

The Letter Writer, Frances Stark

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Writers Mentioned in the Frances Stark's *Collected Writings: 1993-2003*

Oscar Wilde	Jonathan Pylypchuck
Friedrich Nietzsche	Lane Relyea
Robert Musil	JD Salinger
P.D. Ouspensky	Gustav Flaubert
G.I. Gurdjieff	David Foster Wallace
Virginia Woolfe	Curtis White
E.H. Gombrich	Ludwig Wittgenstein
Gaston Bachelard	Juergen Habermas
Emily Dickinson	Jimmie Durham
Howard Singerman	Raymond Pettibon
John Keats (not THAT	Novalis
John Keats)	Joan Didion
Dorothy Parker	Goethe
Pierre Bourdieu	Thomas Bernhard
Rudolf Steiner	Henry Miller

Other Writers She Mentioned to Me as Being Important to Her Not Listed Above:

Witold Gombrowicz Ingeborg Bachmann

...the clarity we are aiming at is indeed *complete* clarity. But this simply means that the philosophical problems should *completely* disappear.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*

In place of *hermeneutics*, we need an *erotics* of art.

Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation*

A Single Paragraph on the Work of Frances Stark Before We Start Talking About Other Things:

Los Angeles-based artist Frances Stark marks in her work the complex and beautiful struggle of how to clearly express the exact dimensions of thought and emotion. Realized primarily through texts and fragile line drawings (as well as performance, collage, and paintings), Stark's intensely personal practice reveals an artist engaging with literature, philosophy, and art history and how these effect the process of making art and the practice of everyday life. The effect of seeing an exhibition by her is similar to reading a novel of ideas all at once. To Stark, a thousand words is worth a picture.

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All writing to be read by someone else is a kind of a letter. One person writing to another. From me to you.

This essay that I'm writing and you're reading, and most writing found in magazines, is usually of the more impersonal variety. RE: Subject. Dear Sirs. To whom it may concern. Some writing published in the world are actual letters, from one single person to another. The epistolary novel. Love poetry.

Though I'm sure some poets sit down and conjure an ideal beauty, as (to me, boring and sort of weird) exercise in formal strategy of love, but love (except for the naive) isn't an ideal, it's a specific. We love the grace of our lover's long hands as they fold in weave in a conversation. We love the way they stand on their toes, naked body leaning forward, arched as the arms stretch up to close a window. We love their smell, wholly unique, and always difficult to articulate in words, but worth trying: the mix of cloves and motor oil, or like if a ship carrying cinnamon sank off the coast of a Caribbean sugar plantation just as they began to burn the cane, or freshly mown grass and old books. I could go on.

We know our lover's smell as only a lover can, even if it's impossible to describe it accurately. It's really specific though and us, writers of love letters, minor poets, all try and fail to put it into words. The poems get printed and reprinted, and sometimes centuries later we learn what a horny Englishman quill penned to his desired woman in English 201a in an anthology with pages as thin as tissue paper. Perhaps we imagine ourselves the lover, memorizing lines to recite to the Literature major we're trying to seduce sitting next to us in class—her blouse open showing the smooth, dark skin of her chest, his sensual lips pursed in thought. Or we image ourselves the object of affection, the surge of being desired, the look of lust. A little displaced, but poetry is meaningful when we make it meaningful for each of us, individually.

I'm going to quote a bit of writing from Frances Stark. I hate performing these kinds of minute vivisections on language, but I think if I take it apart I can show you something perhaps beautiful, I promise, the words will return unharmed from whence they came.

“One hundred years ago, my favorite artist, author Robert Musil, wrote this in a letter to a friend: ‘Art’ for me is only a means of reaching a higher level of ‘self.’”

“One hundred years ago”

A simple time stamp but its exactitude implies a parallel, Musil then, Stark now.

“my favorite artist, author Robert Musil”

Robert Musil (November 6, 1880 – April 15, 1942), an Austrian writer whose most famous book, *The Man Without Qualities*, is a hyperobsessive detailing of the Viennese ruling class right before the Austro-Hungarian empire collapsed, widely considered one of the great novels of the twentieth century. To see a writer described as a favorite artist is telling, though we'll get to that more later.

“wrote this in a letter to a friend”

A letter! And to a friend, an intimate correspondence.

“‘Art’ for me is only a means of reaching a higher level of ‘self.’”

Musil's book describes things with the exactitude of an engineer, as if he were trying to capture the exact thing that he meant, rather than an approximation, a loose synonym, a flat cliché that conveyed little. To say the thing that you exactly mean to say is almost impossible, to find the precise shade of nuance makes communication almost impossible. *The Man Without Qualities* at some 7,000 pages was never completed. Through the book, in the face of all this precision, there's a yearning for the mysterious and mystical qualities of art.

It's a simple sentence, containing within its nouns (years, letter, artist, Musil, friend, art, self) a miniature of a whole complex and brilliant career stretching and circling itself for twenty years, that of Frances Stark.

Frances Stark is an artist, the kind of artist (I'm going to go ahead and declare) that Frances Stark describes Robert Musil to be.

There was a moment in the '60s where artist Marcel Broodthaers the poet became Marcel Broodthaers the artist. He took a raft of unsold books of his poems (forty-four to be exact) and encased them in plaster, making a sculpture (*Pense-Bête* [Reminder,] 1964).

I used to think about this as literature failing to accommodate a visionary writer. That the community of readers and the practice of literature could hardly support (partly intellectually and more truly financially) someone as great as Broodthaers, but that the art world, with its gobs of money, could. (One doesn't here even know Russian oligarchs or Saudi princes throwing money at literature.) I felt like maybe we were losing some of our best writers to visual art. After talking to Frances in her studio, I had this moment of epiphany, a flash of astonishing awareness, that it was not so. Writing had colonized art. Literature had burst its boundaries. The country of Literature had invaded the country of Art and claimed some of its territory. But when the US purchased Louisiana from Napoleon, it didn't stop being Louisiana, it went right on being Louisiana, just under the rubric and rules of a different domain.

Lee Lozano's piece of notebook paper on a pedestal as a piece of writing may have easily gotten lost, but here on the pedestal the writing has a presence, the action she describes on the notebook paper is a stand-in for a performance going on in the world, not only hers but ours.

There was a moment in the Sixties when painters wanted to break free of the canvas, Eve Hesse and Lee Bontecou created works where the flat terrain of painting was insufficient to contain their ideas about what painting could be, they forced painting into the third dimension. Perhaps Broodthaers did the same for writing. Though there were others to be sure putting text (and poetical writing) into art before or at about the same time, Broodthaers' gesture is a resonating one, a legend of art.

What does it mean to be a writer writing in space? Look at the work of Frances Stark. Though emerging from a literary tradition, she still wrestles with the problems of art history, visibility, and space, but through the potency of poetry and writing, a self-realized with words.

I call Frances Stark the letter writer because all of her works feel like a letter, perhaps even a love letter. She told me that once in school, she collected all her lover letters from an ex-boyfriend and then sent them to her professors. Using the raw material of life to deal with the problems of art history (her professors at the time were all very influential artists).

As writing has expanded its domain into the realm of art, Frances Stark's love letter to literature to philosophy to art to people in her life has expanded beyond the confines of a simple page with words scratched with a pen and into a lifetime of artmaking. Her exhibition at

the Secession in Vienna in 2008, “A Torment of Follies,” dealt primarily with realizing a libretto derived from Witold Gombrowicz’s *Ferdyduke* (another great novel of the twentieth century) through her own visual and textual practice as an artist, even in its realization as an exhibition, Frances Stark appears as a character giving asides and doubts as she brings the process of art into realization. Its installation looks like a dress rehearsal for a folly, a theatrical revue, one in which the agents and armature of production, the playwright, the director, the sets, are all still there for the audience to see.

Even now her love letter expands, Stark’s most recent work involves a complex opera (“*I’ve Had It! And I’ve Also Had It!*”) realized with musicians and a vaudevillian backdrop that changes with the clarity of a Powerpoint presentation (another medium she’s used before), drawing from letters written to her and letters she’s written as well as life and literature. First realized at the Aspen Art Museum and to be performed this spring at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, the opera is performed by the artist standing on stage in a dress, designed by her, gauzy and black, and on the front are the white circle of numbers found on a rotary phone. The finale involves Frances removing the dress and standing in black shirt and pants, leaning over computer and doing a live transcription of Lady Gaga’s *Telephone*.

And I leave off this essay, my letter to you, with Lady Gaga’s lines from her song. (How many of us have leaned on lyrics, and mixed tapes, to speak our feelings for us?) Even in love however, we still need a break from the work of it sometimes, not to overthink Lady Gaga or Frances Stark’s referencing Lady Gaga too much, or love in general perhaps; talking about life and love is ever always going to be a shadow of physically and actually being alive. Between talking and dancing, though it doesn’t always happen like this, I’d rather dance. And when we can’t dance, the words are all there, nearly always ready for us to use them.

“Stop callin’, stop callin’,

I don’t wanna think anymore!

I left my head and my heart on the dance floor.

Stop callin’, stop callin’,

I don’t wanna talk anymore!

I left my head and my heart on the dance floor.”