

Open 1 at Liverpool's Open Eye Gallery

By **Sinead Nunes** - July 20, 2015



Accountant, commodities, financial futures and options trading firm, London 2006.

Words by Ruth White

Open 1 is the first in a series of three annual open submission exhibitions, this years' theme being based around ideas of 'social portraiture'. Most people know what portraiture is, so what exactly is 'social portraiture'?

The Oxford Dictionary defines a number of possible meanings of the word social: it relates not only to society and its organisation but also to status and rank, the need for companionship, activities where people meet up for pleasure, an informal or social

gathering – especially one organised by the members of a particular club or group, and it is also an informal word in the UK for unemployment benefits.

In light of this it is possible to see how each artist has managed to hit all the right curatorial buttons. Be it: Helen Marshall's collaboration with one of Yogyakarta, Java's last nomadic theatre troupe' for her project, *Tabong*; or Sonal Kantaria's photographs of Australian immigrants of Indian heritage and the local Australian landscape, in *Traces*; or Deborah Kelly's unconventional families, whose children have been conceived using Assisted Reproductive Technologies, in *The Miracles*; or Richard Ross's photographs of confined juveniles residing in privatised correction centres across America accompanied by statements, in *Juvenile in Justice*. But two other artists in particular stand out:

Louis Quail's *Desk Job* (2013) which occupies the second of two ground floor galleries is both banal and humorous. The row of square photographs each contains an anonymous individual seated at a desk within an office space. Most of the subjects/employees, appear to be totally absorbed in whatever work related task it is they are engaged with on their computers; they seem oblivious to the presence of the photographer.

The captions that accompany the photographs reveal the country and region in which the image was taken, the company the employee works for and their job role. The lack of any other information about the subjects forces the viewer to focus more closely on details within the images for possible clues. Implied narratives and personality traits are discovered among the knick-knacks strewn about on and around their desks. For example:

A young Metal Trader working for a London firm appears to be having a nap. He is slumped across two seats, his eyes shut and his tie completely undone. Has he been working very hard and perhaps through the night? Or has come into work suffering from a hangover? The bottle of Lucozade suggests either could be possible.

A bespectacled and middle aged Human Resources Officer working for the Berlin government wears a stern and quizzical expression as she stares at her computer screen. The ridiculous pile of colourful cuddly toys sat on her computer and desk persuades us that perhaps she is kind and sentimental and not as unapproachable as her expression suggests. Implicit in such an ostentatious display of personality within

the work place is also the implication that she is settled and secure in her job role and has perhaps worked there for a number of years.

A middle aged Team Supervisor of Customer Services Representatives looks out of the frame as if in some sort of daze or daydream. Is he bored or taking a break? The large American flag pinned up on the wall behind him suggests he is patriotic. Is this the American Dream he hoped for? What we read from the size of his work station and through the amount of personal belongings scattered around, is that his job role affords him a certain amount of autonomy. Autonomy that the call centre workers working below him, will most probably not be enjoying.

Quail is an editorial photographer by trade and this was a personal project he worked on between 2006 and 2013 whilst travelling for commercial assignments. Quail's globetrotting allowed him to visit offices in a wide range of countries to request permission to photograph workers at their desks. Both surprisingly and fortunately many companies agreed, resulting in the recording of individuals from a wide range of sectors and companies that all play a part in the global economy. Workers range from those who are employed in the financial sectors and are therefore closer to what we might think of as pure unadulterated capital – earning relatively high wages, such as asset management firms and commodity brokers – to those at the bottom of the heap, who earn considerably less and enjoy little autonomy, such as receptionists and call centre workers.

Quail revealed during the talk he gave at Open Eye, that he began this project with a polemical frame of mind, starting with the commodity brokers who were the most obvious targets for a critique of capitalism. But as the project progressed, he decided – mainly for practical reasons, to record individuals in positions not too high up – as they would be difficult to gain access to – and not too low down, as it would be unethical.

The completeness or incompleteness of his global picture, depending on how you read the work, is further revealed in the fanzine-like photobook that accompanies the exhibition. Yet, it is still only through having some understanding of economics, and reading between the lines, that the audience can reflect on its fuller meaning.

Quail admits to being an interested novice when it comes to economic theories, therefore the ambition and depth of his project is in part intuitive and in part a happy accident. His claims for the project are modest, Quail saying he is interested in "the

ordinary and the overlooked”, his original intention having been to create a “typology” of office workers – a study of types in the same manner of German photographers such as August Sander in the late 1920s and those from the Dusseldorf School of Photography in the mid 1970s. After beginning to read about neoliberal economic theories, Quail is now beginning to see how his work can be used as a vehicle for discussions about the economy, and the invitation of a professor of economics to his talk proved just that.

Billy Macrae’s *G20 Double Takes* (2014) are displayed in a row, un-mounted and un-framed, on a tilted shelf, occupying a wall that leads through the second ground floor gallery space. Macrae returned in 2014 to Threadneedle Street, the home of the Bank of England in London, to re-photograph the spaces that had been occupied by crowds of demonstrators and police during the G-20 Summit in 2009 – G-20 being the name given to the 20 heads of states and central banks who met to discuss the financial crisis of 2007-2010. The images of Macrae’s hand holding up snapshot sized photographs of crowds of protestors and police against relatively empty spaces, reveal a hidden history and of how the street has since returned to business as usual. At the G-20 summit, protesters had demonstrated over a number of issues including: anger at economic policies, the banking system and bankers and their high wages and large bonuses despite their part in causing the financial crisis. The protests also sadly resulted in the death of Ian Tomlinson, an innocent bystander – caused by unwarranted police brutality.

Quail’s workers and their computers are the anonymous tools of capital. They all contribute directly and indirectly to the misery that Macrae’s demonstrators protested against.



Accountant, commodities, financial futures and options trading firm, London 2006.



Team Supervisor, Customer Service Representative, electricity and gas supplier, Berlin, Connecticut, USA 2007



Human Resources Officer, Local government finance administration, Berlin 2008



Metal Trader, commodities, financial futures and options trading firm, London 2006



Receptionist, IT outsourcing provider, Moscow 2004



Sales Consultant, electricity and gas supplier, Berlin, Connecticut, USA, 2007

Open 1 continues at Open Eye Gallery until 23 August 2015.



This article has been commissioned by the Contemporary Visual Arts Network North West (CVAN NW), as part of a regional critical writing development programme supported by the National Lottery through Arts Council England — see

more here.