

Nœuds d'écoute

Listening Knots

Karen Trask

April 13 – May 18, 2019

WORDS, WAVES, NETS

Karen Trask approaches words as if they were matter, as if they were objects that exist in the world, alongside us and with which we interact. Surely we appreciate that language shapes our relation to things, even if only partially and provisionally. On the other hand, to imagine words as objects is to understand something of the kinds and qualities of the connections between words and what they name.

Trask makes sculptural installations that build poetry out of paper pulp, and turn pages from books into thread to make myriad other things—tapestries and bed covers and giant balls of string. She conducts performances imagining our relationship to language and to words as creative and iterative and writes moving, poetic texts that try to come to terms with absence and loss, death and dying, and the spaces that open up between words and the worlds they describe. In all, Trask's arts give rise to thoughts about the strangeness, uncertainty and conditional nature of language, and also about how we embody and are embodied by words.

At OBORO, *Nœuds d'écoute/Listening Knots* (2018-19) takes Virginia Woolf's extraordinary "play poem" *The Waves* as its inspiration. Though Woolf's appreciation of how self is entwined with the forces of nature and its objects is a common theme in all of her writing, *The Waves* expresses this idea most expansively. Divided into nine parts, each corresponding to a different time of day and a different period in the lives of a group of six friends, the narrative progresses through a series of interior monologues that wind together as if a braid: each character's thoughts an expression of their sense perceptions, their own immediate, unfiltered responses to the world, shaped through words into understandings that generate affects and emotions to be carried from one person to the next, just as waves move across the ocean.

The "nœud d'écoute" or listening knot of Trask's exhibition title is a knot used to fabricate fishing nets. Also known as the weaver's knot, the tie joins two, often very different elements together. Employed in the exhibition the knot weaves a series of netted sculptural works and reinforces the conceptual premise of both novel and artwork—an understanding of being, phenomena and experience as a perpetual enjoining of people and things. The title also gives rise to thinking about the stories shared during processes of net making—a time intensive and physically laborious task—as well as stories held in potentia, nascent in the material base of the works in the exhibition. Made with thread spun from the pages of Mi'kmaq, Acadian, French and English dictionaries, the language groups of southern New Brunswick's Maritime community where the work was made, the nets are literally woven from words.

Nets and waveforms lie at the core of the exhibition. *Listening Knots*, installed at the gallery's entrance takes form as a large billowing net that ripples when passed, ever so slightly, just as the surface of the sea folds in the wind. Elsewhere, nets spawn human forms. In the foyer

and suspended from the skylights netted bodies fall, dive and swim into and through the gallery space and give rise to thinking about the dynamics of language—its generative and limiting effects. As the net catches and releases, gathers and permits passage, so words hold concepts to things, but also miss that which is too small, different or discrete to contain.

A work called *The Waves* encircles the gallery. A braid woven from the pages of six different editions of Woolf's novel, one for each character in the novel, the entwining of the disparate strands into a single rope calls to mind the action of the waves on the detritus at the sea's shoreline—a tumbling to which Trask submitted the work and captured in one of the "Play Poem" videos included in the exhibition. Where fishing nets and wave tumbings confirm the oceanic theme visually, the echo of waves lapping a shoreline in one of the "Play Poems" summons the sea acoustically and mixes evocatively and suggestively with the vibrations of a bobbin winder making thread while the spinning performance is underway in another room.

The "multiple references" Woolf makes in her novel to "spinning and threads connecting words and ideas" and the analogy drawn between phrasing and the casting of nets find affinity with Trask's own thinking about the rapport between writing and other craft practices. Indeed, the artist refers to the projects she weaves from pages torn from literary works as a form of rewriting. Before *The Waves*, Trask produced several different weaving projects responding to and incorporating pages from other great works of modernist literature: Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* and James Joyce's *Ulysses*, in particular. She sees it as "a way of physically deconstructing and re-presenting the narrative structures as well as the actual physical gestures and writing processes used by each of these authors—a re-reading and re-writing of each of the books."¹

Touched by words, touching words, emotion becoming motion, Trask's creative processes approximate the rhythm of the sea—methods that are conjured and concretized in the performance at OBORO. Located in a corner in the last room on the gallery tour, the visitor hears the sound of spinning long before she sees what is spun. Arriving at the performance site one finds the stage surprisingly modest: a small opening in a curtained off theatre frames the artist's hands; another reveals the pile of thread accumulating on the floor over the course of the exhibition. Nothing else is seen but the action and object of the artist's labour: a steady, unyielding process of re-reading, re-writing and re-working words. Nothing else is necessary. Words have a material life. Language is never static or finite, but taken on, embodied, revised and reworked in each instance of its iteration.

Cheryl Simon

1. Karen Trask, *The Architecture of Writing or Re-reading and Re-writing – One Line at a Time (With My Fingers)*, <http://karentrask.com/the-architecture-of-writing-or-re-reading-and-re-writing-one-line-at-a-time-with-my-fingers/>