

Time and Transformation: The Impossible Tasks of Karen Trask

Charlotte Jones

Sisyphus relentlessly and endlessly pushes the rock up the hill only to have it return to the bottom to be pushed up again; the beautiful miller's daughter must spin ever increasing amounts of hay into gold; the true bride is tasked with ladling all the water from a pond with a sieve; and Karen Trask transforms thousands of pages from dictionaries into a three foot diameter spun skein and reads the entire seven volumes of *À la recherche du temps perdu* in a year. Nancy Ring, in her essay, refers to Karen Trask's impossible tasks as fairy tale-like and indeed the exhibition at Grenfell College does have that overall quality.¹

Furthermore, when taking in Trask's current exhibition at SWGC Art Gallery, one is struck with several paradoxes which are the essence of the impossible task motif: the work is at once time-consuming and about how we spend our time, but time in this exhibition is more like a pool than the stereotypical river of time; as Ring has noted, Trask's art works at the same time at opposite ends of scale: the micro and macro levels²; and, Trask is obviously fascinated with and has a love of text and literature yet she dismantles both.

In the exhibition, ***Where the words go***, here are some of Karen Trask's impossible tasks:

The large mural, *Wordfield* (cat. 1), has the impossible task at the forefront both as process and subject matter. To create the work, Trask made 80 plus sheets of paper from *kozo* (mulberry) and also incorporated text. She meticulously 'photo-shopped' a digital photograph dividing it into the 64 components of the mural, manipulated the elements and had them printed on the individual sheets. These sheets were then assembled on a large curved wall. The resultant image shows the southwestern Ontario landscape, a field in winter, the ruts of the field forming a pattern which is accented by the rocks that have emerged over the winter, thrown up by the frost thaw cycle. Words and portions of words slyly poke through the image indiscriminately and fortuitously. For the artist the rocks recalled one of the many laborious recurring jobs on the farm: "Every spring new stones appear on the fields where there were no stones before. Stones in a field are not good for machinery. The only effective way to remove them is by hand picking. Someone, usually my youngest brother drove the tractor and wagon. On either side we walked gathering up armfuls and carried them to the wagon and when the wagon was full, we drove to some place on the farm and emptied the wagon by hand. Every farm has many piles of stones. Rarely are they useful."³ On the other hand it was a task that recurred annually.

Where the words go (cat. 2) is a 36" diameter ball of spun paper pages from dictionaries for several languages—French, English, German, Arabic and so on. To create the work, Trask collected dictionaries from various sources, dismantled them, and set the covers to one side. She then glued the pages together to make a strip about eight pages long, cut the lengths into strips about 3' high, and dampened them overnight to make them pliable. The artist used a power drill to spin the paper into the long threads that were wound into the large ball that formed the sculpture. Trask estimates that it took her 3 to 4 months of solid work to complete the work. The work forcibly calls up the tale of Rumpelstiltskin, both because of the intensity of the work involved in its production and because it embodies such a miraculous transformation.

Like *Where the words go*, *Inside Passage* (cat. 7) metamorphoses dictionaries in many languages and disciplines (medical dictionaries, for example) into a new object dictating new meaning. The dictionaries have been disassembled. The covers are screwed together to form the prow of a boat while the guts of the dictionaries have been spun into ropes which spill from the prow.

Similarly, *Wordtree* (cat. 3), a tapestry, is both procedurally and intellectually complex. Trask printed the same image on two large (88 1/2 x 39 1/4") *washi* (Japanese paper) sheets. The image was of two trees in autumn. The artist used Photoshop to float, like falling leaves, letters from different alphabets into the overall image. She then painstakingly cut the printed sheets into one-quarter inch wide vertical strips, folded the strips in half and wove the tapestry by alternating the folded strips from each of the sheets. The finished work shows the same image slightly different on either side.

Proust's Bed: waiting for a kiss (cat. 6) is an installation which comprises three works and represents the vestiges of a year-long performance in which Trask, sitting on a daybed seen in the installation, everyday over a period of a year would

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read the entire, seven volume, 3,000 plus page, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, Marcel Proust's magnum opus. The daybed is covered in squares, like a quilt, of handmade paper, with some of the squares pleated to incorporate lines of text from the novel. The excerpts, often repeating the same phrases in French and English, transform Proust's art into the artist's own version of concrete poetry. Pages from the novel joined accordion-style pour down the back of the bed. A glass disc etched with a photographic image of the sea sits on the wall—the small window to the world that the artist envisions for the sickly, bed ridden Proust—and a small pillow covered in the same handmade paper with text rests on a plinth nearby. This work weaves together Proust's and Trask's communal theme of the recovery of lost memories, the maternal kiss that never came, and the inevitable passage of time.

Snow Piece #1 (cat. 8) is a temporary site-specific installation along the light-filled skywalk between the Library and Fine Arts Building on the Sir Wilfred Grenfell College campus. The artist couched paper pulp onto the windows to form text which at certain times of the day casts shadows of the words along the opposite walls. On one side of the walkway, *dust* figures prominently, on the other, the word, *mystery*, is embedded in a cloud of soft text. The white letters stenciled on the windows echo the patches of snow outside and ask the passerby to stop and take some time to contemplate the mystery and finality of time.

Talking to myself (cat. 5) developed over a period of five years. It is a self-portrait that is as light and ephemeral as life itself, a smaller than life-size sculpture of two conjoined figures, the two sides of the artist, and is realized from chicken wire and paper pulp.

Similarly, *Mmmm* (cat. 4), is a whimsical portrait of the world, a diptych collage sandwiched between glass. The two pieces mirror one another, the continents formed as a positive in one, and a negative in the other. The collage on one side is comprised of small flakes of torn paper each bearing a letter and on the other side, small flakes of torn paper with nothing printed on them.

The impossible task forms a strong motif in myth and folk tales across history and culture. What makes these tales so compelling? Folklorist John Bodner theorizes that: "... some of the pleasure in the motif obviously lies outside the motif itself, in the protagonist's successful completion and victory over their persecutor. But more: I think that the joy of the motif lies in the sheer mad inventiveness of its construction."⁴ This is certainly true of Trask's work. Each work in the exhibition is unique in its individual project (sculpture, installation, collage, site-specific installation and so on) save that all the works use handmade paper and text and are incredibly complex and unusual in their production. We feel compelled to ask ourselves what impossible task is the artist going to set herself now?

For Trask, her relationship with the impossible task more than likely reflects the artist's practical circumstances and philosophical outlook. Trask grew up on a farm in southwestern Ontario and from a very young age was involved in the daily routine and year-round incessant work that is the nature of farming. As she states: "To make a row of something grow in a field takes many steps—a whole year of preparation, planting, growing and harvesting must take place." Like Sisyphus, when the cycle is complete, the farmer must begin the whole process again.

The artist remarks on the similarity of lifestyle between artists, farmers and fishers:

"The independent lifestyles of artmaking, farming and fishing are similar. There are similarities in isolation and attention to the details of self-employment. There are no bosses except mother nature, the clock and one's own ideas. The necessity of working with one's hands is present. There is an awareness of timing in the sense that things have to happen at a certain time or nothing works: i.e. seasonal, right place at right time ..."⁵

Philosophically, Trask views her job as *to create meaning in what is otherwise perceived to be a meaningless world and a way to acknowledge my human condition—one small person here on this planet for a short period of time.*⁶ Her work is about how she chooses to fill her time. To her what is important is the patience, the work, the ingenuity, the time consciously spent in endeavours that are self-imposed.

Camus writing in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, comes to a similar conclusion: "Of all the schools of patience and lucidity, creation is the most effective. It is also the staggering evidence of man's sole dignity: the dogged revolt against his condition, perseverance in an effort considered sterile. It calls for a daily effort, self-mastery, a precise estimate of the limits of truth, measure, and strength. It constitutes an ascesis. All that "for nothing, in order to repeat and mark time. But perhaps the great work of art has less importance in itself than in the ordeal it demands of a man and the opportunity it provides him of overcoming his phantoms and approaching a little closer to his naked reality. But further: All Sisyphus' silent joy is contained therein. His fate belongs to him. His rock is his thing. Likewise, the absurd man, when he contemplates his torment, silences all the idols. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy."⁷

Unlike Sisyphus, though, and more akin to Rumpelstiltskin, Trask's travail includes elements of transformation—books become boats, dictionary pages become a giant ball of rope and torn bits of paper form the continents and oceans of the world. What is behind these transformations? The artist has mentioned that she wants us to look at the space between words, to look at the paper, the support. She also speaks of trying to invent her own language. I would suggest that more than that happens when she disassembles and reforms text. Text is intimately involved with a progression of time, be it a dictionary, a newspaper article or a 3,000-page novel. Even within words, there is an internal progression. When the artist dismantles text and reassembles letters and words to randomly form the continents and oceans of the world, to float aimlessly like leaves in the fall or snow in the winter, the artist breaks apart this forward flow of time. So while Trask is keenly aware of the time and timing, the paradox is that the overall feeling of the exhibition is that of the suspension of time.

Bodner discusses the role of the impossible task motif in folktales: "Finally, the central role of the impossible (or merely tedious, very difficult, paradoxical or suicidal) task is to discover something of the character of individuals in the story."⁸ Ultimately, though, as Bodner notes, folktales resonate and endure because they are "stories of the human condition." Likewise, Karen Trask's work resonates as a meditation on the human condition and our choices. Her quiet art inspires us to choose how we fill our time and encourages us to create our own meaning in life. To Trask, it does not matter what the end product is or what impossible task we undertake; what is important is that we choose, that we are consciously creating our own meaning and that we are taking responsibility for our meaning in life.

Charlotte Jones has worked as an artist, arts writer, arts administrator, educator and independent curator across Canada and in Ireland for over 30 years. She received a BA (Honours) from the University of Manitoba, an MLA from the University of British Columbia and a Masters of Communication from Simon Fraser University. Since 1991 as a curator she has initiated several projects linking Canada with Ireland and linking the arts to other disciplines, particularly science, conservation, literature and sound. These projects include The Wood Project and The Limestone Barrens Project. She currently is acting director of Sir Wilfred Grenfell College Art Gallery.

Endnotes

1 Nancy Ring, *Scale and Wonder in The Recent Work of Karen Trask*, *Karen Trask: Where the Words Go*, Corner Brook: University Relations for Sir Wilfred Grenfell College Art Gallery.

2 Ibid.

3 Karen Trask, email correspondence, February, 2010.

4 John Bodner, notes from The Impossible Task public presentation, Sir Wilfred Grenfell College Art Gallery, January 15, 2010.

5 Karen Trask, *ibid.*

6 Ibid.

7 Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975, p.123.

8 John Bodner, *ibid.*