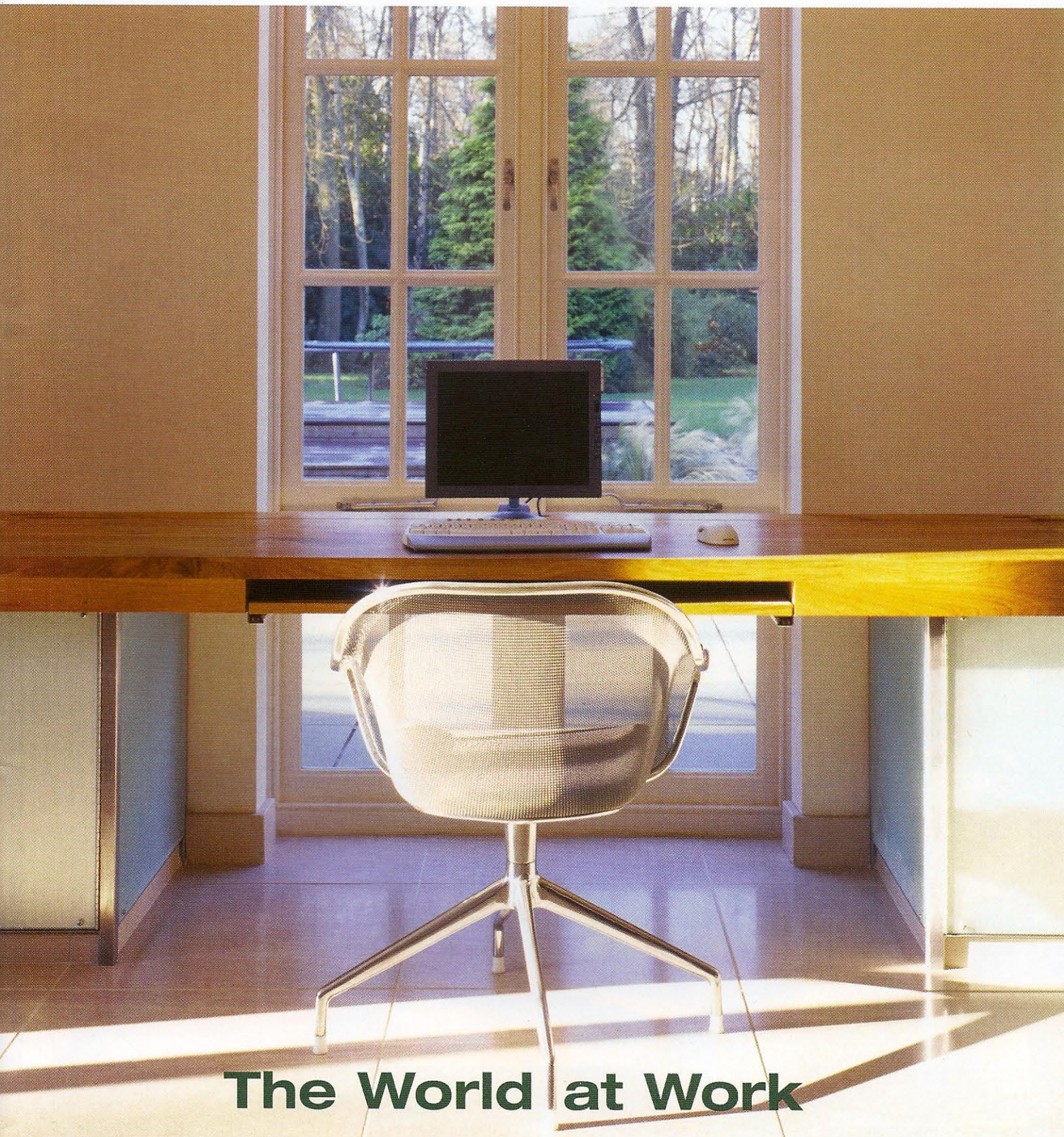


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The World at Work



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UNDER REVIEW

We English

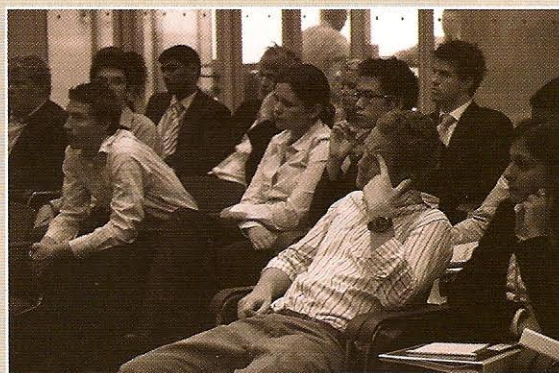
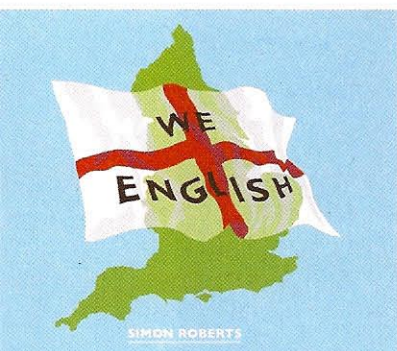
Chris Boot is a photography expert become independent publisher. Still in his early 30s, he has a passion for those practitioners who push the boundaries of the medium, and in particular those who specialize in the pursuit of the banal, the neglected, the forgotten minutiae of daily life – scattered all along the busy by-ways of social history. The Boot back catalogue contains studies on such eclectic topics as town councils in the United States (*Meetings* by Paul Shambroom), economic globalisation trends (*Power* by Jacqueline Hassink) and avatars adopted by the online gaming community (*Alter Ego* by Robbie Cooper).

Boot revels also in the popular history of the British Isles. *We English* is the latest newcomer to join this home-grown pictorial firmament. Armed with a large format camera and accompanied by his family, Simon Roberts' self-confessed aim was to explore the English at leisure, capturing the everyday relationship between people and landscape. From August 2007 to September 2008 he recorded many scenes in a diversity of locations, basing his photographic style on the compositional techniques and flavour of the English romantic landscape painters. His coastal scenes, often reminiscent of the French painter Boudin, contain tiny incidental human figures cavorting at a distance, their humanity defused, rendered almost meaningless by the grand and natural backdrop of sea and sky. Elsewhere, an underlying theme is the uneasy relationship between the urban and the rural – the megalopolis growing ever larger, relentlessly extending its tentacles into the surrounding countryside: a group of retired men play golf against a backdrop of giant cooling towers, a posse of caravans blocks out the view, a housing development lurks at the back of an idyllic river scene. An overall mood of oppressive and bland uniformity descends upon the viewer, despite the variety of settings. I came away wistful, nostalgic and convinced that the English landscape has been physically tamed and irreparably micromanaged to the extent that it is rare to derive a powerful emotion from its contemplation.

Diana Korchien

WE ENGLISH

Simon Roberts
Chris Boot 2009
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School and college leavers listen to seminar given by an accountancy lecturer at a company's London HQ

© RICHARD BAKER

The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work

In his latest work Alain de Botton turns his attention and his philosophical enquiry to the world of work, attempting as he puts it a "hymn to the intelligence, peculiarity, beauty and horror of the modern workplace".

Divided into ten sections tackling diverse professions, and apparently inspired by the cargo ship spotters who feature in chapter one, de Botton's book examines the world of work from various angles, each of them contributing to a structured and coherent whole. He spends time in a series of non-glamorous and media-neglected professions, ranging from logistics and accountancy to career counselling and biscuit manufacture. In each he finds perceptive insights about what the world of work means to us and conjures up revealing comparisons with work in other eras and cultures. In the chapter on accountancy, the receptionist is compared to a priestess at Delphi, while he observes that the "office is to the modern world what the cloister was to medieval Christendom: a chaste arena with an unrivalled capacity to excite desire." Money now plays the role of the God of the Middle Ages.

The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work is, like all of de Botton's work, beautifully written, with images and turns of phrase that would not be out of place in Flaubert or Austen. He repeatedly makes us look at what we do day by day and consider it in a new light and a larger perspective. Although there are occasional longueurs, particularly in the ill-conceived chapter on Painting, this work is fascinating, original and guaranteed to make you think. Are accountants really well adjusted enough to have made peace with oblivion? The central thesis is that work fulfils a vital function in distracting us from consideration of the central issues of life.

The specially commissioned black and white photographs by Richard Baker perfectly complement the dry and quirky text, but one wonders who chose the front cover image – a cliché in a book devoid of them.

THE PLEASURES AND SORROWS OF WORK

Alain de Botton
Photography: Richard Baker
(excluding front cover and a few images in Chapter 3 and 6, separately credited)
Hamish Hamilton 2009
ISBN 978-0-241143-53-7
£18.99 HB

Tim Harris