

BENHILL PRESS RESIDENCY, 2018

Rugeley, Staffordshire

Vimeo link: <https://vimeo.com/295344775>

Automate Everything: The Last Print Run on the Benhill Letterpress is a reflection on changing labour landscapes from the perspective of a small midlands mining town called Rugeley; and a nostalgic ode to the death of a machine in the face of technological progress.

Economic and infrastructural circumstances define Rugeley's sense of identity, stemming straight from its rich geology and geographical situation: coal, electricity, and most recently Amazon.

I undertook a design residency in Rugeley with the Benhill Press located in the centre of the town, in a building that looks dishevelled and abandoned. Inside the building, a wealth of printing history sat cloaked in dust, cared for by the community of people working at the press. A 19th Century letterpress had sat unused for fifty years, overtaken by the more modern two-colour litho press.

In conversation with Rugeley residents I unearthed uncomfortable xenophobic narratives towards Amazon employees, mingling in a pervasive nostalgia towards a golden past of working class heroism. Both narratives ultimately cloaking the dismal reality of a town in the state of being forgotten. All this told the story of the complex, uncomfortable socio-political reality of Britain in 2018.

I produced collaged narratives using archived printing plates, printed on the old letterpress. The result was a series of prints that were nostalgic but utopian, calling for a future where class justice sat hand in hand with economic revival and hope. By hand-producing propaganda in a mechanical printing press, I intentionally referenced revolutionary printing practices throughout political history (Paris 1968, Camden 1977). My collages contained calls for the UBI (Universal Basic Income) and Automate Everything. The messages feature alongside found images of a post-war era play park: play, leisure, prosperity and the lost-progress of the post-war period (still in living memory), working with but distorting and elevating the nostalgia I encountered in everyday conversations. These acronyms, images and words use nostalgia to redirect us towards a new future. Was there a place for this future in Rugeley, a town so wedded to its past?

This project comprises two main outputs:

1. A video - link and file attached
2. Printed collages - available for exhibition

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