

DOMENIEK RUYTERS

## P.S.—NOTES ON A WORK BY FRANCES STARK

Frances Stark is known for her collages and drawings—small, elegant, white, and very transparent. The subject is seemingly simple: furniture, flowers and animals from her immediate surroundings. They are simple, powerful images that interconnect with one another. But somewhere along the way in Frances Stark's work, we get stuck, at a distance, far away from what we had perhaps expected of it, a point, a punch line, a conclusion. The artist chooses to reflect on her own production before it has really begun, suspended in a perpetual circling motion, with no clear objective. Slowly, the focus shifts from the product to the production itself, the process.

Consider her collage, *Portrait of the Artist as a Full-On Bird*. The white parrot turns its head to see the viewer – white innocence held aloft by a tree of language. Frances Stark's work presents the artist as a harmless twaddler, leaning on a world of text, and as

ine joy in recognizing one's own potentials in the act of realizing them.

There is a beautiful drawing by Frances Stark which shows the outlines of a peacock in a perky pose, but its tail feathers are not yet unfolded. Among the collage of different small cutouts of texts that the feather texture is composed of, a Henry Miller quote written backwards in capital letters reads: 'GET ON THE FUCKING BLOCK AND FUCK.' The words read equally like a firm admonition ('Do it!'), a declaration of will ('Yes, I will do it!') and a supportive cheer ('Come on, you can do it!'). As you can also tell by its pose, this bird both wants and needs to get up and go. This inextricable ambivalence between what you want and expect of yourself and what others want and expect from you is probably one of the hardest puzzles for anyone who works both creatively and on demand to solve. One consequence is that an uncanny feeling of outside determination and dependency might never leave you, even if you are positively sure that you only do what you want to do. Here again, to push yourself beyond the point of exhaustion is a common technique to relieve yourself of the burden of outside expectations; you simply incapacitate yourself to a degree that no one can possibly still expect anything of you. The

Dead Kennedys summed it all up in *Too Drunk to Fuck* (1981): 'But now I am jaded / You're out of luck / I'm rolling down the stairs / Too drunk to fuck.'



Frances Stark, *Reflection for Readying*, 2005

### Beyond Exhaustion

What potentialities open up when we reach a state beyond exhaustion? In conversation, Nasrin Tabatabai and Babak Afrassiabi pointed out that a state beyond exhaustion is precisely the condition that asylum seekers find themselves in when, having made their troublesome passage out of their own country into the foreign one, they are forced



#### NOTES ON A WORK BY FRANCES STARK

an observer condemned to remain an outsider, free as a bird, but reluctantly. If the tableau were not so sweet, one would say it was cynical, which may indeed have been the intention.

At her 2007 retrospective exhibition at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, where about 50 works were assembled, a central place had been paved for her text-and-image sequence, *Frances Stark in absentia presents 'Structures that fit my opening and other parts considered in relation to their whole'*. In the catalogue, she explains that this PowerPoint presentation was her second reaction to a 'complicated and passionate inquiry into the legacies of feminism in contemporary art'. Her first reaction had been her participation in a conference on feminism, likewise without her physical presence, for which she used a telephone call from Los Angeles to elucidate on her 'economy of production' and her reasons for preferring not to physically attend the conference.

In the PowerPoint presentation, over the course of 25 minutes, she point-by-point unfolds a detailed monologue in text and visual images, which, divided in 11 segments, makes up a kind of script for an unusual theatrical piece. Or is it a soap opera? The observations are sometimes pithy and aphoristic in nature, sometimes anecdotal, sometimes critical. Here and there, the image is accompanied by sound. Thanks to

#### DOMENIEK RUYTERS

its refined dosage of text and image, depth and diversion, the work is spellbinding. Observations on feminism – her proposed mission – pass us by, especially those of Stark herself, or at least her contribution to the sought-after emancipation as a woman, artist, teacher, mother, ex-wife, that she, as a feminist and artist, is expected to fulfil, without further ado, in what she refers to as a space between work and life. This raises the question of whether she actually does aspire to such emancipation. What does she really want? Who, as a woman, does she want to be? 'Or do I just want to have written something that someone else has underlined?'

Two steps forward, one step back. Occasionally, Stark's endless contemplations are enough to drive you mad. 'CRY' appears, expressed in Paulina Ołowska's human alphabet, as though grasped from the heart, and not just the heart of Frances Stark, but also that of an audience that is by now halfway around the bend. 'Stark, do something!'

So, to anticipate the conclusion, Frances Stark ultimately does nothing, or at least very little. In any case, she can say neither yes nor no to the invitation to which she refers, to take part in an exhibition on feminism. She keeps avoiding it, although she does give a response. It is a convincing answer, in fact, if one is prepared to identify with her position as an



#### NOTES ON A WORK BY FRANCES STARK

artist and his grand task of reconnoitring beyond the space that is known and recognized, the free space on which the artist is expected to play in his production of art – at least ideally. ‘Liberation’ is a concept that creeps more and more to the fore, as viewers have the increasingly distressing feeling of being held captive in the 25-minute work. It seems a subtle confrontation with what it is like to live under duress, as a person, woman, artist or observer, as this work, with its automatic rhythm, just goes on and on, taking away viewers’ freedom of movement.

Some literature is introduced, as is more often the case in Frances Stark’s work. Something is said about Nietzsche, about the delightful claim that he practiced a philosophy of the body, as if it were a dance. Stark continues to repeat, ‘To Think With the Body’, as if it were a mantra, her highest goal. The reality is closer to the opposite, to being ‘unable to achieve transference’, which is her intermediate conclusion. Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* passes by. This ultimate liberated woman and feminist *avant la lettre* indeed disentangled herself from ‘fatherly’ power, but in the end, she does not know how to deal with a life without direction, without purpose. She started experimenting with drugs and alcohol, with her own body, like a maniac, says Stark. What kind of liberation is that?

#### DOMENIEK RUYTERS

An overall image becomes increasingly sharp, of an artist wrestling with the ‘paternal power’ of the art world, its economics, the pressure it generates, the rules it establishes, let us say the world around the art, which has increasingly taken the place of the art itself. Stark’s collage of a peacock that has yet to spread its feathers illustrates this situation. The feathers declare, ‘Get on the fucking block and fuck!’ The peacock refuses to stamp out the text, refuses to make a show of himself, in the same way that Stark, in her work, refuses to wholeheartedly promote it, to follow the demands of the market, the public, the world and visibility. She is doubtful about the necessity of doing so. In whose interest is art actually being produced?

From a letter about her refusal to take part in an exhibition, Stark quotes herself, ‘I wanted to reflect on the question of why it is important to investigate the time frame in which my own work is generated, or even look at the whole range (and here I mean everybody), why, in terms of production, necessity increasingly seems to overshadow the need for expression.’ Here, she is not alone. The mad cycle in the arts, the circus, the merry-go-round with which everyone in art is familiar, has recently been drawing more and more protests from artists. In the last few years, Herman Melville’s *Bartleby* has become a cult figure for many artists and critics. *Bartleby*,

#### NOTES ON A WORK BY FRANCES STARK

Melville's antihero, refuses to continue working with the system, in his case a law firm, where he is a clerk. He does not bluntly refuse to work. He just somewhat cryptically says, 'I prefer not to.'

In Frances Stark's case, there is the same short-circuited refusal that is not really a refusal, possibly coming from an awareness that a refusal is in fact impossible, given that the system would not even care. Stark's work offers no simple activist protest, no direct left or right, no rude 'No thanks', but instead, a spun-out commentary on the seeming impossibility of avoiding the system, even though art from the nature of its mission, the search for freedom, really requires that.

Frances Stark's PowerPoint artwork ends the way it began, with ordinary notes from a notebook. She tells about a girl at a post office, where she had gone to send a package. Stark is recognized by the girl at the counter, who is a fan. For the first time in her life, what she has always hoped for. Instead of becoming euphoric, the artist reports an oncoming headache.