

I started a kind of fun website, but with a serious purpose, asking people for similar stories. It was called buttsurge and a friend of mine who makes websites designed it with some killer animations and stuff. We linked it to a whole bunch of other extreme sports sites. Within a year I had five thousand signatures on a web petition to have guidelines put in place to ensure that all wetsuits manufactured and sold in the United States can protect the wearer from a sudden jet of water following an impact with water. Following a whole load of legal stuff, which I won't bore you with, in 2009 all wetsuits will have to carry the N.A.W.S.I. symbol on the inside of the seat of the wetsuit to confirm that it's compliant with the new wetsuit safety guidelines, most of which came from members and users of buttsurge.com.



NOTES TOWARDS THE EROTICISM OF PEDAGOGY

FRANCES STARK

Let's see here, I have two letters, to me, and I'm going to do like a little Frances sandwich. I'm going to start with a letter that's kind of a proposition and I'm going to end with a letter that's kind of a proposition and I guess I could say this is a little bit about no means yes or maybe yes means no. This letter starts with two quotes: one is from a novel by Alisdair Gray and the other quote is from my own writing. So it begins:

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“... Sound the Clarion, fill the fife!
To all the sensual world proclaim,
One crowded hour of glorious life
Is worth an age without a name
BUT please also always remember that beneath the hammerblows of
fate (dradadum) in the very storm, tempest, and, as I may say, whirlwind of
your passion (dradadum) you must acquire and beget a temperance that may
give it smoothness. So cool it, man.

Bravo. Maybe you knew your job. Perhaps all teachers should pour fine
stuff into children's ears and leave their memories to resurrect it when they
find their own thoughts inadequate.”

—Alisdair Gray, *Janine*, 1982

“Someone once told me ‘you tend to excuse, rather than express.’ It is a
brutal criticism, yes, but also somewhat of a positive description of even my

most articulated accomplishments. To utter, 'I'm too sad to tell you,' is to excuse oneself from not telling whatever it is one could tell if only one weren't so incapacitated by the emotion accompanying the temporarily untellable; to tell does so much more."

F,

I've tried this once before, and upon no response forever held my peace, which seemed the uncomfortable thing to do ("So cool it, man."). And yet, I cannot help but watch you work from small and large distances, and wonder.

The tourniquet around the next issue of *FR D* is beginning to tighten, and I want to write to you with a proposed conversation (Cage: "Conversation is when you don't know what the next thing the person you are with is going to say."), following that the next issue is leaning toward something like "idiosyncratic vocabularies, and configurations of the two in various sizes."

And, as I said, I have watched, and heard reports on your strategic maneuvers to slowly withdraw from writing and focus on making "work." After seeing your last show, where you tend to excuse (to me) by means of Gombrowicz: "If only I could write words like that," I can only think, my God woman, why don't you? You know you can. Just because you are a (Koonsian) victim, with a different construct than Witold, why should you not be able to assemble yourself and write? At the same time, I couldn't care less who wrote the text in your show, because in my eyes/mind, you did. I've never been one to look up catalogue entries.

So, I am wondering if you'd be able to respond to the question:

—Why don't you write any more, Frances? (I miss you)

or

—Are you simply a publisher of material for others' sake (who may be in your shoes), "when they find their own thoughts inadequate"?

Would it Please you to Répondez to thiS inVitation?

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I'm just going to read this little poem now that was written about painting.

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I'm in the studio, not the apartment
And I'm asking
Is "Language an unnecessary, threatening supplement?"
Can things be just things and enumerate testament?
Pertinent sentiment?

Apposite complement?
"Art-as-art is nothing but art."
Shall I put the horse before or after my cart?
"Art is not what is not art."
Honestly, I don't know where I start
To start, did she mean?
No, it's too late for that
I started with *I'm* and having said so
I's very privacy, one ought to know,
is willingly public and ready to go
Sooo
An annexation of housewives to architects
Allegorically implicates a shitload of discontent
kunst star media-life coerces our practice
Pundits and paperwork obscure what the pact is
Bureaucrats baby and bow to the dissidents
While office-less clerks nurture their impudence
Fountainheads frolic, but busy with fountain pens
Contain with containers "consumers" who fail to be "citizens"

Emotion appears, adheres, in a way, overpowering
"It is the germ, the work is the flowering."

Medicament or simply embarrassment
"All writing is crap"
Pap, clap-trap

"Of what use is it to say what we do
If everybody can see it if he wants to"

Can paintings "renege on the meanings they themselves initiate?"
Have you ever just once wished you were illiterate?

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Okay, now I guess I should say that I'm an artist and I'm a professor of painting and drawing and I don't know how to paint and I don't know how to draw and I want to quit my job (it's hard for me to say no), and the other day I was really tired after putting up a show and I was feeling like I was suffering from nervous exhaustion and I started to cry for no reason and I was at Rosemarie Trockel's opening and I had never met

her before and I was feeling kind of sad that I couldn't maybe meet her and talk to her because I was such a wreck and then I decided I'm going to go to my hotel and just you know, whatever, be alone, so then I thought okay maybe I will, um, pull myself together and go say goodbye to my friend and I went to say goodbye to my friend and she happened to be in a conversation with Rosemarie about teaching and Rosemarie and some other women were talking about how difficult it is to lecture and how they just don't have it in them, and they just cannot muster that male lecture-ability-uh-bleh—I can't do that, I mean I can't do it either was what I said and then she told me, or she told everybody—maybe I shouldn't be telling you this but I couldn't think of a way to disguise her—that she said that recently she was driving in the car or the taxi or whatever on the way to the academy with her resignation letter in her purse or bag, whatever, and she left there with a contract for another year and I suddenly didn't feel like crying anymore and I sorta had a crush on her and, um, anyway, so I am now going to read something that's quite old from when I very first started teaching before I got the serious job, and I'm just going try to condense it a little bit here, so it may be a bit choppy. It begins with a quote as essays so often do.

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“Every child should stand before the soul of the teacher as a question posed by the supersensible world to the sense world.”

This quote is taken from Rudolf Steiner's *Education as a Social Problem*, a collection of his speeches given in 1919. Ever since I saw an exhibition of his chalkboard drawings I have been meaning to search out my local anthroposophical society. Finally, I did, and it turned out to be only a hop, skip, and a jump from Art Center where I got and bought an MFA degree. That degree certifies me to be a teacher, something I have a lot of trouble with. I deem my newfound teacher status responsible for my choosing a book with the words “problem” and “education” in the title rather than, say, a book that would ordinarily demand my attention like the one my boyfriend checked out, Friedrich Nietzsche, *Fighter for Freedom*. Here's an example of one of my problems: A few students defiantly announced to me recently, “I just don't buy it.” The “it” they don't buy is the so-called culture industry as outlined by Adorno and Horkheimer in *Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception*. There is a huge difference between teaching and selling, right? I know buying it is just a figure of speech but I can't help but ask what it is art students are buying? I mean, really, what are they paying for? Is this a question my soul can handle? Initially I only typed “God man” as colloquial filler but no sooner realized that it unconsciously announces a subject almost too ridiculous to bring up in an art magazine; that is,

specifically the relationship between man (here you can substitute art student) and God.

After having delivered the culture industry material in such a way that utterly lacked any of the finesse and efficacy of some of my seasoned history professors back at State University, a defeatist mood swept over me. Then came this weird urge just to ask my class to read J.D. Salinger's short novel *Franny and Zooey*.

Franny is a student, who is starting to see the world differently and her boyfriend's attitude toward learning is starting to seriously get on her nerves. Franny: "I'm just so sick of pedants and conceited little tearer-downers I could scream." It turns out she's taken up praying instead of screaming. It gets a little awkward when she begins describing the way of the pilgrim to her boyfriend, who is in the habit of prefacing almost every noun he utters with goddamn. She tells him how it taught her to just say the name of god over and over and how at first you just need quantity and then quality follows.

Doing studio visits with graduate students is a breezy experience compared to standing in front of a room full of twenty-somethings next to an empty chalkboard. Opening at random to a chapter called "The Terror of the Situation," I started reading, "It is scandalous that all weaknesses are permitted in the realm of private life, and that our system of education teaches everything except self-knowledge and self-mastery." In describing his teaching, Gurdjieff, in his own words, writes "... a man must do nothing that he does not understand, except as an experiment under the supervision and direction of his teacher. The more a man understands what he is doing the greater will be the results of his efforts ... the results of work are in proportion to the consciousness of the work. This sounds an awful lot like an MFA studio program, where the boundary between work and self is increasingly difficult to determine.

I was talking on the phone with a friend. In the background was the relatively new hit TV show (read: culture industry product) *Felicity*, and he was like, "Hold on, I have to hear this." *Felicity* was in a crit and the teacher and/or students were being mean, so mean, in fact, that she got really upset and decided to quit the class altogether. He held the phone up to his TV so that I could hear the part where she speaks her mind. I cringed listening to the disembodied female teenage voice-over of self-conscious reason. It wasn't memorable in and of itself but it did remind me of a rant that Franny launches after her boyfriend accuses her of quitting her theater class because she fears competition. "I'm sick of ego, ego, ego! I'm not afraid to compete ... I'm afraid I will compete! I'm so horribly conditioned to accept everybody else's values! I'm ashamed of it. I'm sick of it. I'm sick of not having the courage to be an absolute nobody. I'm sick of myself and everybody else that wants to make some kind of a splash." Now there's a memorable excuse for quitting class.

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Okay, just a couple more things here, this is from a piece called "ioSNEI" [Tennis Anyone?]

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I previously suggested that when you play tennis with someone who is better than you, you play better. When you play with someone who isn't so good, you yourself play worse and chase more balls than you hit. Of course, playing tennis is only standing in for another kind of play, the precise meaning of which is pretty difficult to wrangle from its metaphorical raiment. By tennis, I guess I mean talking, and by talking, I guess I mean talking about important things, and by important things, I guess I mean things that may potentially be deemed philosophical. I wondered whom it was that we expected to take on the responsibility of being the better player Once the question was posed I didn't exactly press myself for specific answers, and so the question evaporated into rhetorical thin air. Ironically enough, I was reminded of it because my tennis racket was recently stolen—a simple, aggravating fact, which has now . . . offered itself up as yet another tennis metaphor, albeit a pretty silly one. I reflect on this racketlessness, nevertheless, if only to provide prefatory consideration of what it might mean to refrain from "playing" due to a lack of critical accoutrements. (Pause now for reflection.)

As we were sitting together at a cafeteria table in an art school in Germany, preparing to give a panel-style lecture on an exhibition series called Circles, a friend suggested I read the essay "Friendship" by Ralph Waldo Emerson. As we organized our slides and notes, he spoke of Emerson and another of his essays, also entitled "Circles," which began a spirited, ineloquent, if not inarticulate, "discussion," the gist of which was best inferred by curt, economical, and perhaps too-ridiculous-to-quote mutual affirmatives. But when it was time to go onstage to draw some circles, I couldn't maintain the train of thought. Friends may very well be the ones on whom to hang the responsibility of the philosophical challenge. Who are those friends? Let's say for argument's sake you answered this and your answer revealed an embarrassment of riches. Depending on your tolerance for neurosis, you might then ask, as I have, why then do I feel so friendless? Emerson might say it's because you aimed at swift and petty benefit, to suck a sudden sweetness. And Nietzsche might say in effect, "welcome to my world," or sing "looking all day and night, for friends I wait: for new friends come it's time! It's late!"

Emerson points out that when faced with the prospect of a one-to-one meeting with a "commended stranger," we rise to the occasion of new friends and "talk better than we are wont." Our nimbler fancies surprise us, even our memories are better "and our dumb devil has taken leave for the time."

What would it take for an artist to unravel the tangled net of professional associations that obscure the fundamental enthusiasm for and in his artworks themselves? A trip to Walden Pond perhaps? If you were to leave your circle, exit the proverbial loop, could you, as Nietzsche says, become who you are? Just the other day, a former professor of mine called me out of the blue and told me he liked something I wrote, even if it was, he admitted, a bit on the messy side. He wanted to know what serious reading I was doing. I said Emerson and Nietzsche. He said that was all well and good, but also suggested that if I really wanted to whip myself into shape—polish my backhand, let's say—I should commit to twenty consecutive pages of Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition* daily. And so I'm off to the ball machine.

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Um, now this is a very old chunk of writing, but taking up the tennis metaphor...

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In the appropriate all- or mostly-all-white attire, two tennis players rallied with a certain self-conscious decorum because it felt good to relax and be quiet in this way: exert, watch what happens, respond, prepare, stroke, study, exhale, inhale—the kind of meditative repetition that's all green and white. And their shirts were white with little green stripes on the collars, and little green laurel leaves on the chests. These were, as it turns out, the right shirts for the game, but shirts that say, to some, Mod before they say Champ because, despite the obvious utterance of a Fred Perry shirt—tennis or country club—these tiny laurels had historically come to rest on the appropriators of leisure culture's signage, not on the proprietors of leisure culture's image. And so their attire chatted wildly with itself: Fred Perry this and Fred Perry that. It was actually said of Fred Perry that before he was a world-renowned champion, his forehand was delivered with a buggy whip snap that drew scowls and muttered protests from club members who felt their weekend games were being ruined by the pest blasting balls wildly on a nearby court. Whereas a particular noise of the vanguard tends to be music in retrospect, it will not be at all surprising that a certain noisy ball-blasting disruption let our two players mentioned above to disassociate themselves from their own color-coordinated consistency. A certain un-tennis was audible on the neighboring court. "One ball on your four, two over the side, ready... okay, go, out rotate, three balls, ready. Four remaining on the line, ready, switch." A stream of nonsensical remarks flowed out of the mouths of the players. They spewed rules and commentary so intricate that what actually happened when a racquet hit a ball was of little interest; and since they obviously had no skill or knowledge of the actual game, they

continued to enhance their own rules as they went along, so that keeping the ball in play was about sustaining its non-regularity with words, and hitting it into the net or way off of the court was not a bore after all. Chasing balls around the periphery was an integral part of their game.

The composer Arnold Schoenberg made extensive notations on the sidelines of tennis matches. He had a fully-developed shorthand, which he used to track every move, error or otherwise, of the players before him . . . tennis players, not musicians. Instead of the final outcome of one's performance, which a final game score is meant to reveal, Schoenberg's notation method would provide the player with a visual score—a complex, cartooned seismograph of action and skill. In a situation where verbalization is kept to a minimum, talk or criticism tends to destroy the serenity of the court (where grunts or other audible signs of physical exertion are tolerated). It is the viewer's job to wallow in commentary; the player just intuitively reacts, moving, bending, and stretching according to the challenges of his opponent. Schoenberg's system extracted from the game its duplicate, in motion and movement, mistake and method, so that if a player wished he or she could play the game on the piano later that evening and let everyone hear just exactly what transpired.

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And here is the other letter . . .

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Hello, Frances,

Hope you are well and not too frantic. I have put teaching on hold for a semester. A friend is taking my place, which makes life . . . makes life.

I just wanted to let you know how much I enjoyed your show. It was something special. This is probably going to sound cheesy but it felt musical. Like a score, not just as a libretto, but something you could dance with. I once had a dream about a friend of mine who was very smart and theoretical and in this dream he was delivering a lecture in full drag with dancing girls and an orchestra, and it was brilliant; the information flowed into you through the music. This was a long time ago and shortly after I saw *Cremaster* and thought, "oh, that's what it would actually look like," and forgot the dream. Anyway, that's what your show made me think of—notes to a pedagogical opera. It also made me see somewhere we could get together. I'll just write what I wrote in my notebook when I was there: "Me and Frances both—mechanized and image-ine-ered bodies somewhere between (real) doubt and (potential) ecstasy." Does that mean anything to you?

Talk to you soon,

Mark