



# A perpetually unravelling odyssey

**Montreal performance artist Karen Trask creates to destroy**

by [Kira Josefsson](#) / August 17, 2009

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The Montreal-based artist Karen Trask likes words. Did you know, for example, that the word “text” originates from “textus,” connected to “texture” and “woven”? This she tells me as she describes her “Cette Nuit, Défaire,” a multifaceted installation that has much to do with the correlation between these words.

Nighttime passersby of the gallery will see a naked light bulb illuminating a heap of audiotape on the floor of the otherwise dark space, while a video in the window shows the undoing of a weave, also made of tape. During the day, the weave is redone, and if you drop in you might see Trask spinning it. Or, you could try cranking an old-school reel-to-reel speaker which gives life to the voice of Penelope, the wife of Homer’s Ulysses.

The inspiration for this project came when Trask’s close friend got sick with cancer, and had to stay in bed for long periods of time. They had both wanted to read James Joyce’s massive novel Ulysses for a while, and decided it would be a good way of spending time together while taking their mind off the illness. Inspired by the poetic qualities of the text, they spontaneously decided to record their reading, and it resulted in the some 66,000 feet of tape.

The tape itself is used to mimic a scene from Homer’s Odyssey, in which Penelope attempts to ward off unwanted suitors while her husband is away at war. Having promised to pick a new spouse once she is done with her weaving, she undoes it every night, so that it will never be finished. Among other things, Trask’s installation deals with the neverending task of doing something for its own sake.

“It’s now,” she says, of her work-in-progress. “I think the whole thing is like a meditation almost,” she adds.

In a constantly accelerating world, there is not much time for this type of activity. Everything needs to lead somewhere. Just think: when did you last do something without having some kind of goal, however vaguely formulated? We want to move fast, we want to see results. “Non-activity” is scarce all around, and this attitude is reflected in the way Penelope is treated by critics. Her patient waiting – in comparison to her husband’s heroic adventures – is seen as submissive and meek. Trask wants to contest this opinion. She says that although the Odyssey might mostly talk about Ulysses, Penelope was there before him and will continue to be there when he is gone. She is the figure that keeps everything together. “I think patience can be very active, very proud,” she observes. Trask wants to emphasize Penelope’s role as equally or more important than Ulysses’s.

“Cette Nuit, Défaire,” however, is not only about counteracting the all-too-familiar habit of overlooking women in literary history, or even about the value of doing things without having an object. It is also about the desire to alter the past. “How often don’t we think about undoing things?” asks Trask. Still, she recognizes that going back is impossible – even undesirable. We are often told to slow down and appreciate life the way it is, with all its bumps and lumps. She points at the weave, and the knotted tangle of audiotape on the floor. “It will not be a pretty little weaving. It’s going to be messy. Like life.”

“Cette Nuit, Défaire” is running until February 10 at Galerie La Centrale (4296 St. Laurent), which is open on Wednesdays from 12-6 p.m., on Thursdays and Fridays from 12-9 p.m. and on weekends from 12-5 p.m.

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