

le degré

CHAPTER

I had met Henri Matisse only once before, a few months earlier, at an opening at Galerie Bernheim-Jeune in Paris. On this bright March morning, I spied him from my usual table outside Pascal's. He was walking along on the opposite side of the Rue St Dennis carefully weaving through people, laden with armfuls of bread. I shouted, and after looking behind, he focused on me and strode over. On arrival, he scattered the long loaves across the table in front of him. "Painting bread for your pension?" I mocked. Pausing, he drew me near to him and whispered, "Listen". I became aware of the faint, low pitched rumbling on the breeze or was it in my mind? It was the sound of artillery from the Allied offensive at Artois.

In 1914, at the age of 44, Matisse was too old to fight in the Great War. Instead he vowed to send 600 francs worth of bread each month to the brave French troops serving their country. He believed that food to them, like Art to him, was fundamental.

Matisse was working at a studio on the Quai de Saint Michel. Notre Dame Cathedral dominated the view from his window. It was to be a productive period before he would move to Nice at the end of the War. "Why shouldn't I paint bread?" He goaded me!
"It is part of life and culture, is it not called the staff of life?"

Earlier in the year, archaeologists digging in Belgium had discovered traces of flour on the bodies of hunter gatherer tribesmen estimated to be from the Upper Palaeolithic era, some 30,000 years earlier. The report in Le Monde was not lost on Matisse, who had cut out the article and pinned it to his studio wall. "I have yet to make an artwork that has as much value as a piece of bread," he wrote in his diary.

Ten years ago, Richard Higlett created a work called 10,000 Reflective Copper Discs. It consisted of the artist's fee in the form of pennies glued to the floor of a street corner in Grangetown, Cardiff. The coins were cleaned with vinegar so they shined in the sun, a whisper to the tale of Dick Whittington in which the streets of London were said to be paved with gold. He was looking at how the individual copper discs could exist collectively as a larger artwork – a minimalist mosaic – but also how the penny was transformed into something other than its principal monetary function. The primary purpose or use of an object is fluid, but held, temporarily defined by systems such as human society and language.

The work lasted one hour before it was removed by the local community, piece by piece and without invitation. Interestingly, no one considered that what they did was wrong as it was essentially a found object. Once the order of the pattern was broken, so too was the spell.

Le degré revisits some of the themes in the 'disc' work as 100 ceramic baguettes are created for an installation in what was previously the Chapter Gallery shop. These will be for sale, the proceeds going to homeless charities in Cardiff. The price of each piece will be based on how much the buyer is willing or able to pay, £25.00 each being the suggested price.

Thank you for purchasing this copy of the Big Issue. This text accompanies le degré, Richard Higlett's INTERFERENCE residency project at Chapter and will not be reprinted anywhere else. Its function is as an artwork within the exhibition. In reading this you are a degree of separation between the artist's concept and the vendor whom you support by purchasing this magazine. You become the link that makes this idea possible.

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Artist talk with Professor Mike Tooby 14.03.15, 2pm



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