

An Artist Residency

A Beautiful Moment



Nœuds d'écoute (2019)
Performance, Paper thread spun from dictionaries
Sackville, New Brunswick
Photo: Karen Trask



Nœuds d'écoute (2019)
Paper thread spun from dictionaries
Karen Trask and Bre Darlison at work
Photo: Erik Edson

The most precious benefits from a residency are intangible, difficult to pinpoint. It is the art-making process that stimulates the artist—a curiosity to see what will happen if.

by Karen Trask

It's early on a Saturday morning, and there are seven of us huddled together in a living room on the Atlantic coast near Cocagne, New Brunswick. Jean-Pierre Caissie, assistant director of the Association acadienne des artistes professionnels du Nouveau-Brunswick, has brought me and my two student interns, Suzanne Cormier and Fanny Rasoamiaramanana, to the homes of Raymond and Alcida Maillet and their son, Robert. It's my third month of a two-year joint residency with the Université de Moncton in Moncton and Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick. Both interns are studying at the Université de Moncton; Suzanne is from the area and is a second-year fine arts student, and Fanny is a foreign student from Madagascar in her second year of design. For Raymond and Alcida, now in their eighties, and their family, fishing has been a way of life. I have brought cord and fishing needles; Raymond is showing us how to tie a *nœud d'écoute*, the basic knot for making a fishing net. Four very different French accents intermingle.

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Fanny is the one who seems to have it in her fingers and catches on quickly. Once back on campus and in the studio together, it is Fanny and the video I took of Raymond and Alcida showing us how to make the knots that help us piece the process together. Then, it is up to me to transfer this craft to my own process. For three more months, my campus studio is all laughter, stories, and busy hands. Together, we start to make a net with paper thread spun from dictionaries. By the end of the two-year residency, eleven or more interns have contributed to the making of a thirty-by-twelve-foot-long net made from four different language dictionaries relevant to the southeastern region of New Brunswick.

Fifteen months later, the end of my residency in New Brunswick is nearing and I am in my studio at Mount Allison University working with fine arts student Bre Darlison. She is my intern for the year, and we have just spent an enjoyable summer working together on a series of video-performance pieces that I am preparing for an upcoming exhibition. But this early Monday morning is different—we are faced with an unexpected project and a looming deadline. I have agreed to remake one of my

sculptures as part of the set design for *Mouvance*, a contemporary opera, created by Suzie LeBlanc and Jérôme Blais, soon to be presented in Halifax and Montreal. A strange mix of dread and curiosity has been with me all weekend. We are doing something that neither of us has done before. Bre says something about the difficulty ahead that suddenly and completely undoes me. She reads the fear and fragility in my face and is silent. For her, this is new. Until now, she has laughingly said, “KT says no fear.” It takes me several minutes, but at last I say, “It’s okay, we’ll figure it out.” And we do. That moment of shared doubt is illuminating. The artist-as-mentor is a positive result of an artist residency within a university setting. Now I remind her that fear is normal; what’s important is what you do with it. “Go with the fear,” I say. My role as mentor continues.

During a 2014 Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec (CALQ) residency in Tokyo, I was invited to give an artist talk at Higure Art Gallery. Connections made there led me to present *Paper Words*, the inaugural exhibition at the brand-new Komagome Contemporary Art Space. During my residency, Nakano Emiko, a well-known Japanese textile artist, taught me *shifu*, the traditional Japanese technique for spinning paper. Through her, I met artist Yanai Tsuguo, who would later exhibit with me and Montreal artist Sarah Bertrand-Hamel at the Canadian Embassy Gallery. These friendships continue.

In 2008, I spent six months in the CALQ Paris studio to research a favourite subject: nothingness. My big discovery arrived unexpectedly. While sitting quietly one evening in front of the window, bright lights, shadows of trees, cars, signposts, and my own shadow were suddenly flying around the room. Tourist boats going up and down the Seine flooded the riverside with lights. Every night, it was a free show; I simply had to stand there, a witness with a camera.

The reason most cited for going on a residency is to research and explore new techniques, cultures, and ideas in a place and time away from normal life. In most residencies, there is no pressure to perform, to present, or even to make work, even though the concrete results often do not match expectations. The most precious benefits from a residency are intangible, difficult to pinpoint. A need for change has been my biggest motivator. A need to discover new ways to challenge my art, my art-making process, and myself often coincide. Whatever the reason, it is the going, the path taken that is interesting. It is the art-making process that stimulates the artist—a curiosity to see what will happen if. It’s the unexpected moment that is often the richest. It’s the connections with people met on residencies that are so valuable. Like rhizomes, they lead to even more connections.

In the fall of 1994, I was at Est-Nord-Est in Saint-Jean-Port-Joli, known at that time as a centre for research and

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Paper Words (2014)
Paper
Photo: Naganuma Hiromasa

production in wood sculpture. My time spent there marked a period of many changes reflected in both my work and my personal life. I met my future partner, Paul Litherland, during that residency. It was one of the most effervescent, inspiring periods of my life. Many artists whom I met there continue to be part of my personal and professional life.

A residency is an opportunity to step outside the normal flow of life—a chance to see one’s art making through other perspectives, cultures, and geographies. The benefits are surprising and infinite. Being forced to work with what is at hand, I have learnt that when my eyes are open, everything I need is right there. An artist residency can be a beautiful moment. ●