

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,



Cette Nuit Défaire, performance and multimedia installation, 2008

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undoing and recomposing:
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past five years.

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.

Nancy Ring is a Montreal-based writer with a doctorate in art history from Northwestern University. She has been teaching and collaborating with visual artists in Canada for over 15 years. Recent projects include an interview with painter Janet Werner for the catalogue, Janet Werner: Too Much Happiness, a performance project with multidisciplinary artist k.g.guttman, and a course that helps students in the MFA Studio program at Concordia develop original writing projects.



Proust's Bed (installation view), 2005