



Where the words go

KAREN TRASK

Scale and Wonder in The Recent Work of Karen Trask

Nancy Ring, Montreal, 2009

Visiting Karen Trask's Montreal studio, I spot a glass bowl sitting on a work table. The bowl is sea-green and kitchen-sized. It looks like it was made to hold flour or fruit, but now it's being used to collect white paper flakes the size and shape of confetti. There are probably hundreds of tiny flakes in the bowl. Trask is cutting them by hand from lists of printed symbols. On each flake is a single letter from a dizzying array of world alphabets: Tibetan, Laotian, Amharic, Bengali, Armenian, Khmer, Inuktitut, Greek, Georgian, Burmese, Malayalam, Thai, Sinhala, Ethiopian, Czech, Russian, Chinese, Hebrew, Arabic, and the standard Latin alphabet used in the West. Cutting the letters, one by one, from the printed lists is picky work. The process is slow and not nearing an end. At the time of my visit, the snipping has been going on for hours, but the flakes of symbols, the tiny grains of writing have barely made a dent in the sea-green bowl. The mound of them is no higher than the nail on my smallest finger.

I feel, as I often do in the presence of Trask's work, close to the realm of fairytales, with the impossible-seeming tasks these stories demand of their heroines. Spin these rooms full of straw into gold. Pick every seed that's been flung into the fireplace out of the cinders. Gather up the letters from all the alphabets in the world and cut them out, one by one. Yet in Trask's world, unlike that of the Brothers Grimm, there's no threat of punishment should she fail to reach her goal. There's just the steady rhythm of the work, and the enchantment of the process.



Reading Proust, performance, 2005

Daunting, enthralling tasks have taken center stage in Trask's practice since 2005, the year she launched the project *Proust's Bed: Waiting for a Kiss*. Inspired by the opening pages of the novel *Swann's Way*—where the young Marcel Proust waits in bed for a kiss from his mother that never comes—Trask decided to sit on a daybed for a year and read every volume of Proust's immense and difficult *chef d'oeuvre*, *In Search of Lost Time*. For twelve months the daybed became a second studio for Trask. She spent long hours soaking up Proust's dense French prose. She moved between activity and reverie, taking notes, making drawings, and daydreaming, sometimes about her own mother, who died when she was a small girl.

In the summer of 2006, Trask turned her research into a unique installation with the support of DARE-DARE, an artist-run centre that places art projects in non-gallery spaces. The site chosen for *Proust's Bed: Waiting for a Kiss* (cat. 6) was inspired: an 8 × 10' room built on top of a shed in a backyard garden. To get to the work, viewers had to walk down an alley in Montreal's Little Italy, enter the garden through a door in a wall, and mount steep narrow steps that rose higher than the garden's fruit trees. Crossing the threshold into the little room was like stepping out of daily life and into the world of a book—a hushed, clamorous, magical space suspended in time. The daybed where Trask had read Proust was now blanketed in thick white paper embellished and pieced together like a crazy-quilt. Words and sentences from Proust's writing studded and shot across the coverlet like black stars in a milky sky. More paper, in fanciful arrangements, swirled and spread around and beyond the bed. Reams of pages from old copies of Proust's novels cascaded down behind the headboard. Flounces of paper cut into a diamond pattern fell off the sides of the bed and stretched across the floor. A band of ribbed paper, again with Proust's words flashing in and out of its weave, descended from one of the room's small windows like Rapunzel's hair.

Yet all this liveliness was somehow caught and stopped in the room. Vibrant movement intertwined with trance-like stillness. The sense of time and motion frozen in place was created in part by the colour white, which dominated the installation. There was one small spot of colour in the room, but it only enhanced the sense of activity suspended. Hung high on the wall facing the daybed, at the farthest possible physical distance from its headboard, was a circle of glass on which was printed an image of the green-blue sea, becalmed. *La mer, la mère ...* it was tempting to view this stilled glass sea as a portrait of the mother who would never come to plant her kiss. The green-blue circle set within but apart from the installation's fantasia of paper seemed to depict Proust's—and Trask's—longed-for, unreachable horizon.

Trask's next long-term project was as grand in its scale and fantastical in its scope as *Proust's Bed*. It originated from the act of reading another challenging, charged literary classic: James Joyce's *Ulysses*. This time, the reading process did not stem from the experience of longing for something inaccessible; instead, it was rooted in intimacy, immediacy and presence. In early 2006, a good friend—confined to her bed by a serious illness—was seeking distraction, a challenge and some pleasure. She engaged with Trask to read the entire text of Joyce's book out loud into a tape recorder while Trask sat alongside her, drawing, listening, and writing down passages of text that caught her fancy. Joyce's prose in *Ulysses* is heady and jubilant. Much of the 1000-plus-page book is written in a stream-of-consciousness style that captures ideas and sensations in the instant they emerge, then releases them as instantaneously as other moments of being rise up to take their place. Similarly, the exhibition that Trask produced out of her encounter with *Ulysses—Cette Nuit, Défaire*—was about touching and releasing, about savouring what is present even in the face of its inevitable disappearance.

Cette Nuit, Défaire opened in January of 2008 at La Centrale, a storefront gallery on Montreal's busy rue St. Laurent. What viewers saw of the show depended on when they arrived in front of the gallery's display window. By day, passers-by could see a tapestry being woven out of audiotape; the pattern in the weave grew increasingly legible over the course of several weeks, finally spelling out the joyous final word in *Ulysses*: YES. Beyond this tapestry was a sight that pulled countless visitors into the gallery: a woman in her fifties—Trask herself—seated by an enormous mound of tape, feeding it through a device that resembled a spinning machine. The heap of tape was the entire spoken text of Joyce's book, unravelled from the plastic cassettes that had once contained it. For hours each day, Trask pulled threads from the heap,

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then—using a foot pedal and a handheld playback device—worked at converting the tape back into sound. This process was a gruelling one. The tape—insistently material—was unruly, tending to tangle and knot. The foot pedal and playback device also demanded enormous patience; it was nearly impossible to work them in a way that didn't distort the recorded voice, speeding it up, chipmunk-style, or slowing it down, lowering its timbre. But despite the difficulties, Trask sat at the machine day after day for hours at a time, pulling her friend's voice and Joyce's words through her fingers as the heap of tape beside her grew smaller. Occasionally, invariably, Trask would hit gold: she'd work the machine just right and—for a few flashing seconds—there they'd be, right there in the gallery: the friend's voice, in its authentic pitch and texture; the text of *Ulysses*, in its lush sound and rhythms.

By night, the exhibition changed. The unfinished tapestry, the foot pedal and the speaker, the pile of tape sat inert and half-visible in the unlit gallery space. But bright in the window was a video screen that played the same recording until day broke once more. Perhaps the most visually lovely element of *Cette Nuit, Défaire*, this video showed the work of the day played in reverse. Pausing under lit streetlamps in front of the display window, viewers could see strands of brown audiotape leaping away from Trask's machine, coiling back into the tangled heap from which they had been pulled.

Cyclical processes of making and unmaking were the focus of a short text Trask composed for the La Centrale show. This text retold the story of Penelope, wife of the wandering mythical warrior Ulysses. If visitors turned a crank on a small assemblage of tape and reels hung on the gallery wall, they could hear it spoken out loud:

*You heard that my name is Penelope and that Ulysses came home
and that was the end of the story.*

They told you that I wove by day and then unwove by night.

*They told you that it was my strategy for waiting, for putting off time and for keeping order in the kingdom until Ulysses
came back from that terrible war and those long years of getting lost on his way home.*

*But, I am here and I was doing this long before I knew Ulysses. He has come and gone many times and I have had many
names and still I sit pulling and winding threads, this one to that one.*

*By day I weave sense of it all, by night, it all comes apart
and then, I start over again.*

My voice is in your hands.

("Penelope Speaks" 2008)

The voice reciting this text was Trask's own, and indeed, Penelope—the intrepid, persistent heroine who embraces absence as much as presence, destruction alongside creation—is a good emblem for Trask herself. Weaving and unravelling, undoing and recomposing: these processes are intertwined in every significant piece Trask has produced over the past five years. Creating *Where the Words Go* (cat. 2) involved dismantling literally hundreds of dictionaries, the pages of which were then spun into threads to make a large freestanding ball. *Where the Words Go* is an object defined by its roundness, its density. There's also a hollow passage built into its design; a hole that—by complementing fullness with its opposite—completes the circle. For *Inside Passage* (cat. 7), Trask again dismantled books, this time using their bright covers and pale pages to construct a boat hull that is at once full and hollow. For *Wordtree* (cat. 3), she shredded paper imprinted with the image of trees in autumn into fine, thin strips. She then rewove the strips to make the trees—dropping letters from various alphabets like leaves—reappear once more. For the large mural *Wordfield* (cat. 1), Trask beat shredded book pages into the paste she used to make her massive sheets of paper. Words and letters re-emerge everywhere in the scene that *Wordfield* shows: in the broad stretch of winter sky, in the furrows of a rural field, in the snow and stones in the mural's foreground.

Another constant in Trask's recent work is the way she brings together the very small with the very large. This tendency is evident in *Wordfield*, as well as in the image with which I began this essay: the tiny flakes of paper representing all the letters of the world accumulating, ever so slowly, in the glass bowl in Trask's studio. I find it lovely, and typical of Trask, that she's planning to scatter these miniscule units of writing onto panes of glass to form maps of all the earth's continents and its oceans. The Arabic letters 'kaf' and 'alif' helping to form the mass that is North America ... single words from Proust patterned onto a wide field of white paper... brief flashes of comprehensible speech pointing to the vast tract that is Joyce's *Ulysses*... an old book cover, a bit of linen, the word *yes*, mortality, joy—the tiny and the massive are the warp and woof of Trask's art.

One day recently Trask spoke to me about a story she'd heard on the CBC Sunday radio program *Tapestry*. The story was about a rabbi who, wherever he went, carried two slips of paper in his pocket. On one slip was written the word "mystery." On the other was written "dust." "He just had to keep his hands in both pockets," Trask explained, her voice excited, "to understand what life is all about." It is no surprise Trask found meaning and pleasure in this parable. The work she has chosen for herself is to create objects and experiences in which the ineffably large, the farthest horizon, the most humble materials and the smallest of particles are constantly colliding, each helping to form and to illuminate the other. And what emerges from this collision, what Trask's work transmits to the viewer, is one of the best sensations that art is capable of producing: a sense of wonder.

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Proust's Bed (installation view), 2005

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.*

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