

Is it an anti-corporate manifesto or a tool designed to unblock creativity at work? **Alasdair Sandford** meets The Doodle Notebook's creator, Claire Faÿ

The doodling philosophy

At first sight it looks like an act of defiance. Another poke in the eye to the world of work from the lazy French office employee, addicted to his or her 35-hour week and enthusiastic only when contemplating what to do on the next "RTT" (Réduction du temps de travail) – the statutory day off to which workers are entitled should they for any reason be outrageously forced to do overtime.

"Want to be fired? Bring your strawberry into the next meeting and colour it in," is the caption above an outline of the fruit on the page below.

"Each time your boss makes a negative remark, give him a resignation token." There are 15 tokens to cut out, the last of which says: "Bravo! You have my resignation."

On the following pages you are invited to trace your escape route on a map of the building, avoiding any danger areas where the boss might be, and to colour in the champagne flutes for your own leaving drinks.

These are excerpts from Le Cahier de gribouillages pour les adultes qui veulent tout plaquer (literally, "the notebook of doodles for adults who want to chuck it all"). Since it came out last autumn, the small green publication has sold 100,000 copies. It is well on its way to emulating the success of its bright orange predecessor, Le Cahier de gribouillages pour les adultes qui s'ennuient au bureau ("for adults who are bored

at work"), which, since its appearance the previous year, has sold three times that number and is still going strong. Extracts from a British version of this first edition, The Doodle Notebook, which is about to be published, are printed on the following pages for the first time.

The title in French says the book is for adults but its spirit is rooted in the classroom: memories of hours spent gazing out of the window and doodling absent-mindedly to shut out the teacher. For a start, there is more than a passing resemblance to a school exercise book. You are invited to fill in your name and the date, and to compare the job you dreamed of doing as a child with the one you actually do today. Instead of teacher's signature, the bottom of the page is reserved for that of the director of human resources.

The author of the Gribouillages books, Claire Faÿ, says her idea was born out of her own difficulty in adapting to the corporate world. She has worked closely with the publishers in London to tailor it for the British market. "Maybe there's slightly less boredom at work in England, but it's a concept that can make everyone laugh," she says. The 30-year-old graphic designer insists her mission is constructive: she is not out to knock the business

world or incite mutiny among office workers. "The basic principle is to doodle to evacuate your stress, your dark thoughts, your boredom, whatever riles you, and to transform it into positive energy," she says. "When we evacuate stress we become more efficient at work, because we managed to release what's been blocking us."

In 2004, another book taking a sceptical look at working life became a huge bestseller in France. But where the Gribouillages series is aimed at providing some innocent light relief in the office, Bonjour Paresse (Hello Laziness) was almost subversive, an "anarchic anti-business bible" encouraging employees to do as little work as possible. The antidote to the array of business performance books targeting ambitious workaholics, here was the definitive guide for office slackers.

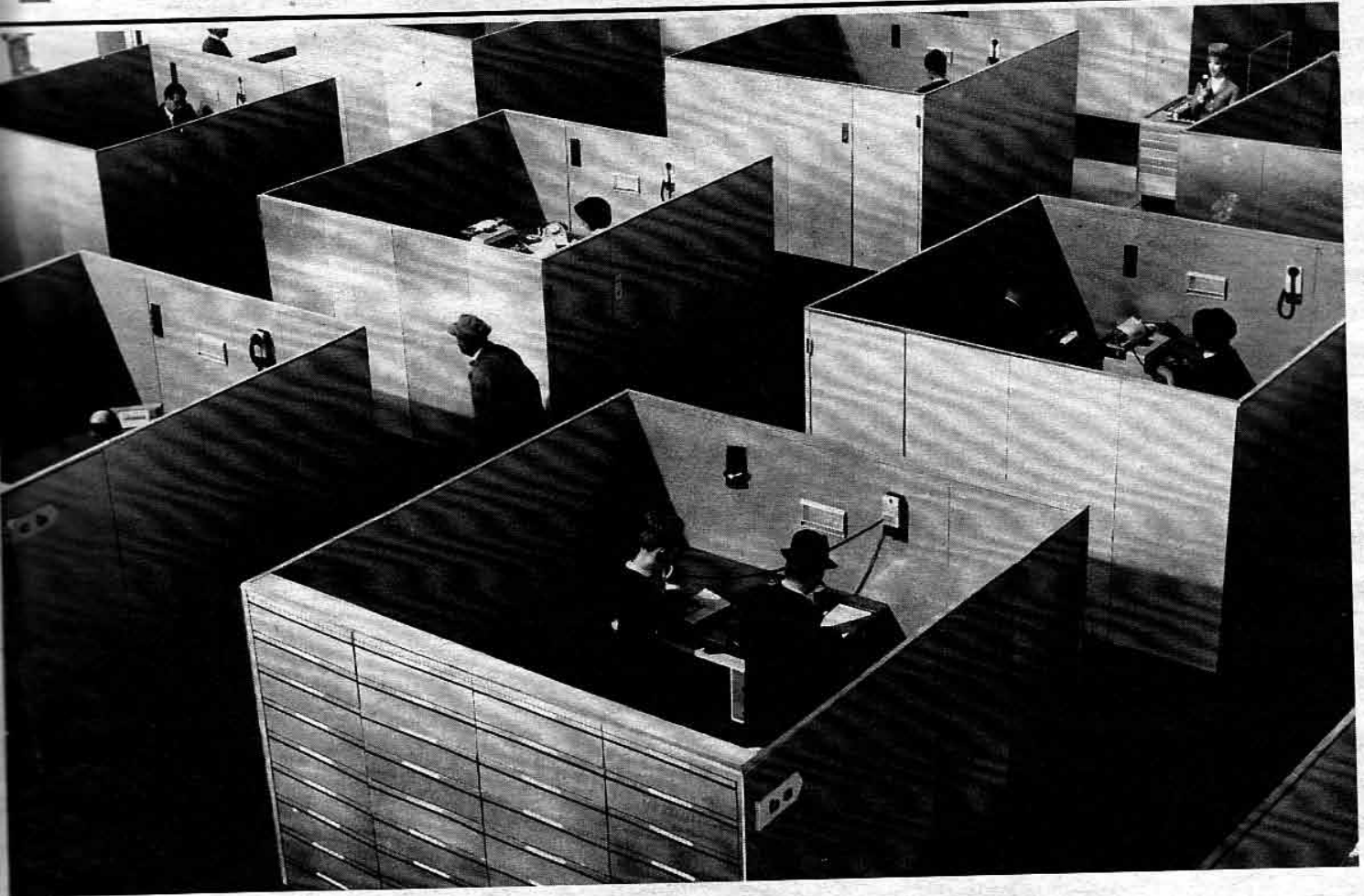
Its author, Corinne Maier, ridiculed the French business world's addiction to Anglo-American corporate-speak. Designed to impress bosses and colleagues, she argued that when uttered by French mouths with limited command of English it came out as pitiful Franglais – "no man's langue", as she puts it. Her impertinence got her into trouble with her then-employer, the state electricity company EDF, which threatened her with disciplinary action until the negative publicity gave it second thoughts.

Claire Faÿ need have no such fears, and not only because she is now happily freelance. "[My book] has nothing to do with [Bonjour Paresse], it's not at all in the same spirit," she says, insisting that it's not about having a go at the boss, simply an attempt to lighten up the day. "Instead of going outside for a smoke with your colleagues,

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Get doodling!

How to waste time at work



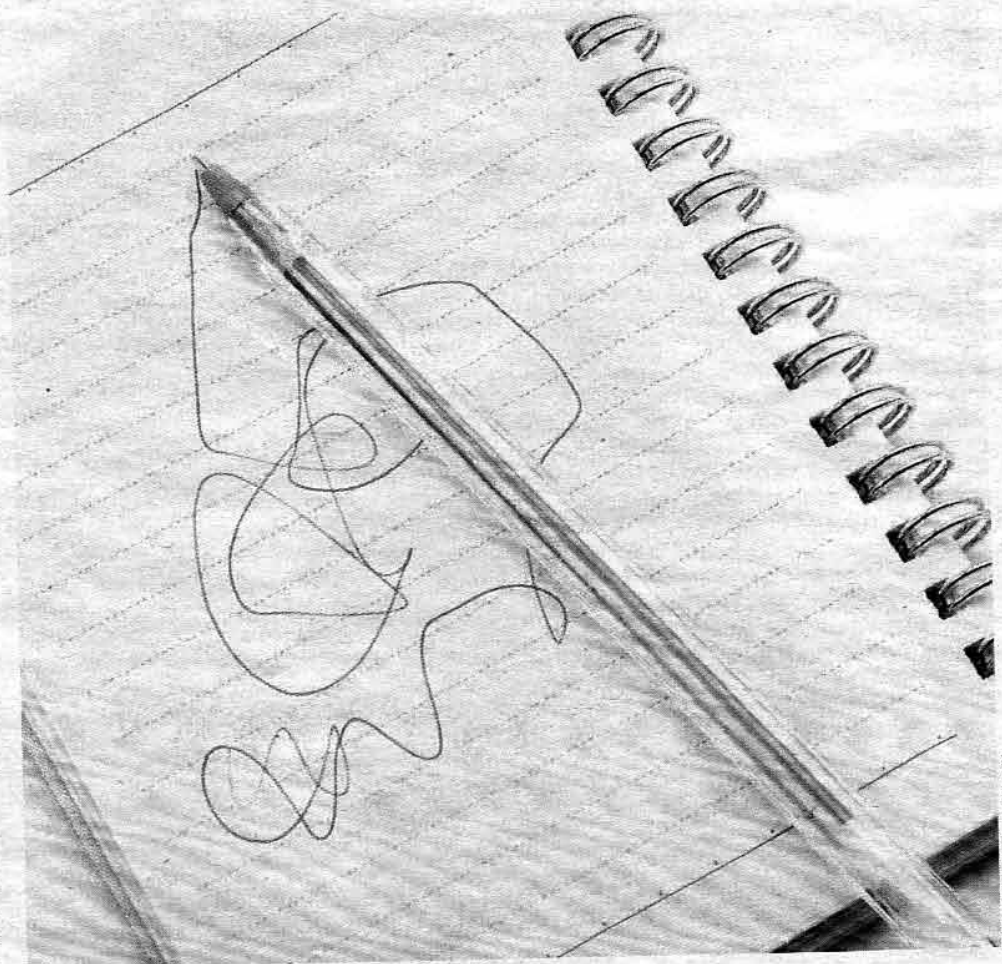
"The great thing about the English is they get bored very easily. It's a case of: we're all under pressure, let's have some fun!"

you can doodle and have a laugh with them, before getting down to work again."

The doodler's "fag break", in the first *Gribouillages* book, takes the form of an invitation to colour in a decorative pair of lungs. The latest edition appeals to the bored worker's juvenile, if not slightly malicious, instincts: "Need to let off steam? Get your intern to photocopy this page." The sheet below is blank. No one is pretending that such a source of endless mirth is going to keep people entertained for hours on end. It is disposable entertainment, but successful enough to keep it in the top 10 bestseller list for 18 months.

Jerome, a 36-year-old engineer, recalls how he and two other workmates were given *Le Cahier de gribouillages* by a female colleague for Christmas. "It's funny," he says, "but I only looked at it for five minutes. I couldn't envisage taking it into a meeting." He admitted doodling while he had been talking to me on the phone, colouring in lots of squares on the page in front of him.

According to Roberta Tweedy of the Neurofibromatosis Association, such shading-in indicates "some evidence of differing anxieties, fears or worries constantly besetting the author". The organisation, with Epilepsy Action, is one of the beneficiaries of National Doodle Day in the UK (March 7, www.nationaldoodleday.org.uk), which



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How to waste time at work

5

invites celebrities, schools, companies and individuals to put pen to paper until the end of March to raise money. Its website says that analysts are attaching increasing importance to doodling, arguing that if employees are made to undergo personality and character assessments when being considered for promotion, their absent-minded scribbles should be taken into account.

Jamie Camplin, Thames and Hudson's managing director, also admitted doodling while talking to me, though he did not say what he had drawn. He believes the Gribouillages books spring from a certain "elegant, stylish disdain for the idea of work" among the French. *Le Monde* has scoffed at the idea that hard-working Anglo-Saxons would be receptive to a book about doodling. Yet Camplin believes *The Doodle Notebook* in its British form will find a captive market on his side of the Channel.

"In my experience of offices – I except our own – in the post-Thatcherite era I don't always see everyone's nose always to the grindstone," Camplin says. "But the great thing about the English is they get bored very easily and they like to have fun. And if you combine that with the fact that a lot of people are under pressure – I do think it's different in the two countries but it comes back to the same thing – in the English case it's: 'Goodness! We're all under such pressure. Let's have some fun.' And this is the book to give it to you. In the case of the French it's not fun, it's: 'Let's show our elegant and stylish disdain for the idea of working.'"

Camplin also argues that it is about asserting a certain individuality in the digital age. "When computers came on the scene, everyone was excited about what you could construct and illustrate," he says. "We went through that era, and now we're very much back in an individualists' era, and therefore hand-lettering, hand-doodling and so on is appealing." In France, too, commentators have praised the Gribouillages books for reuniting people with a world which, in the words of *Le Nouvel Observateur*, for example, "was disappearing more and more, alas, in offices now invaded by screens."

The same publication also detected a healthy "passive resistance" to the prevailing climate, with its monotonous refrains from politicians exhorting the country to "get back to work". Since being elected, president Nicolas Sarkozy has continued to vaunt the merits of a France that "wakes up early" in a bid to "work more to earn more". The French know that change is necessary. But perhaps the success of *Les Cahiers de gribouillages* is sending out a parallel message: allow us the right to be lazy too.

It is a matter of debate as to whether the French government's reforms have had a significant impact on employment. I, for one, suspect that the Gribouillages books may be one reason why January's jobless figures showed a sudden unwelcome rise. Claire Fay describes how one young man she met at a recent book signing session told her he'd been fired because his boss took exception to the presence of her book on his desk. "He'd been hoping for one thing – to get the sack – because he was bored in his job," she says. "Thanks to *Le Cahier* his dream came true, so he came to show me his appreciation."

The Doodle Notebook: How to Waste Time in the Office (Thames & Hudson, £4.99). To order a copy with free UK p&p go to guardian.co.uk/bookshop or call 0870 836 0875

Confessions of a serial doodler



Did you know that during politburo meetings in the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 30s, Bukharin used to doodle caricatures of his fellow revolutionaries? Quite often he'd get his subjects to sign the result, including Stalin, who still had Bukharin shot in 1938 during the Great Purge. So doodling may not have quite the same redemptive powers as other, supposedly higher "art", but that doesn't stop it being art.

In fact, it's a truer, more honest art, almost a kind of spirit-writing. It short-circuits straight to the subconscious as you scribble away, and thus a doodle helps keep the brain ticking over while you're meant to be listening to some clown lecture or lay down the law. Doodling keeps us earthed to ourselves as it helps us control the world around us, defeat boredom and confound the balls-aching dullness of the working day.

Personally, I've never stopped doodling, both compulsively and unconsciously. In the various organisations I've been involved with over the years, during endless committee meetings I suddenly realise that I've covered important

papers with spiral staircases, animals, enormously elaborate arabesques and surreal scenes whose starting point is a punctuation mark in the middle of the page. I also often find, again without really having thought about what I was doing, that I've caricatured other committee members. At one such meeting a highly eminent professor of zoology from Oxford broke off his peroration to point at me and bellow across the table "That man is drawing me!", as if I was stealing his soul. ("It's nothing like you, mate," I answered rather feebly.) I even once discovered, with some embarrassment, that during a phone conversation with a solicitor, I'd doodled all over my late step-mother's will.

Worst of all is when I've seen originals of my work on exhibition, where I'd forgotten to trim the paper close enough to the main artwork. Sure enough, peeking round the frame, there'll be a camel drinking a cup of tea balanced on an elephant, although I haven't a clue what it means or why I drew it.

Martin Rowson