

# Furlough

## The Red Headed League, November 2012

*"To the Red-Headed League: On account of the bequest of the late Ezekiah Hopkins of Lebanon Pennsylvania USA, there is now another vacancy open which entitles a member of the league to a salary of £4 a week for purely nominal services. All red headed men sound in body and mind and above the age of 21 years are eligible. Apply in person on Monday at eleven o'clock to Duncan Ross at the offices of the league 7 Pope's Court, Fleet Street."*

*The Morning Chronicle, of 27th April 1890*

In the Sherlock Holmes story *The Red-Headed League*, Jabez Wilson, a red-headed London businessman, is selected for a meaningless but well-paid clerical job by virtue of the redness of his hair. The job he is employed to carry out is to copy out the pages of an Encyclopaedia, for which he is paid the sum of £4 per week. Suddenly, after several days, he arrives at work to find a note abruptly declaring, "The Red-Headed League is dissolved". Sherlock Holmes later uncovers that the League was nothing more than a ruse to get Mr. Wilson out of the way so that a dishonest employee of his could dig a hole through to the bank vault next door to Wilson's business premises.

This project showcases artworks created by a "league" of thirteen artists who have been selected for the project because of the redness of their hair. Each artist has been provided with one of the first thirteen images in the Encyclopaedia Britannica (Micropaedia Edition) as source material for their work.

We decided to re-enact the story in a way that could reveal something about the 'purely nominal service' of producing art. We wanted the project to sit awkwardly between being a creative endeavour worth engaging in for the participating artists, but also as a distraction from their other more self-directed creative endeavours. The economic model for the project takes this into account, offering up an artist's fee of £4 per week – the same fee as in the original story, despite over a hundred years of inflation.

Selecting artists based on their hair colour seems like a highly suspicious way of enlisting an artistic workforce, but we could think of shows that have been selected using other similarly generalised criteria: gender, age, medium and so on. In terms of its ethical stance, this project is doing everything wrong by both paying badly and selecting artists based on non-artistic criteria – but these are problems that professional artists very often face, so exaggeratedly restaging them seems to us like a valid mode of critique. It's so wrong that it

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begins to foreground all the smaller wrongs that happen much more often but are usually overlooked, or grudgingly excused.

We expected the project to operate without external funding, but wanted to pay the artists something rather than asking them to work for free. The £4 fee we are paying them is utterly derisory. We wanted to put them in the position where they would question whether it was worth participating for such a paltry amount, (despite the reality that many of them will have done exhibitions for free in the past). Is it better to be paid an insultingly small amount, or to work for nothing? In the original story, the work that Mr Wilson is asked to do is described as 'nominal services', and it was important to us that that in our re-enactment, the production of the very fabric of the project was described that way. The artists had to consider the work to be nominal, or at least so far outside of their normal practice as to be unimportant.

We wanted to give the artists some scope to use their creativity, or indeed, to withhold the best of it bearing in mind how little we were paying them. Remaining loyal to the original story, we decided that we would give the participating artists one of the first thirteen images from the Encyclopaedia to respond to. They might expend artistic energy developing a highly individual response to the image we gave them, or they might decide to make a detailed facsimile of it, much like Wilson in the original story. If they wanted to, they could produce a work as derisory as the fee we were paying them. In the event, the booklet contains examples of all of these approaches.

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