

## FRANCES STARK

Language is both a medium and a subject for Frances Stark, whose works on paper, sculptures, and books explore its potential and limits. Stark posits language as simultaneously inescapable and ephemeral, presenting it as a fertile struggle that she engages with curiosity, humor, and doubt. Using text as both material and image, she examines themes of communication, interpretation, and the practice of making art, confronting the conflict between our desire to be understood and language's inadequacy to aid expression from a philosophical position. The paradoxical oppositions that she finds in language are encompassed by the larger tension at work in her practice. Recognized as an accomplished writer and artist, she continually wrestles with a discomfort with her role and her perceived failures through the very mediums of which she is so wary.

In recent years Stark has moved away from the carbon paper and typewriter-generated drawings made on fragile papers and ornamented with hand-drawn corrections and marginalia that characterized much of her earlier work. Using wood panels and sheets of heavy paper, she creates elaborate collages with bits of the exhibition announcements, advertisements, and bills that arrive at her studio every day combined with printed texts and her own ink-and-paint drawings. *Push* (2006) is made with such materials as well as with tape and stickers, depicting the storefront door to her studio (including its vertically oriented PUSH sticker) with a seemingly endless stream of colorful missives flying through its mail slot.

Often floating on bright white or other monochromatic backgrounds, the drawings occasionally feature materials such as string, fabric, or other three-dimensional elements. *Why should you not be able to assemble yourself and write* (2008) shows Stark seated and seen from above. Collaged into the work is a piece of paper torn from a sketchbook and inscribed with the question posed in the work's title. The letter from which the drawing's text is extracted came from a colleague with whom Stark maintained an ongoing correspondence. Encouraging and accusatory at once, the question is—especially when removed from its context—inherently ambivalent. This ambivalence is mirrored in the composition of the work, which is organized in such a way that, as viewers, we experience two points of view simultaneously: those of the writer and the reader, the interrogator and the assumed respondent. Along with other recent works, this collage documents Stark's sometimes frustrating and occasionally exuberant pursuit of an understanding of how to convey and receive meaning and how, through aesthetic endeavors, she may be not only "assembling [her]self to write" but perhaps even assembling her self in the process as well.

Stark frequently takes as her subject relations between the sexes—social, sexual, professional—and gender difference as it plays out in these arenas. The letter mentioned above was from a male colleague, and in tandem with a second letter received from another male colleague, it provoked her to write a lecture titled "Notes toward the Eroticism of Pedagogy" (2008). Bookended by the two letters, the text, like her works on paper, is a collage. Assembled from lines that she wrote specifically for the piece, epigraphic quotations, the aforementioned letters, and fragments from her own earlier writings, including a poem and essay extracts, the lecture discusses exchange by invoking letter writing, art making, teaching, studying, conversation, and tennis. The text is riddled with questions, circumspection, and as Stark notes at the outset, propositions, all of which are productive, giving rise to ideas and tangents and, ultimately, new works. The lecture is woven through with tales of her various exchanges with male colleagues, teachers, friends, and writers, whose intentional or unintended prodding invariably redoubles her already-in-progress examination of her own practice. In the middle of the lecture, however, Stark recounts an interaction with fellow artist Rosemarie Trockel, in which they both confess to a near-constant desire to resign from teaching. In tandem with one of the more strident soliloquies of the writer J. D. Salinger's character Franny, the anecdote points out nuance in modes of address and reception. While her male colleagues attempt to encourage through challenge and unintentionally sideways flattery, her female colleague and Salinger's fictional antiheroine provide solace through identification.

Stark makes her art in response to the machinations through which art is produced and disseminated. Her own self-doubt regarding the validity of her work and her role as an artist and a teacher results in a broader critique of the cultural conditions within which art is produced, distributed, and received. *I've Had It! And I've Also Had It!* (2010) is a performance based on the 1951 musical *I've Had It!*, which, like "Notes toward the Eroticism of Pedagogy," uses relations between the sexes as a narrative device and questions so-called high culture. In the original play, a composer who has come to Aspen, Colorado, for a music festival tries to seduce the girlfriend of the bellhop he has hired as his assistant. Increasingly incensed by the composer's advances toward his girlfriend, the bellhop rallies his bartender friend and some local musicians to reveal that the composer's work is actually a popular song played backward. The romantic comedy is a send-up of the pretensions of the avant-garde as much as it is a commentary on class structure and social mores. Stark is a lifelong music fan, and musical lyrics and rhythms appear throughout her work, but this is her first work in which music takes center stage, so to speak. In *I've Had It! And I've Also Had It!*—first performed in Aspen, where *I've Had It!* is set—Stark transposed musical theater into an art performance, turning the original play's critical eye on the world of music into a critique of advanced art.