

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Benjamin Weissman, "As Eloquence Appears," *Frieze*, June, 2005

Frieze



As Eloquence Appears

by Benjamin Weissman

Frances Stark's playful work is as richly literary as it is visually economic

Frances Stark's Life Sentence

Frances Stark has spent the last ten years making some of the most discrete, demanding, tender, sad, airy, nervous, maddening, self-conscious drawings in America. By using carbon paper (that messy, outmoded means of copying a letter-sized document) and casting herself as the poetic office nerd, she has constructed a cosmology of signs focusing on the subtleties and idiosyncrasies of language, fragmented utterances, Concrete poetry, literature and the act of writing.

If Stark were to exhibit a blank piece of paper (the cliché of a writer's void or vacuum), her audience would know exactly what she meant: a vacant space that stands for an enormous amount of agony, that tenuous moment before the first word is written on the page, the first letter scratched onto the glaringly pale paper. She's one of the few artists who could get away with such a hokey move

and render it meaningful. If there is such a thing as an artist's artist, then Stark is very much a writer's artist she thinks about the troubles the scribe faces, or at least the difficulties their texts face once constructed. She has, for example, made a work entitled *The emptiness in my head ...* (1997), which is loaded with static, fear, bliss – nothingness at its most pregnant. It comprises a rectangular field of blue and green words, spelling out over and over again the phrase 'The emptiness in my head' followed by 'could melt with sweet peace into the emptiness of this view'. With the blue carbon cueing sky, and the green the earth below, Stark has produced a sublime landscape reminiscent of a Caspar David Friedrich in which the figure literally becomes the language, the first-person voice.

Stark often works with carbon paper, tracing sentences from classic texts by Emily Dickinson, Robert Musil, her hero Henry Miller and many others (Samuel Beckett and Thomas Bernhard, the repetition masters, also figure), though she seems to be less interested

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in the specific narratives rendered and the writers who produced them and more drawn toward states of interiority, the *angst* of self-consciousness, the uncanny writer's voice.

This sounds like a simple, innocuous pursuit, which in part it may be, but there's something more complicated going on since her relationship to language, her absolute faith in the written word, is a bended-knee reverence, as if tracing musical notes with her tongue. When she comes across the aforementioned writers, Stark is spellbound; her impulse is to write their words, copy and repeat them. In this sense she connects to language in an elemental way. The alphabet is her air and water, her means of survival. When she spells out tiny letters on paper you get the feeling that oxygen is being given to someone who only moments ago was suffocating. A steady melancholy, a kind of lush desperation, seems to be at the heart of her work, and it functions as a kind of cheerful SOS jammed into bottles, floated out to sea or onto gallery walls. Of course she, the message writer, doesn't need to be saved in any real way, though there is something covertly emotional in her practice hidden, withheld.

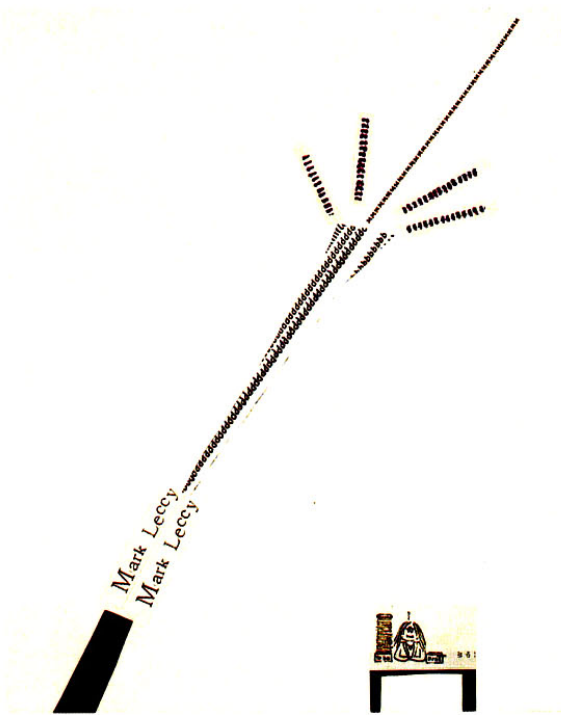
Pompoms

There was a period in junior high school when Stark, aged 14, was a cheerleader, in a suburb of San Francisco, standing in front of a group of sports fans seated in bleachers, rooting for their team. She leapt in the air and yelled 'Give me a C' and formed the letter with her body; the audience would yell back the letter C. 'Give me an O', she'd continue, and so on, until the school's name was spelled out: Conquistadors. Though her pompoms are gone and the crowd in front of her has reformed itself, little else has changed. Stark is still spelling out words that mean a great deal to her, laboriously, letter by letter.

Chews gum & bounces ball

Stark is one of the few artists of her generation who's also a writer of curious lush prose, both fiction and non-fiction. Her *Collected Writings 1993–2003* were published recently by Book Works. In decades past the visual artist and writer was not such a rare

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animal. Artists such as Dan Graham, Barbara Kruger, Mike Kelley and John Miller all cultivated a writing practice that was, and in many cases still is, central to their work. But Stark, as both exhibiting artist and published writer, stands nearly alone among her peers. It's as if, in this point in time, to be bi-medial, to swing both ways, is thought to confuse the art audience or to harm an artist's reputation.

There's a stylistic magic to Stark's writing that is gracefully laboured (polished stones come to mind, but oddly shaped and with strange organisms stuck to their undersides), intimate, fussy, self-conscious; each sentence eggs itself on, lustily digressing, indulging in its own peculiar meditation. It is a sweet mixture of hyper-giddiness and brainiac overdrive. The pleasures writing affords Stark are noticeable in every sentence she writes. Many of those sentences are about reading and writing: 'And I always used to say, or write rather, privately and pathetically, to myself that the curse of the heavy-headed lazy one is the occasional late late night which must be spent purging some memorable chunks – hearty and indigestible – of a life that seems unendurable' ('The Structure of this Bliss', 1997). She examines the world, ridicules herself and investigates her own shortcomings, recalling what Allen Ginsberg once said about his writing: 'My intention was to make a picture of the mind, mistakes and all.' An honest pursuit, but in less talented hands the results are stultifying slop. With Stark you get, say, from her undated piece on Raymond Pettibon, 'I'm taking this opportunity to feel some holes in addition to filling them' and 'There's a sanctuary in writing sentences. They can fashion either the emptiness or fullness of the real world into intricate syntactical wonders – solid little trains that choo-choo to an unworldly destination sometimes right past their readers who wait anxiously for a cargo of reflection.'

Medium envy

So Stark is gaga-mad for literature, and her visual art practice and her writing testify to this. As she says, 'I am envious of those who

can deliver nuggets in tightly wrapped packages. The economy of Emily Dickinson is a huge inspiration. I think I try to work with a different economy, impose limits so that I can hit a single clear note in a visual work [...] this led me to think about all the Cubist depictions of music and how there was a certain envy there on the part of the painters, envying an invisibly textured time-based medium.' Stark has thematically hit on this theme of coveting the effects and power of music in a couple of pieces, for example in *Music is Different* (1996), a straightforward work with plain notebook paper on the left side of the picture and a musical staff on the right. 'Music affects audiences so strongly', Stark has observed; 'viscerally an artist can't compete'. In *Still Life with IBM Cards and Violin* (1999) she made her point about the enviability of music as a medium very clear, via a pseudo Pablo Picasso collage featuring a column of black and white squares that functions as a kind of literal pedestal for a fragment of a violin. There was also a piece she did about the songs of Donovan, and another about the Beatles in which she painstakingly traced a timeline of the band's career, a history that's been reprinted a zillion times, and arranged the information in desolate little clumps. As Walter Pater declared in 1877, all art aspires to the condition of music.

The bottom of it

From the beginning of her career Stark has worked with two flimsy materials: carbon paper and rice paper. In *Having an Experience* (1995) the title phrase is written in capital letters using carbon paper, and below it, also in carbon, is the shaky ocean of lines where you might expect to find words and sentences. Read between the lines and see the ineffable, the rendering of an indescribable experience, the portrait of a paragraph. *W. is for Werther*, a drawing from 1996, is a tower comprising combinations of the letter U shaped in boxes, the Microsoft Word logo done as a totem pole. At the top, to the left of the totem, which from a distance blurs out into a vague seam or zipper, is a tiny triangular flap, the Microsoft dog-eared and isolated, free from the confines of its original design, and beside it is a tiny rectangle, possibly the page itself, rotated on its side with a tiny mark above it: perhaps a microscopic suitcase – just what Johanne Wolfgang von Goethe's sorrowful Werther needed on his harrowing travels. Stark treats the picture plane like a manuscript page, making metaphorical connections and contrasts between the blank canvas, the blank page for a writer and the computer screen. The Microsoft logo may be a symbol of monstrous authority and power, but of course Stark sees it differently, more abstractly. 'I like the way the world dominator can just be an envelope (oh god) for something more delicate,' she has said, 'in this case a series of epistles that are almost like film frames building a biopic. I love that it has the dog-ear, to designate it as a piece of paper. I like it as an icon of something very banal.'

In a piece entitled *Relaxed by the residue of my own sad perplexity* (1998) Stark delves into her own art-making process. The title, a shapely creature, all convoluted and yet symmetrical, is not a literary quotation but comes rather from her own notebook (a rare instance) and seems to exemplify key aspects of her sensibility. Pertinent is the idea of residue, a key image when thinking formally about the carbon paper transfer process, dealing with small fragments, leftovers and the paper trail of the artist's existence. Here the backbone of the piece is tissue paper, with the heavier rice paper on top, watercolour, and linen tape – her materials, ephemera de luxe – and the abovementioned phrase repeated over and over again. There is also the drawing *Erosion's Fertile Debris* (1999), the origin of whose title is unknown, according to Stark. Here we have a large expanse of paper, nearly all of it a blank white landscape of light. In the bottom fifth of the picture there is a dense band of meticulous

lines. On closer inspection the repeated title phrase is revealed, which literally weighs down the paper and curls up the bottom edge where the debris, or rather Stark's marks, reside.

Repetition

Repetition is at the heart of Stark's practice, and she employs it heartily, like her mentors Beckett and Bernhard, in nearly every piece of art she makes. Repetition is a poetic device used to convey emphasis, boredom, madness, prayer, nonsense, hard times, a life sentence, a meaning enhancer, comfort, a conjurer of spells, a luller to sleep, to stop time, to wish for something, to memorize, to seek a transformative effect, to turn oneself into those she quotes. On a similar note young writers are often encouraged literally to write out in long hand the sentences they want to emulate. Joan Didion admitted doing this with an entire story of Ernest Hemingway's, to get him into her blood. Al Ruppertsberg, a hero of Stark's, did this on dozens of canvases by copying out the text of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). In *Bartleby the Scrivener* (1853), Herman Melville's brilliant story about a copyist who refuses to copy, Bartleby, a clerk at the end of his tether, utters the phrase, 'I prefer not to'. He repeats his chorus to the end of the narrative. Stark, on the other hand, 'prefers to' be a scribe, and she does it in unpredictable ways. She is obsessive about her words, letters, scratches, smudges, micro-marks, sentences.

And now let us pray

Stark's is an art practice that is redemptive (she always recovers ownership of the work, no matter what voices she's channelling), and reverential (notice the bleeding knees), as if the greater one's emotions the more difficult it is to speak about them, as if the work or the entire practice is somewhat tongue-tied, at a loss for words. Her worshipful awe of writing and music is painstakingly enacted in each piece; she seems to revel in that realm, almost romantically, literally creating lines, cracks, fissures, crevasses, ersatz text, the muttering universe, the luscious void. 'That's what I'm doing in a lot of my work - having a kind of love affair with another writer's words.' In conversation with Raymond Pettibon, Stark said, 'I often wonder what Robert Musil would think about the sentences I've underlined'. I think he would say, 'Finally someone who understands me'.

Frances Stark, 38 years old, 5' 3", 122 lbs. hazel eyes; born in Newport Beach, raised in El Toro, five sisters and one brother. Undergraduate studies at San Francisco State where civil rights activist, Angela Davis, taught ('but I didn't have a class with her'). MFA from Art Center College of Design. Married to Steve Hansen, former Art Center librarian, guitarist of Mythter (instrumental mental band), owner of China Art Objects, co-owner of The Mountain (a bar). Rents house in Echo Park (walking distance to Dodger Stadium). Baby boy named Arlo ('He's such a good artist, I'm so jealous. The line quality is so perfect. Full page coverage.'). Performed in films by Raymond Pettibon (as Yoko Ono) and Charles Ray (a mannequin). Tattoos: peace sign on left ankle (self inflicted), Me-Edith (her grandmother, something she wrote on the back of a Polaroid), Louis Sullivan drawing of abstract foliage. Holds the 1989 land speed record for 250cc motorcycle at the Bonneville Salt Flats (127mph).

Benjamin Weissman is the author of two books of short fiction, Headless (Akashic Books, 2004) and Dear Dead Person (Serpent's Tail, 1995). He teaches at Art Center College of Design in Pasadena.



Above: *In and on an unergonomic mind* 2004 Carbon transfer and collage on casein on canvas board 36x28cm Opposite page: *D D 1 2 3 4 MMMM* 2005 Collage and ink on casein on canvas board 42x34cm Below: *Frances Stark after winning the 1989 land speed record for 250cc motorcycle*
Courtesy: Above: greengrassi, London, Opposite page: Marc Foxx, Los Angeles

