

## False Note

Exhibition by Freya Dooley

Text by Angelica Sule

O.K. is having an existential crisis. Or maybe just an average day at work. He is taking his break, slowly, bite by bite, ruminating over his croissant, which is stale, but free. He stretches it out while the wheels grind along behind him, next to him, over him. He unpicks the workings of the supermarket, the day-to-day of his work and life, his worklife. He doesn't smile back here, he tells us, none of them do, it is a silent but collective refusal, the non-public face. Here there is an understanding, out there on the floor he is here to help, here to please, here to smile.

Jane is stuck. Stuck between work and life, precarity and buoyancy. She needs a job to pay the bills, eat, live, have a home. But Jane is now part of the ~~team~~ family, it is more of a home really. The family knows her best, she spends most of her time with them, so she should fit in, should get the jokes, know the language, should bring her best self. The family wants her to communicate well, on their terms, in their way,

but not on company time. They care about her, but only for the permitted 5 sick days per year.

Jane and O.K. are two sides of the same trick coin. Passed from hand to hand, vanished and replaced in an instant. They are public and private, front facing and behind the scenes, but both operating the same machine. They live inside a system designed to take advantage of them, to keep them down, while constantly serving more and more.

They take it upon themselves to find small acts of rebellion in amongst the tedium and oppression, because wouldn't you? Don't you?

O.K works in a supermarket, the ultimate leveller, a space for everyone. Its aisles are free to walk, though stacked with hierarchies - basics, taste the difference, finest. Consumption dictated by capitalism - did you know that most supermarkets sell basics like milk and bread at a loss to get you through the door? O.K. sees the people coming through the door. All of them. He sees it all. Their lives laid bare on the conveyor belt. The meal for one, cat food and antacids scrolling a

picture of your life in commodities, or necessities, need or greed. He sees the people taking back and celebrates their petty retributions - putting all their shopping through as potatoes at the self-checkout, pocketing the chocolate bars conveniently located at waist height, putting on a fleece before walking out the door.

Jane works in an office, you know the one, with the inspirational poster on the wall (hang in there), the instant coffee and the snacks in the kitchen. We don't know what they do, but we don't need to. It operates under the same oppressive system of capitalism as O.K.'s supermarket, pursuing increased productivity, more profit, less chat. Jane is also here to help, here to please.

Their spaces of work are set and scene for *False Note*, a staging of everyday refusals and inconspicuous rebellion in spaces that are horribly familiar to us. Here we see our protagonists O.K. and Jane, supermarket and office worker respectively, try to regain their own sense of value, untangling where they start and where their work takes over, but the lines aren't that clear. Their value is measured in

productivity, a job well done, profit made, in flowers and croissants, in cigarette breaks and snatched conversations. They like to feel valued, like to value. They are unable to pull the threads apart, it is all bound together, what they give and what they have, how they feel and how they belong.

With a rising trend to consider wellbeing in the workplace, there is often an emphasis on how someone 'fits' in an organisation, how they will belong. Will they be part of the 'family'? Will they get the jokes? Will they be too distracting? Because the work family should communicate well, but not have lengthy conversations, after all, 10 minutes spent talking is 10 minutes stolen from the company. So how do you fit in without overstepping?

In our current understanding of work, the average working week is between 35-40 hours (give or take a paid lunch break), 5 days a week, 9 to 5. Increasing automation and a reliance on technology was meant to give us all more leisure time, utopian ideas of the future, now present, imagined more time to ourselves and less spent in the drudgery of work. In reality, it has just meant loss of jobs and increased

precarity, especially at the lower end of the pay scale. We are now *lucky* to have jobs. We should be grateful, take what we can get, not complain. So where does that leave us.

Jane is lucky. She becomes the office, the wedge keeping the desk from rocking, the coffee dribbling through the machine, the pen lid being chewed. She is (nearly) indispensable. But the family have taken too much of her and she is losing herself. She is managing too well, managed too well, managed badly? Jane decides to take her time back. She takes up smoking breaks, not actual smoking, just the breaks. She persuades others to join her and learns about their lives, shares hers. But her revolt is cut short, she is not allowed to have a mind or body of her own, the ~~company~~ family own that now. Smoking is banned, for her own good. She is not permitted to bring any of herself to work, she should save that for when she gets home, for her life. It is a tilted scale, work / life balance. Stacked heavy with productivity, output and giving 110% on one side, with a light futile sprinkling of home, friends, eating and surviving on the other. It is almost impossible to keep the scale flat.

O.K. takes his balance back in the form of flowers stolen as a small act of rebellion, favouring their artificial colours. It is not much to ask, they will only go to waste otherwise, so he enjoys them in their technicolour decay. They are a gift for his constant performance, his service, his service with a smile. They are a display of vulnerability, reminding us of the brief intimacies of the supermarket, the closeness in the aisle, the smiling at the checkout, a joke, a nod, a wink. His labour is in his smile, and it is hard going, through the inane chat, the questions, the spillages. So he looks the other way as his other self begins to steal. As he steals. No, he just takes back what is owed, they all do.

Jane and O.K. find themselves in a never-ending loop. Work to live, live to work. They are a vital part of the family, but ultimately replaceable. As O.K. and Jane share commonalities, so too do they share Doppelgängers. They are replicated, repeated through their doppelgängers, people with the same name. We understand that there are always new versions waiting to take over. The system doesn't care how individual you are, whether you can do magic, whether you are a dog handler or perform a George Michael cover

version. The system just wants things to be done in the most efficient way possible. If you get in the way, we'll just find another you. You are only nearly indispensable.

But O.K. and Jane are not alone. Though we hear their stories separately, individually, they yearn to belong. Through the lonely Neoliberal plod, they strive for connection, for contact, for fleeting intimacies. They find camaraderie under the radar - the shared release from a fixed smile, a smoking break with a coworker, all coworkers, applause, small talk, a flirtatious exchange. They find slippages, leaks at the edge of the boundaries meant to keep them apart. They sing, chorus, band together. They find their value in human interactions stolen from the faceless system. Even if it is not always heard or recognised, doesn't always last, they keep going, keep looping.

## **Credits**

The Double (2024), Diamonds and Rust (2024) and Basics of Buoyancy (2024).

Written and directed by Freya Dooley.

Music by Freya Dooley and Emma Daman Thomas.

Mix and sound design by Freya Dooley.

Filmed and edited by Freya Dooley and Roger Graham.

Produced by Robyn Haddon, Associate Curator.

Curated by Angelica Sule.

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