

PERFORMING TEXTS

INTERVIEW WITH

FRANCES STARK

CHRISTOPHE GALLOIS

By way of digression... the separate parts of the body suffice to form a solid and artistically constructed whole, and this applies to words and my construction yields in no way to the best examples of construction. What will you say, finally, when you have seen the whole of all the parts as well as the parts of all the parts?...Do you not agree that the reader is able to assimilate only one part at a time? Sometimes he reads two or three passages and never returns; and not, mark you, because he is not interested, but because of some totally extraneous circumstance; and, even if he reads the whole thing, do you suppose for one moment that he has a view of it as a whole, appreciates the constructive harmony of the parts, if no specialist gives him the hint? Is it for this that authors spend years cutting, rearranging, revising, and sweating, straining and suffering? Let us carry the matter further...May not a telephone call, or a fly, distract the reader's attention just at the moment when all the parts, themes, threads, are on the point of converging into a supreme unity... Consider, moreover, that that unique and exceptional work of yours on which you have expended so much effort and sweat is just one of the thirty thousand equally unique and exceptional works which will appear during the year. Oh! Terrible and accursed parts! So it is for this that we laboriously construct; so that part of a part of a reader may partially assimilate part of a part of a book. What in reality is a person aiming at nowadays who feels a vocation for the pen, the paint-brush, or the clarinet? Above all, he wants to be an artist... to offer himself whole to others, to burn on the altar of the sublime in providing humanity with this so desirable manna. What noble aims! What magnificent intentions! Are they not identical with those of S---, G---, B--- or C---? But here you run into trouble. The awkward fact is that you are neither C--- nor S--- but at most a half-S, or a quarter-C (oh! Cursed parts!), and consequently the sole result of your attitude is to draw attention to your sad inadequacy and inferiority. It is as if in the course of your clumsy efforts to leap you were breaking the most precious parts



Frances Stark, *By Way of Digression*, 2007

CHRISTOPHE GALLOIS: The series *A Torment of Follies*, which you created in 2007-2008, takes as its point of departure Gombrowicz's novel *Ferdydurke* (1937). Which aspects of Gombrowicz's work interested you?

FRANCES STARK: There are various passages throughout *Ferdydurke* in which the author himself emerges out of the story. These parts exist apart from the narrative, functioning as prefaces inserted into the novel. I was interested in the self-conscious voice that Gombrowicz develops in these parts, ruminating on the work's reception. The story also interested me because it deals with the notion of metamorphosis: the main character suddenly transforms into an awkward teenager. *Ferdydurke* is characterised by a rapid pace, where the prose breaks down and becomes almost like poetry. I have always loved that text. I quoted it in other works in the past and, in *A Torment of Follies*, I wanted to deal with the whole.

CG: In a text you wrote about this series of works, you described your approach as "putting the novel to music". You also mentioned the fact that the characters featured in your works are almost "performing the text". What kind of displacement operates between Gombrowicz's novel and your works?

FS: I have always dealt with the time-based aspect of text, with the text as a durational experience. I'm also interested in the distinction between what it means to be a reader and what it means to be a viewer, and whether they can be the same thing at once. I usually only use very short excerpts from books but, in this series, I wanted to use larger chunks of text, and I had to deal with the question of how to present them. I was thinking in terms of adaptation: how do I adapt these passages? I also had in mind the idea of doing a performance. What would it be like to try to appear physically as a performer? This had to do with the question of being entertaining, and at this point the idea of a character I started to think of as a Chorus Girl came up, as a kind of vehicle for entertainment. The use of the optical illusion poster for the Chorus Girl's dress also highlights the notion of "seeming"; I wanted these works to be about the fact that they seemed to be moving. Here is a very flat, motionless image, yet it contains motion. It's the gigantic paradox wanting to be like an elaborate Busby Berkeley dance number, but at the same time totally flat, 2D...

CG: Two works from the *A Torment of Follies* series, entitled *By Way of Digression* (2007) and *I must explain, specify, rationalize, classify, etc.* (2007), show a character in the process of meticulously studying two long excerpts from *Ferdydurke*. Could we understand this gesture as a kind of metaphor for the act of reading?

FS: Yes, these works are about reading, but they are also about the artist's relation to the text. I used two large chunks of text, and the figure, which is obviously me, is either measuring or aligning the words. These gestures are also linked to the fact that the letters are not just typeset on the large sheet of paper: each of them is literally embedded into the paper. Reading is also central in the two excerpts from Gombrowicz's novel: they are characterised by a very obviously self-conscious voice that relates a kind of anxiety about the work's reception. When the complete *A Torment of Follies* series was presented at the Secession in Vienna, these two works were the first things you saw. They illustrated the preparations for the exhibition. At the end, you discovered the view of the choreographed characters, at which point they combine to form a group of parading figures.

CG: The notions of reflection and concentration seem to play a key role in your practice. Some of your works depict characters in reflective states, as if they were looking for inspiration or mulling over ideas. There is also the work *Why should you not be able to assemble yourself and write* (2008), presented in the exhibition at Portikus, in which one sees a character apparently reading again and again a letter on which the title sentence is written...

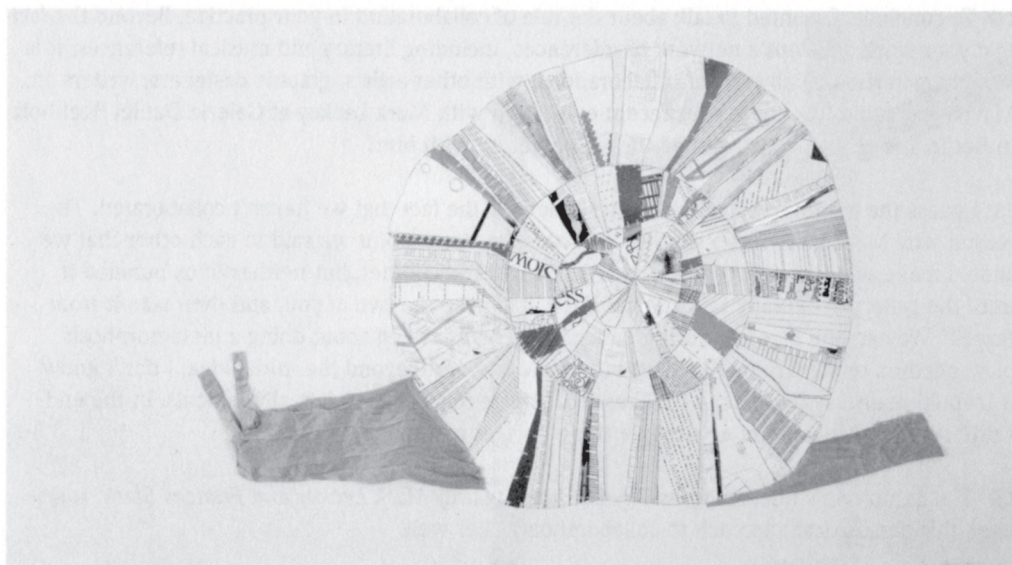
FS: The figure in the piece is seen from above, in weird perspective, so she seems to stand on her head while her feet are floating. This ungrounded aspect reminds me of a quote from one of the Gombrowicz passages we were just talking about. The quote goes, "Instead of marching forward straight and erect like the great writers of all ages, I am merely revolving ridiculously on my own heels." For me, this idea of the author revolving ridiculously on his own heels is not necessarily a bad thing, and speaks of an interesting approach to thinking and composing. The other day I heard a programme on the radio about religion, in which they were talking about meditation, and the speaker was making the distinction between thought and just awareness. I think that, in the creative process, there is something similar to this kind of non-thought or negative space of thought. I once used a quote from Robert Musil's *Diaries*, in which he talks about how important the *not doing* is to the actual *doing*. I increasingly find that the whole notion of intuition – despite being completely unfashionable and often seemingly stupid – is such a major aspect of the whole process.

CG: You realised a group of works taking as a point of departure Daniel Buren's seminal text *The Function of the Studio* (1971), but the way you understand this question appears quite distant from Buren's rejection of the studio and the kind of art it implies. Your approach to the studio as not only a space for production, but also as a space for "non-production" or as a domestic space, is at odds with his theory.

FS: This series started right about the time I got a studio. It also coincided with the completion of my book *The Architect and the Housewife*, which was more explicitly critical of the dominant approach of large scale, post-studio contemporary art production. I discovered this phrase in Buren's text: "The unspeakable compromise of the portable work of art." It just sounded so mean! But I also thought that I could take this disdain and look at it from a different angle. This body of work also had to do with the question of the role of the artist, and more precisely the role of an artist like me who likes to ramble and has a lot to say about his or her work. At the time it seemed other artists would never be caught standing next to their works and talking to people, while I tended to talk continuously. I loved to talk about my work, and I realised that my voice is a crucial aspect of my practice. In that *Unspeakable Compromise* series my comments function alongside the work, almost as a kind of certificate of authenticity.

CG: In your work *Push* (2006), one can see a line of mail entering your studio through the front door. Could we see this work as a direct illustration of the type of materials that you currently use in your collages?

FS: There are in fact two works that preceded *Push: In and In* (2005) and *In Box* (2004). Both of them show stacks of mail and were made by using the material that was coming through my mailbox. When I first saw that I could do something as a visual artist, still relatively young, I was really attracted to making announcements. I still have a love/hate relationship with this form of address. You know that the person who receives an announcement will have it in his or



Frances Stark, *Westward Snail*, 2005

her hands, as opposed to just walking past a work in a gallery. But you soon start getting more and more things through your mailbox and you realise that you cannot have a personal relationship with every single piece of mail, every single invitation, and you probably won't see any of those exhibitions. They exist as a kind of reminder of the so-called art world you supposedly inhabit. Initially, I wasn't using only art announcement cards. I was also using all kinds of mail, including junk mail. But the announcement cards were the main thrust, and this is also where you get all the colour and the heavy paper.

CG: It is very interesting to see the evolution of your collage practice, from the small drawings combining only a few elements to the larger works, like *A Woman and a Peacock* (2008), in which the collage unfolds in space. Do you know what will be the next step in the development of your collage technique?

FS: When I look at all the existing works together, I often ask myself, "Why didn't I do more of this, or more of that?" I always say to myself that I would like to go back and revisit various series of works, but of course I never do... The way I work is not about repeating a technique. But maybe in some other parallel universe, I could make pieces like *A Woman and a Peacock* over and over again. Because it's a real joy to play with printed matter... There is something "passive-aggressive" about the way I used collage and the way I worked with fugitive materials in the past. I have always simultaneously dealt with the paper's fragility and its durability. That's the whole thing about paper. It's a very flexible material, but it is also the most delicate. I don't know if you noticed, but, in *A Woman and a Peacock*, the peacock's tail, composed of numerous pieces of paper freely fixed to the canvas, comes slightly off the stretcher, so you can't just lean the thing against the wall, or wrap it like a normal canvas. When installing it you might say, "Oh, come on! This is a nightmare to handle! All for 2 inches of extra tail?"

CG: To conclude, I wanted to talk about the role of collaboration in your practice. Beyond the fact that your work develops a network of references, including literary and musical references, it is also characterised by all sorts of collaborations, with other artists, graphic designers, writers etc. Maybe you could talk about your recent exhibition with Mark Leckey at Galerie Daniel Buchholz in Berlin and how you approached the collaboration with him?

FS: I guess the exhibition is actually a testament to the fact that we haven't collaborated. The reason why Mark and I had a show was because, at some point we said to each other that we should make something – a show or a piece of work – together, but neither of us pursued it until the gallery eventually said, “What if we juxtapose the two of you, and then take it from there?” We had one meeting during which we actually talked about doing a metamorphosis play together, or something like that, but we never went beyond the initial idea. I don't know if I would really say that I am a collaborator. I think collaboration is really difficult. In the end, I think that I have more of a “struggle alone” writer mentality.

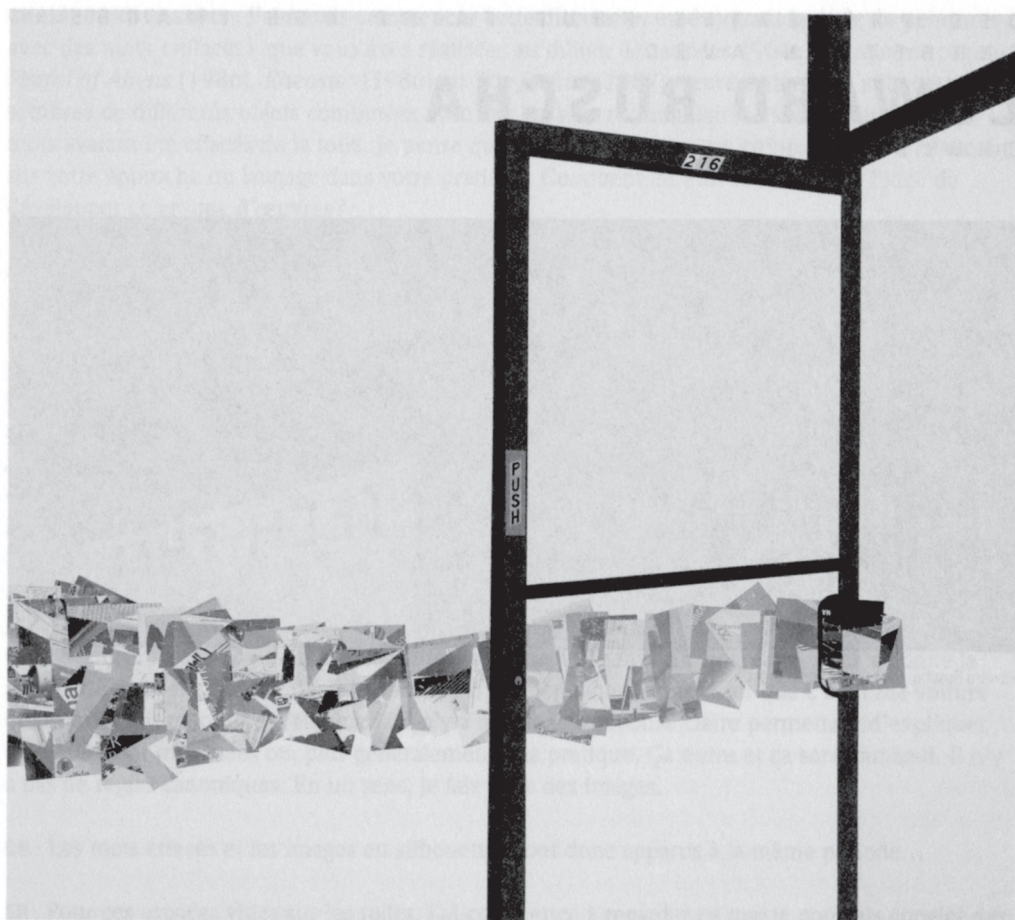
CG: The exhibition's title, *And possibly but not certainly Mark Leckey and Frances Stark*, translated this paradoxical approach to collaboration rather well.

FS: The title relates the essential “Could it?”, i.e., “Is it even possible for this to happen?” In a way, this goes back to the notion of being a reader. When you are reading, you are not collaborating with the author or interpreting the text the way you want, but you are making something come into being. I have always been intrigued by the haptic relationship between the author and the reader. I think that this kind of energy and attraction is part of the aesthetic experience. You are experiencing a text, but also the mind that made this text and, with some authors, it becomes almost like a love affair.

CG: So maybe the term “collaboration” is not accurate, maybe it's more about meeting. Morgan Fisher wrote a text on the occasion of a show you did together, *Frances Stark meets Morgan Fisher*. This text talks about the difference between the meetings that occur in life, where something may or may not happen, and the ones that occur in fiction, where something is necessarily going to happen. Considering the title of your exhibition with Mark Leckey, your approach to collaboration seems closer to the meetings that happen in real life. Something may or may not happen...

FS: What Morgan was addressing was the notion of the “meet-cute”, a cinematic device that pairs two unlikely characters together in a comical fashion as a set-up for their inevitable union. So in both the cases of my exhibition with Morgan and with Mark, the exhibition venue itself is the meet-cute, and the exhibition is the fiction, which can be about something happening or something not happening; i.e. in the story I can say “Oh, we haven't done anything”, but that IS the story.

Los Angeles, April 2009



Frances Stark, *Push*, 2006. (Copures de censure) ou des «vacances» (espaces vides): je pensais aussi que l'organisation de ces espaces vides nécessiterait une certaine logique: si, par exemple, je disais «cinq ans» (l'âge du fils), l'espace vide correspondant au mot «cinq» serait alors un petit peu plus long que celui pour le mot «ans». J'ai donc suivi ce procédé, fidèlement.

CS: Au milieu des années 1990, vous avez également travaillé avec des mots effacés, pour un ensemble de peintures regroupées sous le nom de *Clypeuses*. Cette série est assez différente des œuvres dont on vient de parler. Les peintures n'ont pas d'image d'arrière-plan – il n'y a que des mots effacés – et les titres sont caractérisés par un ton quelque peu menaçant. Je pense par exemple aux œuvres *Now We Have All Day / Got Rid of Several Like You – One Was Found In River Just Recently* (1997) ou *Little Snitches Like You End Up In Dumpsters All Around Town* (1997).

ES: Alors que je travaillais sur les peintures avec des silhouettes, elles ont commencé à évoluer. Elles sont devenues de plus en plus abstraites, ce qui m'a amené à la série des *Clypeuses*. Ces œuvres sont également venues en partie en pensant aux lettres de sang. C'est pourquoi chacune d'entre elles semble avoir un ton proche de la menace... J'ai vu des lettres de sang dans le passé, et elles ont quelque chose d'effrayant. J'étais très intrigué par leur aspect visuel,