

AMY YAO AND FRANCES STARK

On Jul 13, 2007, at 8:29 AM:

AMY: Now, let's talk about cats. What's up with the Black Flag cat videos? Oh, well they're not all Black Flag cat videos.

FRANCES: They are pre-YouTube, of course. I started just making unedited videos of my cats—well, I mean, they are edited from less watchable footage but there are never cuts within each video. They're all the length of a song which plays live in the background while I'm taping. This was perhaps the precursor to the introduction of the semi-comic bird figures. It was also a form of domestic self-portraiture about the time when I started trying to write the book, *Architect & The Housewife*. I was thinking about the cats doing nothing, or having no plans and about putting a recognizable frame (a song) around that nothingness. As a viewer you know that a song doesn't go on TOO long so you can deal with the action/non-action within that not-too-demanding period of time. Sometimes the cat's action synchs with the lyrics or the music. My grandmother was a cat lady with tons of feral cats in the yard and pie tins full of crusty cat food swarming with flies—so growing up we didn't have cats and my father always expressed a great animosity toward them. There's something about living with cats that is very visual, that is so much about just observing them, being able to stare at them, which I never experienced until adulthood. And so then I think that the love affair with a cat roommate was also inspiration for this, that visual aspect of it. I think I was constantly having a crisis about being bored by art, or wondering why I didn't like looking at more art more than I did at the time. So I think I was also trying to observe what did give me visual pleasure; and for sure just lying around doing nothing staring at my cats was a big source of it.

AMY: What do you think about word vs. image? I think of your work as being a dialectic, where in viewing your work the two end up combining into a whole.

FRANCES: I guess the 'versus' plays a big part for me as an artist. I think I always felt tyrannized by images and

never felt like images were something I could control or even understand, even as a very young person, whether this had to do with not knowing how to "get the look" I wanted with hair or make-up (ha!) or not being able to draw, or have any kind of decorating or designing capacity whatsoever growing up. My family is still shocked that I make my living as a visual artist, but in some ways the visual has only been a result of this 'vs.', this battle between word and image.

AMY: Gertrude Stein and the ex-patriot modernists working out of Paris come to mind with your earlier works, as well as with your writing—your epistolary style, your references to your circle of artist friends, and your use of repetition. Are you influenced by them?

FRANCES: That is not something I ever studied or made a concerted effort to emulate, if you know what I mean. But having said that, I do recall that when I was about sixteen I had this idea that I wanted to be like Gertrude Stein. But at that young age this particular momentary aspiration had probably more to do with being seduced by the idea of an important and intelligent (and not-so-pretty) woman—this is not a model readily available as a teenager in southern California. And in high school at that time, Stein was taught as a figure, not an author or an artist. So the formal aspects of her writing and her thought were only things I came to much later but I wouldn't even say they were consciously influential.

I sort of wished I was more into reading her than I am, to be honest. It comes across as very schticky so it's not that I ever had the desire to keep reading her. I don't really like admitting that, but I'm a bit of a philistine, the kind of person who finds Scott Walker annoying for being so "difficult" or "special." And just today someone was playing Arthur Russell in my studio and I was very annoyed by it and all I could hear was how unusual or special it was and it was making my skin crawl. I said to Stuart, "Babe, this is so *arty*" and he said, "Babe, you're *arty*." But then when Mayo Thomson does ironic or atonal, somehow there's some dirtiness to it or humor so I can enjoy that.

What do you think of this apparent habit of always making music analogies? Steve Hanson and I used to do that ALL THE TIME and I imagine that's how you two connected. I think I was so naïve—or maybe narrow minded is a better way of putting it—that when I started Art Center I remember having this sense of vague disappointment discovering none of my fellow students were punk. I mean now everyone's "punk" because everyone from toddlers to grannies are wearing skull and cross

bones, with a sense of “I’m not shocked by anything,” but somehow I really felt that as artists they were supposed to have been hardcore at some point, and people seemed quite straight to me. And so when I met Steve (as the librarian), we bonded over some kind of nostalgic appreciation of Black Flag, or of having been at the same PIL concert/riot ten years prior without having known each other. This is really petty and cliquy but that was my mentality at the time, and I think it’s a weakness. And so I guess that the kind of us-versus-them mentality that I had in the early ‘80s as a teenager, where the boundaries of mainstream and subculture were very clearly delineated, is a paradigm that’s hard to kick.

On Aug 8, 2007, at 5:49 PM:

AMY: The punk clique thing is hard to get away from, even now, but I think it is also the reason I met Steve. Back then I was nineteen and just starting Art Center as an undergrad and everyone at school was so much older than me and much more professional. I always felt like I had this crazy kooky teen antagonistic attitude. I know he thought I was obnoxious, but maybe he also thought it was funny? He was one of the few who put up with me and hired me as a student librarian probably because of the music thing. We realized we were at the same Melvins show four years before at Jabberjaw, where the power went out in the middle of the show and everyone was in the dark for like four minutes. It was one of the first punk shows I had ever gone to. But about making music analogies, I think it taps into an intuitive, almost animal, opinion-shaping mechanism. And punk as a look is so weird because it messes with your mind! Who can you trust nowadays!? What’s that image saying to me!? My signal is crossed!

On Jul 13, 2007, at 8:29 AM:

AMY: I remember when you lectured at Yale, I saw this great drawing you made with Marc Leccy’s name on it. I think you commented that you thought of him as almost a futurist, maybe because of Donateller, his band. That cover of Maurice Lemaitre’s Lettriste march song.

FRANCES: See, I didn’t even know it is Maurice Lemaitre. I must admit I don’t know much about this. I heard some Lettriste recordings when I just started doing art when I was a Humanities major at San Francisco State and was blown away but I never followed through with it. (That kind of stuff was not so easy to get a hold of, pre-ubu.com). Already a bit of a fan of Leckey, when I heard Donateller’s “March of

the White Barbarians” I was absolutely beside myself with joy. It was the best thing I heard in ages and it still makes me crazy to listen to it. Regarding Futurism—or perhaps, more importantly, the idea of “future”—I don’t know how to continue responding to this question, to be honest, because whenever it comes to art historical self-consciousness, or the deliberate employment of certain motifs which call out certain *-isms*, it makes me uneasy. It starts off this psychological tic whereby I imagine that everyone else learned art in some orderly linear fashion: this came after this which couldn’t have come unless this came before etc etc ad infinitum...as if everybody must arrive in the present by way of some chronological art historical entry hall. The question also makes me very self-conscious about being unfashionable, in the sense of recognizing that certain contemporary artists are very adept at resuscitating certain stylistic gestures (whether it’s the cut of a dress or a quotation of tapestry design or homage to under-recognized artists). You know, I can think of a few women artists who somehow utilize their own special taste in the forefront of their practice in an interesting way, and because I enjoy and admire the work of these artists, I sometimes envy that ability. However, I don’t think I employ or quote art historical codes very well, I don’t create anything very stylish—the Leccy collage is (despite its erectness) a kind of lame homage to Marinetti. I’m actually on the verge of collaborating with Mark, which is kind of crazy, because I’m more like a fan. And the whole possibility of us doing a performance together has really forced me to question my own desire or need to want to cross the line from elated/adoring receiver to collaborator. But one of the sparks of the collaboration was a discussion we had about Mark E Smith and how Leckey doesn’t even like The Fall (too Beefheart!!) but admires MES as the model of a great artist. And I can see that the both of us have a kind of desire to be like MES in our own way.

AMY: Your artwork started out more text-based, using repetition, and in that sense abstracting the word. I remember Giovanni (Intra) compared it to white noise in a review of your work from the mid- ‘90s. Currently, you use words and letters more so as objects that fill spaces of representational pictures that describe simple objects we know—a flower, a chair, a bird, grasses. Could you talk about this transition, what led you to work in these ways?

FRANCES: A simple or superficial response to this question would have to address the problem of getting

tired of doing the same thing over and over again. (Doing the same thing over and over specifically refers to how the work was made—but generally refers to accretion, or to what it means to have a “practice”). So it has to do with why we value change or development and also the problem posed by repetition itself. And I think this aspect of the general question is completely tied up with the specifics of it.

So, I used repetition to create a mass, to make a mark or fill a ground or page. But my ultimate purpose was never to abstract (as in hiding, or reducing) the word because the word(s)—and by extension, letters—were so central to the construction of the image (or fields, really) that the words or phrases, along with their potential meaning, were never intended to be obliterated. Sometimes repetition is employed in language as a way to allow something familiar to become strange again, you know, saying the same thing over and over until you don’t recognize it anymore, or to the point where you recognize it precisely as a set of arbitrary noises. In that early work you mention, the repetition brings the authored bit, then its meaning—however slippery or paradoxical—slowly into view. When this happens, its shape and tone are evident as authored, intentional, and one can have an aesthetic response to the text which lies outside of my drawing. We can say, “I understand that,” or, “I love what was written, what was stated.” Whether that has to do with something along the lines of “oh that is true” is another tangent... ie. “the desolation of acting a part, the desperation of imitation, the brutalizing torment of brutalization and of saying the same thing over and over again.”

We perceive a voice, a mind, and we experience that voice/mind and...well, it’s almost too corny to say but the white noise that Giovanni refers to (created by the repetition of the letters) sort of speaks to the backdrop of the alphabet as a basic tool box that is all-purpose and anonymous.

Funny, I think the noise aspect (white or not) is important in following the line of your question because this earlier work had a certain quietness to it, and maybe even closer to the effect of a mantra than white noise. At a certain point I felt that it was either misleading or it couldn’t accommodate the rougher, darker, or even potentially humorous aspects of my own voice. And I guess that’s about the time when I introduced the simple collage elements into the fields...generally birds that were shamelessly anthropomorphic components tacked on to turn the text field into a text bubble. Think of Woodstock from the Peanuts cartoon with his little language of repeated lines...

On Aug 7, 2007, at 11:46 AM:

AMY: I like thinking about Woodstock, the bird, in relation to some of your work. I definitely see that in the work, not only conceptually, but also aesthetically. In many of the early works, the drawings/text are made of traced carbon copies of the sentences. The act itself emphasizes the material and formal qualities of the word. It also reminds me of the ephemeral, passing nature of words. Now, with the collaged works that incorporate parts of older works, the words are fused together as an image, less so as decipherable text, as cut pieces of papers, each paper piece being both an image and part of an image. Images replace images in the same way as text replace images in earlier works, instead of representing. Do you think about the word as an image? Do you think that this world we live in is becoming more and more image-as opposed to word-oriented? I think of TV and news reporting, the internet and interactivity, the new Mac computers with video chat, etc.

On Aug 8, 2007, at 5:49 PM:

FRANCES: Well, absolutely. Image is very dominant and I think that language just takes a lot of time and complex language doesn’t translate well into mainstream media, especially language that is uncertain or even language that is carefully certain. I often feel sad about not having much eloquence in my own speech, and I think that it has become increasingly rare to find people who are very eloquent speakers. American English is so incredibly informal, and so I think that the standards and rules are just morphing so rapidly that it seems to be evaporating. I feel it myself, losing the ability to speak complexly, directly. I can’t finish sentences half the time. It’s like they don’t even matter. Maybe because there’s so much media out there that you just know is hot air and every sign or ad or fine print is just something you know is meaningless or wrong (and things that seem convincing and true are proven time and again to be, in our media culture, inconsequential). But by the same token, I believe you can have an extremely valuable or relevant conversation between people even if it is inarticulate and clumsy. This is what amazes me, and as I continue to teach in the mentor fashion of one-on-one studio visits, I marvel at the fact that we can be as productive as we are sometimes (me and the student), despite our apparent clumsiness and shrinking vocabulary.

On Jul 14, 2007, at 8:29 AM:

AMY: Why is letter writing important to you?

FRANCES: First, putting aside why it would be important to ANYONE, I would have to say it's important to me because I suppose the act of writing letters has shaped my understanding of what it means to be an artist. That sounds a bit pat. I wrote lots of letters as a teenager to all types of friends that I had met in different schools from moving back and forth between parents between southern and northern California. And I got really almost addicted to it when I started writing to a guy named Kevin Sullivan, who was an artist and a surfer who knew all about art and punk and Marxism etc. I was of course smitten, but he kind of gave me an education about everything from Picabia to critique of advertising; from The Fall to the band Savage Republic (he started attending art school at UCLA about the same time they were there). I asked for the letters back (not sure why) and then I started incorporating them into work—work that was bad or stupid but the point was that it was at this intersection of trying to make art in grad school (being untrained as I am fond of confessing), this intersection between post-studio quasi-conceptual/performative practice and writing. I was taking a writing class with Dennis Cooper outside of school through Beyond Baroque. So anyway, it was the letter writer in me that felt “real,” if you will, and not like I was trying too hard to become an artist. Once I got to art school I had to face the fact that most, but of course not all, of my fellow students were “talented” in the sense of being the kind of people who were artistically inclined, and headed to art school without question. You know, they could draw, print photos, do lithos, silkscreen, whatever. I guess I just felt like my letter writing—my ability to communicate or the voice which was manifest in that part of my life (which predated my education in postmodern theory)—was my talent, my line, as I had minimal experience with any other media. BUT that's all just to point out how it is important to the formation of a practice. I see your next question is about writer's block, and I guess the thing with writing letters (as long as it's not a cover letter!!) is that they usually just flow out like crazy. And the reason they make writing easy is because you know exactly who your audience is. For example, I got some e-mail from a venue where I'll be exhibiting and it asked very point blank about getting information about my work. I was so turned off by this because I felt that because the inquiry was so general there was simply no motivation to begin a discussion.

They hadn't taken the time to ask specific questions. So in the case of me answering your questions, I have the opposite of writer's block because I know who's on the other end, and all the things I know about you can inspire me to want to tell you more...and believe me I probably am only getting out half of what's actually coursing through my mind...and that's mostly because I'm totally out of practice. So I guess knowing I'll have to go back and edit this later may make me stutter or not bother trying to articulate some minor or unrelated point etc. But ultimately I'm writing TO YOU and so I want to communicate to you. With an exhibition venue they just want something to put in a press release and that is the type of writing that I used to be really good at but now it just makes me want to run in horror. I think much more clearly when I know what's at stake when the initiator of a response has a stake in the matter. There's one letter that was really brilliant, a kind of form letter from Scorched Earth—do you know that? Well I had it up on my wall for a while and it was really begging for a response and one day I just felt totally compelled to respond even though Scorched Earth was by then just wrapping up or maybe already complete. But the point is, despite having actually finished composing the letter, the succinctness of my response, though unsent, brought on by the direct address was very special.

AMY: Have you ever had writer's block?

FRANCES: Yes, I guess. But maybe that is something that applies to someone who has a daily practice of writing, which I don't. But I struggle to write, of course... probably more writer's procrastination than block, because while sometimes getting a simple sentence right takes ages, it's getting to the point that's hard. And getting to the point is, as I said, always easier when you have one reader in mind.

AMY: Any favorite authors?

FRANCES: Thomas Bernhard, Emily Dickinson, Robert Musil, J.D. Salinger, Robert Walser, Ingeborg Bachmann. I guess Mark E Smith. Is that fair to add him to the list? Well, because of the way he so often writes about reading or browsing or stumbling across something...to me that is one of the persistent aspects of his voice. As someone who writes things down or repeats what he has seen or read—oh nevermind...

AMY: With your writing, what is interesting to me about it is the tone. Simultaneously it gives off a real

sense of vulnerability as well as being strong and hard. Many female friends I have who identify themselves as feminist relate to your tone. Did you develop this tone consciously, or did it evolve organically? How did this distinct voice come about?

FRANCES: I think I developed this tone from my early letter writing. I think I edit for sound and rhythm, of course, but I don't think I ever tried to achieve a tone. This is where I have to admit that I'm pretty unskilled, in the sense that I just am what I am and I don't mind refining that. But as a strategist I'm much too lazy or undisciplined to really cultivate a desired effect, if you know what I mean. I think I was kind of precocious as a young person but also very insecure and excessively self-reflective. However, I feel that I may have just allowed that reflexivity and effusiveness to evolve into something a bit more tempered, or I've figured out how to focus it. The funny thing is I don't generally write the things that I end up publishing as fast as I am writing this. Usually those things are very slow and excruciatingly painful to get out. So maybe it's wrong to say I don't have what it takes to cultivate a desired effect because I think often this writing comes across as stream of consciousness, or very casual when in fact it is very labored over, which is not to say it's so extra crafty, just that there is really a difference between the kind of linear spasms that come out with joy and an apparent clarity and the finished pieces which are produced with one part writing, three parts walking away from the computer and crying about not being able to write.

AMY: In your new book, you included a source photo for the painting of the Hoover. It just looks like an advert, but then it takes on poetic sense through the description of its place, title, action. Could you talk about that a little? How did you find it and is the source photo important to you?

FRANCES: That actually came from a photo I took in my bedroom. I became very attached to the photo. I had to wonder why I should bother making a collage or painting of the image, couldn't I just exhibit a photo... and my automatic response was no, I couldn't just exhibit a photo. And that really bothered me, but that's a completely different conversation. I then decided that I wanted to just do a painting of my vacuum cleaner, also a weird homage to the Koons *Hoover Convertible* made specifically for a show that Matthew Higgs put together called "dereconstruction."

AMY: I heard a rumor that you used to be roommates with someone in Flipper when you lived in SF...

FRANCES: Yes, I lived with both Bruce Lose and Will Shatter, both of whom I totally looked up to (Flipper was by then defunct circa '86) and both of whom turned me onto some interesting things, some of which were unsavory and unhealthy. Will died several years before I left SF to go to art school. I've been thinking about Bruce lately. But to be honest I haven't followed the latest Flipper incarnation. I saw them a lot when I was pretty young (before meeting them) and they were really a big deal, but I hate to say the records don't translate how special they were to someone who is not going to automatically buy the California Punk story, if you know what I mean.

On Aug 16, 2007, at 6:56 AM:

AMY: That's sad to hear about Will Shatter, I didn't know he passed away back then. I have to say I really love Flipper! When I used to work in the Kill Rock Stars mailroom in Olympia, WA, we listened to only Flipper endlessly all-winter-long. And between the few different bands I've been in, we've covered Sex Bomb and Earthworm. Bingo! Well thanks for the interview Frances! Hope to see you soon! 🍷

Editors' note: This interview is a slightly-edited and excerpted version of a sprawling email exchange between Stark and Yao that took place during the Summer of 2007. This casual conversation, focused primarily on Stark's work, continually comes back to exchanges about a California music landscape with which both artists are familiar. The product is a nice reminder that North Drive Press is committed to presenting artists in their own words.