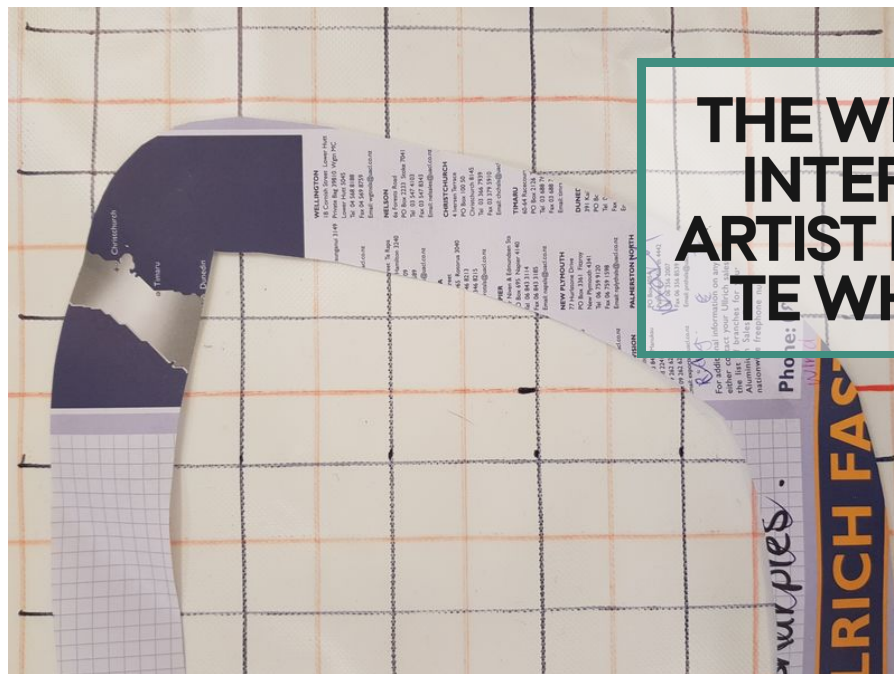


Soraya Rhofir, *Paper Pattern*
(*Chair and Desk Silhouettes*).
Photograph of work in progress,
2017.



Richard Reddaway

Soraya Rhofir, *Rough* *Rough*

As I start to write about this work, I struggle; it's not there yet, here it is but I am yet to see it. The work is a kind of rough shadow, a memory not yet had. Have you seen it, have you done the work? If I tell you a story, would it make sense?

Trouble is, I'm getting on and my memory's not that good. But here's how I remember it: an old and poor carpenter fashioned a wooden puppet, and he called it Pinocchio. Perhaps he was afraid of dying alone, as we all will, and thought that his craft would keep his heart from growing cold and turning to stone.

But this marionette, Pinocchio, had other ideas. I wanted only to be free. Can't argue with that, can you? *It's my life and I'll do what I want.*¹

So, one morning while the old carpenter slept, it took off. And had lots of adventures, none of which I remember. Nor do I remember why it came back to the old man, for it did. Perhaps it too was afraid of being alone.

I did not remember, but now I know, that the carpenter was called Geppetto. And he loved his puppet son so much that the thing of wood and string became a real boy of flesh and blood, even though it had stolen Geppetto's money, stolen his coat, and lied (this is where Pinocchio's nose

grew, grew into a magic stick). No, that's not right, that's not the story.

Pinocchio took off and had adventures, met with merry folk who turned out bad and hung him from a tree,

... a wild wind started to blow. As it shrieked and moaned, the poor little sufferer was blown to and fro like the hammer of a bell. The rocking made him seasick and the noose, becoming tighter and tighter, choked him. Little by little a film covered his eyes. Death was creeping nearer and nearer... He closed his eyes, opened his mouth, stretched out his legs, and hung there, as if he were dead.²
p.30

He wanted to be free, free of his father and free from work. But all he got was cheated and dead, or at least the semblance of death as a puppet cannot really die because it is not really alive. He got real sick, though, and had to be rescued by the Azure Fairy with a homily about social responsibility,

“My dear boy,” said the Fairy, “people who speak as you do usually end their days either in a prison or in a hospital. A man, remember, whether rich or poor, should do something in this world. No one can find happiness without work.” p.54

Hey, why are we talking about Pinocchio here? What about this artist and her artwork? Well, from Robert Smithson,

Artists themselves are not confined, but their output is. Museums, like asylums and jails, have wards and cells- in other words, neutral rooms called “galleries.” A work of art when placed in a gallery loses its charge, and becomes a portable object or surface disengaged from the outside world. A vacant white room with lights is still a submission to the neutral. Works of art seen in such spaces seem to be going through a kind of aesthetic convalescence.³

A work of art wants to be free, to do what it wants, any old time. Instead it gets a vacant white room and waits for death. I know, I know, an artwork can never want anything for it's not alive. It is made, it does not grow; it cannot dance or sing; it can never do any work. It cannot love its Geppetto; it is this artist that wants these things, for we love our offspring (as we hope they love us in return, Pygmalion). But somehow it makes sense to want art to do more than hang still on a wall or on a plinth. It's a desire I think Hélio Oiticica had when he made the shimmering cloth sculpture called *los parangolés*. Art to be worn and dance the Samba in. The word is Portuguese, but its etymology is obscure and its definition slippery,

parangolé
substantivo masculino

1. conversa sem pé nem cabeça, desconchavada.
2. conversa desinteressante, conversa que não leva a nada.
3. conversa fiada; lábia.
4. comportamento desonesto para ludibriar alguém; malandragem, astúcia, esperteza.⁴

When I asked my Brazilian friend, she danced around the meaning, “you know, “labia” means lip”, and I said “as in “to give some lip, like a naughty boy puppet?” and she said, “no, no not really... it’s slang, more like, “malandragem” is the man, the cool, smart dude from the favela, you know the favela? who uses his smarts to eke out a living”. So, in this sense, freedom means the freedom to make one’s living by one’s wits, self-reliant through entrepreneurship, perhaps. *To not-work, for we accept, of course, that hard work does not equal good art,*⁵ rather,

“You must know that, just outside the City of Simple Simons, there is a blessed field called the Field of Wonders. In this field you dig a hole and in the hole you bury a gold piece. After covering up the hole with earth you water it well, sprinkle a bit of salt on it, and go to bed. During the night, the gold piece sprouts, grows, blossoms, and next morning you find a beautiful tree, that is loaded with gold pieces.” p.23

I could say of this, it’s much, much easier to bury your gold and watch it grow than to work. But perhaps, as the artist says, this is magic, and magic needs patience and a sense of detachment to work. She reminds me, the name Pinocchio comes from “pine nut,” so this is the Germinal principal; the seed, like the work in-progress, is the unsuspected and yet-to-be accomplished entity. She thinks this is more about breath and inspiration, about creating and creatures, about emotions and the magic of words.⁶ Artists are not marionettes, and they do magic, not “work” in the conventional sense of the word. Anton Vidokle builds on this in “Art without Work?”, wherein the work in art is not necessarily where the art is,

While I am not completely sure that action, in Arendt’s beautiful definition [that labor was for slaves; free citizens were expected to engage in politics, poetry, philosophy, but not work], is always applicable in describing conditions that enable the production of art, I suspect that certain types of art practices can turn labor and work into action, and in doing so, free art from a dependence on labor and work.⁷

Just what Pinocchio wants: to be free from a dependence on work. But he gets strung up on a tree and left to die.

But I keep getting it wrong. For are we talking about Pinocchio here, or something else? Geppetto makes Pinocchio, who wants to be free. Or is it that Geppetto wants Pinocchio to be free? For when this artist makes her art she wants it to be free. No, that's not right, she wants to emancipate the images she uses, she doesn't want her work stuck on the walls of a vacant white room. Her art has to get out and about, do the work it was made to do, otherwise it may as well be dead, brain-dead. Death warmed up. Because in Smithson's words,

The function of the warden-curator is to separate art from the rest of society. Next comes integration. Once the work of art is totally neutralized, ineffective, abstracted, safe, and politically lobotomized it is ready to be consumed by society. All is reduced to visual fodder and transportable merchandise. Innovations are allowed only if they support this kind of confinement.

Then, the Blue Fairy might say of Pinocchio's waywardness,

all these mannerist stratagems and artful celebrations of effortlessness may well be the result of (or worse still, merely covering up) a simple lack of time, focus, and energy for making "work". It is not so much that we are working too much, we are just plain busy, too busy, in fact, to work.

So, that was Dieter Roelstraete in riposte to Vidokle.

Certainly, it looks to me as though this artist has worked hard. She's made her little wooden boy, clothed it in little suit of flowered paper, a pair of shoes from the bark of a tree, and a tiny cap from a bit of dough, called it Rough, Rough, and set it free. As all artists do with their work.

"How ridiculous I was as a Marionette! And how happy I am, now that I have become a real boy!" p.93

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1. It's My Life, performed by Eric Burdon and the Animals, lyrics and music Roger Atkins and Carl D'Errico, released 1965 by Columbia. But, to be honest, it's the 1992 BMG Ariola release by Dr. Alban that I sing in my head.
 2. All story quotes are from *The Adventures of Pinocchio*, by C. Collodi [pseudonym of Carlo Lorenzini], translated from the Italian by Carol Della Chiesa, Project Gutenberg
 3. Selected Writings of Robert Smithson, *On Cultural Confinement*, <https://www.robertsmithson.com/essays/cultural.htm> accessed 20/07/17
 4. Talk out the back of one's head, unplugged, 2. Uninteresting conversation, conversation that leads to nothing, 3. Small talk; to mouth-off, 4. Dishonest behavior to deceive someone; trickery,

cunning, cleverness. <http://bemfalar.com/significado/parangole.html>, accessed 20/07/17

5. e-flux journal #42 february 2013 - Dieter Roelstraete The Business: On the Unbearable Lightness of Art
6. Soraya Rhofir in conversation with the author, 24th July 2017
7. e-flux journal #29 november 2011 - Anton Vidokle Art without Work?

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