

Raymond Boisjoly: The Work That Work Leaves Undone

Forest City Gallery, London, ON

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by Kevin Rodgers

In the late spring of 2012, Vancouver artist Raymond Boisjoly meticulously arranged three works along the walls of Forest City Gallery in London, Ontario. Constructed from hundreds of sheets of tiled office paper, *Makeshift*, *Makeshift i* and *Makeshift ii* (2010–2012) were each approximately five feet high and spread nine feet in length. They all used a type of bright-coloured paper of the kind saved for office notices that call attention to some important administrative fact or event. Embedded within each page in light grey were fragments of text that only emerged as a distinct phrase once the overall composition was grasped as a totality, and from these works three phrases appeared: “TO DISCOVER WHAT THIS ISN’T,” one read, “YET MIGHT HAVE BEEN, AND WHAT, AT A DECISIVE MOMENT, IT FAILED TO BECOME WITHOUT CEASING TO EXIST ALTOGETHER.”

The *Makeshift* trilogy was installed under the larger title *The Work That Work Leaves Undone*, and the pieces seemed to circle back on themselves, phrases comically and continuously reimagined as a mixture of self-help avowal and philosophical conundrum. They were funny, a project well constructed, if elusive. But once the viewer grasped the slogan and admired the tiled presentation, what was left but to move on or await the next missive? I turned to the title: what is the *work* that these works leave undone?

In fact, the overactive administrative aesthetic of this installation appeared quite distinct from two other projects Boisjoly had produced that summer: a large external billboard image for The Power Plant’s summer exhibition *Tools for Conviviality* in Toronto and a series of sun-exposed construction-paper prints in *Phantasmagoria* at Presentation House Gallery in Vancouver. These were far more explicit in their political referent, the former considering The Power Plant’s location “within aboriginal histories and Western vernaculars” while the latter reflected upon particular locales of Indigenous peoples in British Columbia.

Boisjoly, who is an Aboriginal artist of Haida and Québécois descent based in Vancouver, BC, has specifically addressed issues of vernacular language as a cultural practice in his previous works. While his exhibition at Forest City Gallery appeared at first glance to lack the political directness of his other projects, to conclude so would be mistaken. What *The Work That Work Leaves Undone* displayed was a succinct example of Boisjoly’s intelligence, humour and material disposition. As the work communicates something of its own character, it also produces a reply to its own construction.

The exhibition encapsulated many of the larger concerns that drive Boisjoly’s evolving text-based practice, specifically language as a site of contestation. If text is often meant to function transparently and in everyday use go unquestioned, Boisjoly emphasizes what is omitted: in the *Makeshift* trilogy the phrases never clarify. They are always receding, as if in awareness of their own irredeemable incompleteness. If knowledge is a variegated phenomenon, the multicoloured sheets of



Raymond Boisjoly, *The Work that Work Leaves Undone*, Installation view at Forest City Gallery, 2012, London, inkjet prints/painter’s tape, 2.8 m × 1.5 m

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paper directly address the presumptions of neutrality. The ambiguous phrase within each *Makeshift* piece resembles organizational language trying to hit the right tones, trying to convince and introduce something tangible into the world, and in this comic display comes the critical reply of Boisjoly’s installation, a sort of humiliation of the bureaucrat.

I cannot help but think of volumes of paperwork and plans, board meetings and endless committees: at artist run centres discussing mandates and grant applications, or public policy meetings about cultural activity, or at negotiations about oil monitoring and pipeline routes through traditional aboriginal lands. In *The Work That Work Leaves Undone* enchantment and disappointment appear to be given equal weight, good intentions deferred. Yet the title suggests a stress on the unfinished. If these words mean anything, it seems to say, they must also contain a critical reply to their own framing, a (to lift the title of a different Boisjoly piece) “captured speech writing back.”

But this is simply one interpretation; to initiate thought is the success of the work. The strength of Boisjoly’s practice is a determined examination of a phenomenon as it appears, and of harnessing what that phenomenon simultaneously conceals. By desiring a practice that speaks to the complexity of aboriginal experience, Boisjoly draws attention to *how* experiences are conveyed in vernacular forms, and what is left aside. Unlike earlier examinations of black metal subcultures and eponyms (that at times tread too closely to the work of other well-known Vancouver artists like Steven Shearer or Ron Terada), there is a more formal or abstract quality to *The Work That Work Leaves Undone*. It is more difficult to read, more austere, fitting with the administrative quality of the work. Yet in this study of creation and critique, the work seems to demand even more from itself and the viewer, and perhaps this too, is work that is left undone. ×

Kevin Rodgers is a visual artist whose practice draws upon provisional formalism and political philosophy. He has a PhD in Art and Visual Culture from Western University and an MFA from the University of Guelph.

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