

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Nancy Princenthal, "Margin Trading: Frances Stark," *Art in America*, January, 2011

Art in America

Ranging from collage to PowerPoint presentations, the diverse oeuvre of Frances Stark, recently on view at MIT, reveals enthusiasms literary, artistic and zoological.



MARGIN TRADING FRANCES STARK

BY NANCY
PRINCENTHAL

Opposite, Frances Stark:
*There will also be things
that I don't like*, 2007,
mixed mediums on paper,
80 by 60 inches. Collection
Beth Rudin DeWoody,
New York. Courtesy Marc
Foxx Gallery, Los Angeles.

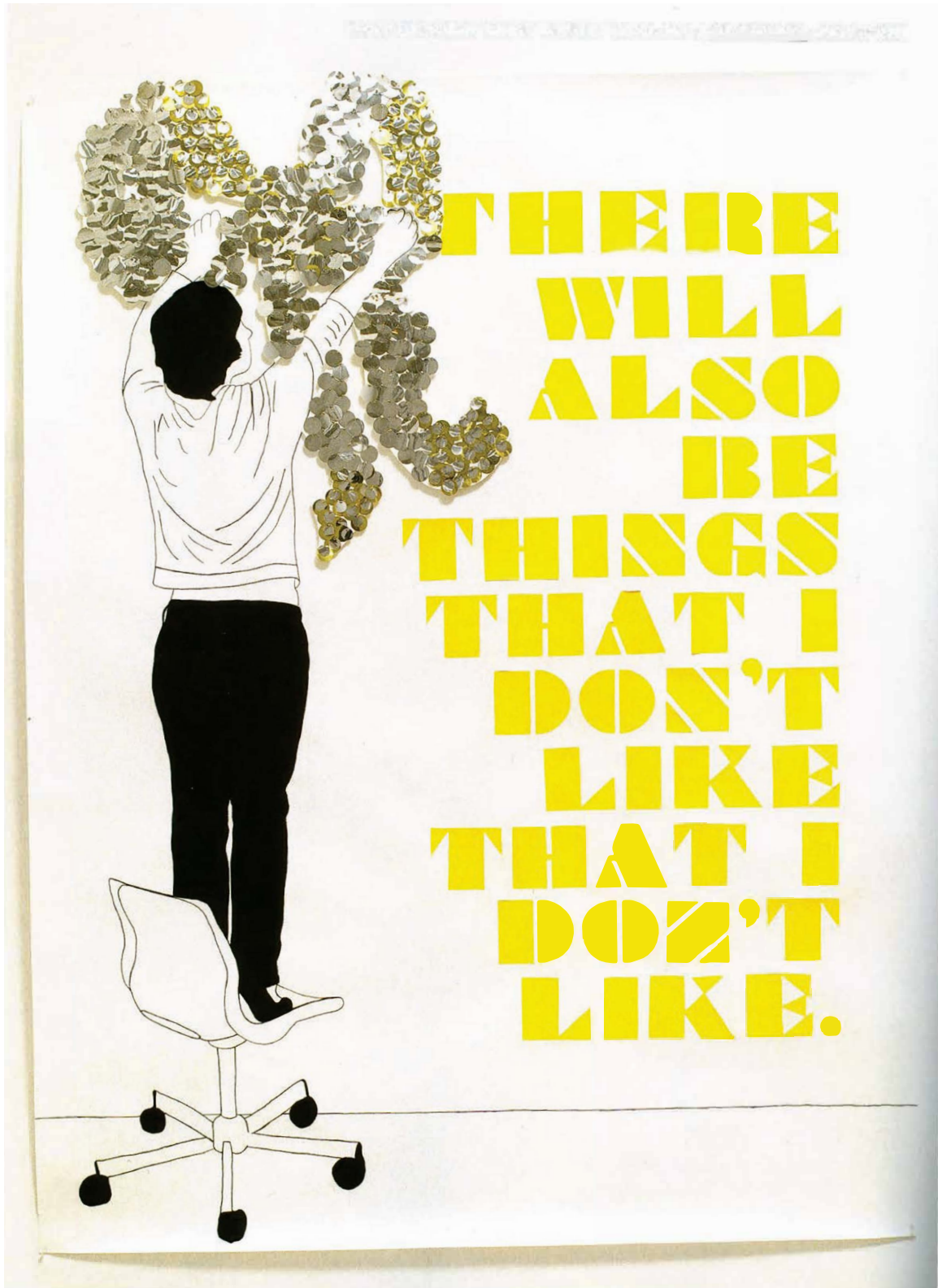
Above, *Portrait of
the Artist as Full-on Bird*,
2004, collage on casein on
canvas board, 20 by
24 inches. Courtesy
Galerie Daniel Buchholz,
Cologne/Berlin.

THE INTERNET AGE is widely understood as the apogee of image culture, but the medium in which we swim, buoyed by waves of chat, posts and tweets, seems increasingly to be the written word. Or so it appears in the company of Frances Stark.

Like more than a few artists of her generation, Stark (born 1967 in Newport Beach) often incorporates writing in her work, which was surveyed recently at the MIT List Visual Arts Center in Cambridge. She has also published her texts independently in various magazines, catalogues and freestanding books, and has penned the odd exhibition review. A cross between fluidly interdisciplinary commentary and wry interior monologue, Stark's prose showed up at the List Center not only as content in her drawings and collages but also in the works' titles; in wall labels, which were generally restricted to the usual identifying information but sometimes digressed rather freely; and, most prominently, in the exhibition catalogue, which is not a conventional document (there are no illustrations) but an anthology of her essays, graced very occasionally with exceedingly terse marginal notations by the survey's curator, João Ribas. Stark's relish for marginalia is confirmed by the title of both book and exhibition, *This could become a gimmick [sic] or an honest articulation of the workings of the mind*, which derives from a comment written in the margin of a used copy of Alain Robbe-Grillet's 1955 novel *The Voyeur*. Stark transcribed the annotated page of this lucky find into a drawing in 1995.

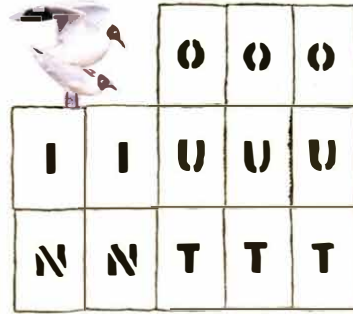
As this titular work suggests, there was a bounty of odd references on offer in the exhibition and its accompanying book. But above all, we got to know Stark—and generally felt fortunate to be in her company. The show opened with several biographical notes, among them *Untitled (Self-portrait/Autobiography)*, 1992, a red carbon copy of her college transcripts (good grades predominate; there is one less successful semester). There were also a couple of nearly blank pieces of paper in the first room, variously enhanced (hand-ruled lines, a one-line note from

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STARK EXPLAINED
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Above, *The Unspeakable Compromise of the Portable Work of Art #11/16 (in lieu of my couch)*, 2001, chair in parts, linen tape, casein on plaster, 34 inches high.

Top, *The Old In and Out*, 2002, collage and paint on paper, 8½ by 11 inches, Private collection, London,

Opposite, *Foyer Furnishing*, 2006, gouache on paper, mylar, printed matter, linen tape, 87¾ by 44½ inches. Collection Valeria and Gregorio Napoleone, London, Courtesy Marc Foxx Gallery.

a friend), suggesting the outset of any routinely terrifying effort at writing, or art-making. Bookishness was instated as a theme with a handful of found and altered volumes. The transcribed page of Robbe-Grillet shared a wall with altered copies of Henry Miller's *Sexus* (1992) and *Tropic of Cancer* (1993), and with illegible drawings of two pages from John Dewey's *Art as Experience (Having an Experience)*, 1995).

Among other signature motifs introduced early on are birds; *Portrait of the Artist as a Full-On Bird* (2004) includes a collaged photo of a cockatoo. Stark explained to me in an interview that she favors birds because, like marginalia, they perch lightly on the edges of things, serving as points of entry—or, more to the point, re-entry. (In *The Old In and Out*, 2002, a collage/drawing of two birds mating, this function serves a simple joke.) Peacocks, which variously flaunt and modestly fold their feathers in several works, need no explanation as metaphor.

Many artists depict birds, none of them evoked by Stark with any specificity. But often, interartist connections are freely acknowledged. One label explained that a red-painted wooden dining chair of vaguely Asian design traces its history to what is said to be the oldest Chinese restaurant in Los Angeles, the city where Stark lives; in recent decades the restaurant became an art bar, and then Jorge Pardo's studio. It was Pardo (whom Stark has

known for 20 years) who provided her with the chair, which he dismembered; Evan Holloway helped her see that she'd need wooden splints to put it back together, duct tape not being up to the job. Its feet propped on plaster blocks, the chair (2001) is part of a series called "The Unspeakable Compromise of the Portable Work of Art," a title borrowed from an essay by Daniel Buren published in *October* in 1971. (This last bit of information comes not from the label, but from Stark's 1999 book of essays, *The Architect & The Housewife*.) Other friendships attested to include Olafur Eliasson's, in the form of a note he sent Stark proclaiming that a blank piece of paper is not enough (*It is not enough*, 1998).

Stark cautions against reading all this collegiality as a testament to the special community spirit of the L.A. art scene. While she confirms a sense of "invisible connectedness," and there is an undeniable tendency toward promiscuity in the matter of social as well as textual and visual allusions in her work, she is also at pains to demonstrate how much of her time is taken up with perfectly chaste domesticity. Stark's home life can be glimpsed in *Cat Videos* (1999-2002), which features feline antics in alternation with those of two little boys—her son and a friend of his. The kids watch David Bowie on a laptop and groove, four-year-oldishly, to the music. Stark says she didn't intend to make an artwork when she turned on the camera, but

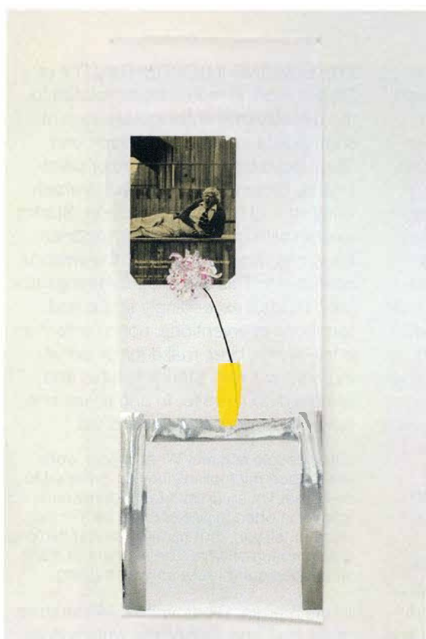
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Above. *To a Selected Theme (Fit to Print)*, 2007, collage and linen tape on paper, 64 by 24¾ inches. Collection Beth Rudin DeWoody.

Opposite. *Oh god, I'm so embarrassed*, 2007, poster and collage on paper, 81½ by 52½ inches.

Right. *Why should you not be able to assemble yourself and write?*, 2008, rice paper, paper and ink on canvas on panel, 53½ by 27 inches.

WHILE A FEW COMPOSITIONS ARE OFFHAND, THE MAJORITY OF STARK'S WORKS ARE EXECUTED WITH CONSIDERABLE CARE. BUT SELF-DOUBT ALWAYS THREATENS.



was delighted to find it had recorded what she describes as a "perfect essay on cultural reproduction"—i.e., small boys acting out the pop-cultural myth of Bowie as Ziggy Stardust, touching down to greet the planet.

The sense of hominess in these videos is expanded in several large collages featuring cabinets, mirrors and flowers. *Foyer Furnishing* (2006) is a large (more than 7-foot-high) drawing/collage that features all three: the mirror (made of Mylar) reflects potted flowers drawn in gouache; a collaged bag slumped by the cabinet's side holds actual printed matter (student papers, bills). In *To a Selected Theme (Fit to Print)*, 2007, a long-stemmed chrysanthemum, in a vase on a table, leans its head toward the cover of a David Hockney catalogue on which the artist is seen lounging with trademark insouciance.

MOST OF THE WORK that was shown is on paper, occasionally mounted on canvas and/or panel. Scale varies widely, and while a few compositions are offhand, the majority are executed with considerable care; text is sometimes cut out and set into its support letter by letter, and the drawing is deft throughout. But self-doubt always threatens. *Oh god, I'm so embarrassed* (2007) makes use of a poster for a 1994 Sean Landers exhibition on which that irremediably self-demeaning artist wrote, "I regret to inform you that I could not come up with an idea for the invitation card. . . . Something is terribly wrong with me. . . . Oh god I'm so embarrassed." Stark helps demonstrate the perfect ordinariness of his mortification by pairing the poster with a mundane accessory: an umbrella parked in a stand (though that could allow Surrealist or sexual readings as well).

Speaking for herself, Stark asks, in the title of a work of 2008, *Why should you not be able to assemble yourself and write?* The question also appears on a piece of paper held in the subject's lap, which we view from above; in this drawing, the seated figure's feet drift upward and her head anchors the drawing's bottom. In *I must explain, specify, rationalize, classify, etc.* (2007), the subject—again, it is presumably the artist—stands on a chair on casters, not the steadiest of supports. Her back to us, she substantially obscures a long text, holding a builder's level under the word "nose" in the passage, "I must explain, enabling the reader to find the work's head, nose, fingers, legs, . . ." *There will also be things that I don't like* (2007) finds the subject standing on the same chair, struggling to hang a garland of big Mylar sequins; the titular declaration, printed in yellow vinyl letters, blares beside her.

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The text in *I must explain (again)*, 2009, covers a big sheet of paper that extends to the floor; it is held by the outstretched hands of a silhouetted woman drawn on the ground sheet—a figure nearly concealed by her own lengthy declamation. This drawing shared the show's final room with works that are, in one way or another, nearly all time-based. The four examples shown from the series "Wisdom, Stupidity, Ugliness" (2008) each features the actual moving hands of a working clock, along with the image of a book and the profile of a progressively dejected woman, who proceeds from upright but leaning to slumped and then bent double: a day in the life. *Toward a score for "Load every rift with ore"* (2010) is a very large (nearly 80-by-90-inch) collage that centers on an image of a music stand and features several printed fragments that could serve, in a pinch, as scores. This work faced a freestanding black dress, its skirt adorned with a massive dial modeled on an old-fashioned rotary phone. Stark wore this costume in a 2009 performance, about which no information was given. As shown, it is among the least accessible works in a survey that otherwise mostly manages to avoid the annoying trait common in much strenuously casual, neo-conceptual work, of talking over the audience's head.

Another time-based medium in Stark's repertory is PowerPoint, which she uses to wickedly funny effect in the nearly half-hour-long presentation *Structures that Fit My Opening* (2006). Shown on a laptop, it offers, as in some loopy version of off-site higher ed, a rambling monologue, given in title frames, and a range of imagery dominated by photographs of the artist's home. The intermittent soundtrack features a typewriter clacking in use, a ticking clock, a ringing phone and cymbals striking to note the occasional punch line. One droll anecdote concerns an exchange of letters between Stark and an editor requesting a text; the artist declines, but her (written) refusal is accepted as a contribution, for which she is paid before she can explain the misunderstanding.

In Stark's boundary-less working life, such incidents seem to occur with some regularity. Mild confusion reigns, untidiness is accepted, things spill. Efforts are made to straighten out the mess, and duly documented: witness, perhaps, an otherwise hard to explain image of a vacuum cleaner, *Hoover in a Corner* (2006). But it remains a struggle, really, to keep it all straight—to maintain distinct professional and personal identities; to project a voice distinguished by its candor while protecting the speaker's privacy and integrity; and to be sure that what is said matches what is meant.

THE BUZZING INTERTEXTUALITY of Stark's work is more closely related to the densely referential installations of such artists as Rachel Harrison and Carol Bove than to drawings or paintings by other wordsmiths like Graham Gilmore and Raymond Pettibon. Stark's kinship with rogue theorists/historians becomes most apparent in the writings collected in *This could become a gimick [sic]*. Ribas's exceedingly spare and recondite interventions, none more than a few words long, make for an amusing contrast with Stark's voluble and often diffident prose. In one essay she acknowledges being flummoxed

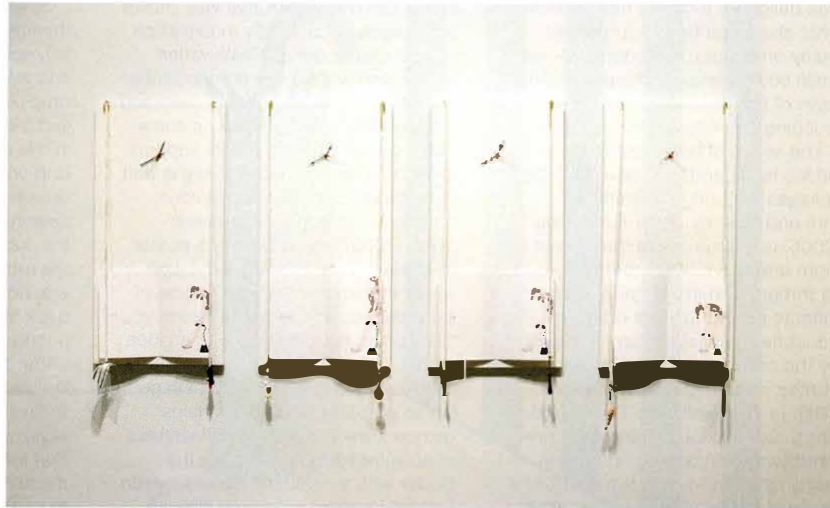
when people ask me 'What is your work like?' upon my foolishly having revealed to them that I'm an artist. I feel like my non-answer is often misinterpreted as 'I'm too deep to tell you,' but usually I'm just thinking a description of what I do is going to make what I do sound really un-worth doing.

In the margin, Ribas writes, "A literature of refusal" and names the writers Robert Musil and Robert Walser; below, he adds, "Malevich and laziness." But then Stark herself is just as likely to quote Musil (a touchstone), Stanley Cavell, Harold Bloom, Avital Ronell, Paul de Man and dozens of highbrow others.

Strikingly, the book's last essay ends with a little meditation about the shaky hold our minds have on the information delivered by our senses. Stark's friend Sharon Lockhart, who made a well-

This page, view of "Wisdom, Stupidity, Ugliness: 1-4 in an ongoing series," 2008, collage and clock on canvas, each 36 by 18 inches. Courtesy MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge.

Opposite, *Toward a score for "Load every rift with ore,"* 2010, paint and printed matter on paper, 86¾ by 79¼ inches. Courtesy Marc Foxx Gallery.



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known series of photographic portraits of young adolescents at Pine Flat, Calif., mistook a suicidal teen who appears in a film by Larry Clark for one of her subjects. Lockhart "had to rewatch the scene many times before she realized, with some sense of relief I suppose, she was mistaken." Stark concludes, "It is this double take, this impossibly unfavorable crossover between two worlds seemingly so far from each other that moved me to write what you just read the way that I did." It is a conclusion of considerable ambiguity.

Robbe-Grillet's *The Voyeur* (whence the marginal note from which the book and exhibition took its title) is, typically for the author, a shifty novel. Its pro-

tagonist is short on affect and lacks any grasp of temporal reality, but he has the visual acuity of a raptor. His experiences are described in hypnotic detail, an account that is repetitious, inconsistent and altogether untrustworthy. Stark, by contrast, invites our faith in her emotional and intellectual honesty. But she also lets us know that she's not a completely reliable narrator either. And if, as readers of her prose—or viewers of her art—we are tempted to add our second guesses and interpretive digressions to Ribas's and her own, we find ourselves in a peculiarly unstable position. It's a very odd place from which to write criticism—which may be part of Stark's exceptionally canny strategy.

"Frances Stark: This could become a gimmick [sic] or an honest articulation of the workings of the mind" was on view at the MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, Mass., Oct. 22, 2010-Jan. 2, 2011.

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