FOR SOME PERVERTS THE SENTENCE IS A BODY

On the work of Frances Stark

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It is the delay which is in the beginning.
(Jacques Derrida)

Frances Stark might be described as a reluctant writer or, more accurately, a reluctant producer of texts. "At the time the question was posed as to whether or not I would like to contribute a text about Al Ruppersberg," she wrote in *Afterall* magazine in 2002, "I was full of promises to myself to turn down any request for writing that came my way." It's important, this distinction between writer and producer. Stark isn't averse to writing (although she admits that it's demanding and when she's doing it "everything and everyone else suffers"); rather, she's ambivalent about "producing for." Simply, reductively, it's a matter of internal as opposed to external exigency. The Ruppersberg text continues, "Presumably, saying 'no' to others might constitute saying 'yes' to oneself, or rather, I may have been thinking it might be best to dedicate myself to writing something that stemmed from my own requirements, not something that was somebody else's idea."[1] As I'm reading this, it occurs to me that Stark's 'no' can be voiced *in* the text but can't be performed *by* it.

Certainly, this opening fits seamlessly with the conversational character of Stark's essay (and her writing in general), but it's still worth asking: Why the confession? Why fess up to her ambivalence? Stark's unorthodox introduction might appear to function something like the *praetereo* (from the Latin verb meaning "to pass by") with which Cicero began some of his speeches: "I won't mention the fact that…," he would say, and then proceed, of course, to state the fact. But, while Cicero's "negation of the negation" seems purely rhetorical, Stark's plays a more structural role

1
Frances Stark, "For nobody knows himself, if he is only himself and not also another one at the same time," in *Frances Stark: Collected Writing 1993–2003* (London: Book Works, 2003), 12.

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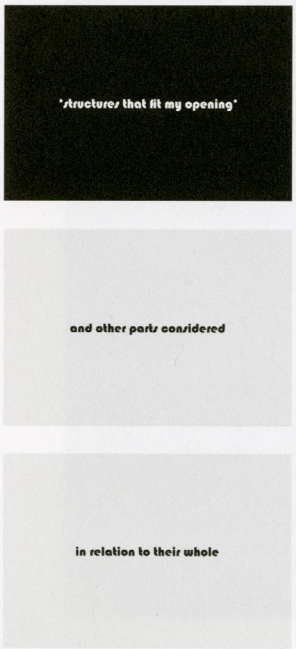
in the text. A recent example of her compulsion to cave (she's been testing her resolve for a while now) involves an invitation to write about her own work, which resulted in a text that begins with the claim that she has declared a yearlong moratorium on writing. "A moratorium," she writes, is "an authorized delay or stopping of some specific activity. I have attempted to assume this authority in order to make it possible to respond to requests with an unequivocal 'no.'"[2] Perpetually deferred, her unequivocal 'no' is an exercise not so much in futility as reflexivity, since the anecdote about her admittedly abortive moratorium not only provides an opening gambit for the essay but might be seen to delay its beginning, however briefly. In the final sentence of her two-page letter to the editor who commissioned the text, Stark suggests ironically that her moratorium has remained intact: "So you see, at the moment, I can't give you anything new."[3] Except that, having proceeded to discuss her work in the remainder of the text, she just has. Paradoxically, Stark doesn't authorize the delay, she authors it.

2
Frances Stark, "Dear Gean," *ArtLies* (Summer 2006): 30.

3
Ibid., 31.

An artist who writes or a writer who makes primarily text-based artworks (depending on how you look at it), Stark faces a real dilemma when presented with these opportunities. But does making us privy to her internal struggle somehow implicate us? Her elaborate ritual of self-authorization is a way of reserving the right to say 'no' in spite of both the need and the desire to say 'yes,' a theme which pervades not only her recent writing but a new body of work. "*Structures That Fit My Opening" and Other Parts Considered in Relation to Their Whole*, a work that takes the form of a powerpoint presentation, provides a kind of voiceover or extended caption for Stark's eponymous exhibition. Included in the presentation is an excerpt from her moratorium text: "I wanted to reflect on why it seems so important to begin seriously reconsidering the time frame in which my own work is generated, or even reconsidering across the board (and here I mean for everybody) why urgency in terms of production increasingly seems to overshadow urgency in terms of expression." Given her concern about this time frame and the priority she associates with it, it's clear that there's more at stake in Stark's delay—and, more particularly, her need to authorize it—than her offhand remarks would suggest. It comes as no surprise that these false starts are related to strategies employed in her visual artworks that address the same issue.



4

Left: from
"Structures That Fit My Opening" and Other Parts Considered in Relation to Their Whole (2006)

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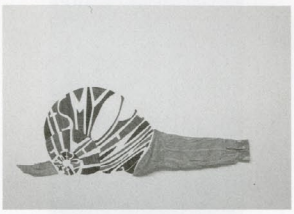
Unless for some perverts the sentence is a body*?*
(Roland Barthes)

To suggest that Stark's intentionally titillating *Structure That F(its My Opening)* offers a visual interpretation of Barthes's inscrutable question seems less provocative than obvious, but it's arguably the textual fragment as much as the sexual innuendo that establishes a link between them. In the section of *The Pleasure of the Text* that ends with his rhetorical question Barthes argues, "The Sentence is hierarchical: it implies subjections, subordinations, internal reactions. Whence its completion: how can a hierarchy remain open?"[4] The completeness of the sentence, its closure, is problematic for Barthes because, as he paraphrases Julia Kristeva, "any completed utterance runs the risk of being ideological"—which doesn't mean that any other kind of utterance is immune to this risk, but circumventing completion is a place to start.[5] (It might be worth noting that the question itself is a fragment.) Or, alternatively, the "pleasure of the sentence," which, according to Barthes, is typically attributable to the ludic exploitation of the "immutably structured and yet infinitely renewable" nature of the sentence, might turn out to be more carnal than grammatical. Barthes put it succinctly: "What is significance? It is meaning, *insofar as it is sensually produced*."[6]

In *Structure That F(its My Opening)* the sentence is, quite literally, a body—except that it's only part of the body. Inverting the usual hierarchy, the sentence fragment ("structure that fits my opening") is the whole of which the sentence ("it's my opening") is only a part. The completeness of the sentence is challenged both by its enclosure within the fragment (echoing the snail's dependence on its shell) and the double meaning this strategy gives rise to: in the context of the gallery the word "opening" refers simultaneously to the one the viewer is attending and the one through which the snail emerges, as the subject to which "my" refers seems to shift back and forth between artist and snail. Similarly, the silk sleeve collaged onto the surface of the support refers metonymically to the artist, collapsing the absent—and sexualized—body of the artist with that of the snail. And, since the implied movement of the snail acts as a metaphor for narrative progression, the sleeve alludes to the slipperiness not only of the snail but of language—a structure that fits this artist's opening—as well.



Structure That F(its My Opening) (2006)

4
Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 50.

5
Ibid.

6
Ibid., 61.

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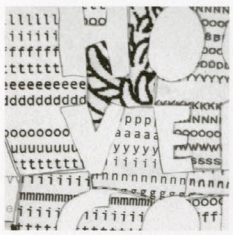
Barthes's distrust of closure and his suggestive alternative to it coincide in the double-reading of this work, its embodied text opening it up to multiple interpretations both materially and linguistically.

Stark appears to have a more sanguine view of the sentence than Barthes, mostly because she's convinced that its totalizing potential can be sidestepped, if not subverted, poetically: "There's a sanctuary in writing sentences. They can fashion either the emptiness or fullness of the real world into intricate syntactical wonders—solid little trains that choo choo to an unworldly destination sometimes right past their readers who wait anxiously for a cargo of reflections."[7] The deferral involved in sentences that don't deliver their cargo directly or promptly resonates with Stark's authorized delay. Like Barthes's hierarchical sentence, the real world cargo that readers are prone to anticipate amounts to language that has been reified through its subordination and subjection to conventional syntax. Acting as conduits between the worldly and the unworldly, Stark's "syntactical wonders" don't deliver up a fixed meaning—a transcendental signified—but traffic instead in both holes (emptiness) and wholes (fullness). In a similar vein, the presence of the text in *Structure That F(its My Opening)*, which is formed by the negative space between text-filled pieces of paper, is the result of a material absence. The delays, deferrals, digressions, and elisions that permeate Stark's writing are perhaps the temporal analogue for the "holeness" of her visual artworks; their open-endedness means there's some filling in to do.

In much of the work Stark has made during the past decade, she appropriated short phrases from literary works by a wide range of authors, including Emily Dickinson, Robert Musil, and Samuel Beckett, tracing them by hand onto the support using carbon paper. More recently, Stark has been working with literal as opposed to literary fragments—snippets of junk mail and exhibition announcements. In some cases, the scraps of paper aren't collaged (as they are in *Structure That F(its My Opening)*) but pieced together like a quilt, held together by tiny bits of linen tape. In *50% Head* an image of a chrysanthemum is captioned by the title phrase, which is collaged onto the lower right-hand corner of the support like a hastily assembled ransom note. The creases in the paper below the chrysanthemum provide a kind of frame for the missing body, although the percentages don't quite add up. The body is conspicuously absent from both text

7
Frances Stark, "I'm taking this opportunity to feel some holes in addition to filling them," in *Collected Writing*, 43.



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and image, leaving it to the viewer/reader to fill in the blank. The pale chrysanthemum looks like nothing so much as a ghostly brain suspended above an invisible body, like the Cheshire cat's smile. Representationally, the figure/ground relationship is retained in the image, but materially the figure is part of the ground. In addition to making a virtual hole in the two-dimensional surface by creating the illusion of three-dimensional space, the flower fills a real hole—a structure, then, that fits this opening. Far from seamless, the sutured surface emphasizes both its materiality and the fact that its single expanse is made up of many parts.

50% Head (2005)

> *Unfortunately nothing is so difficult to achieve as a literary representation of a man thinking.*
> (Robert Musil)

Quoting Robert Musil, whose unfinished novel *The Man Without Qualities* was the source of the excerpt in the work she was discussing, Stark once mused,

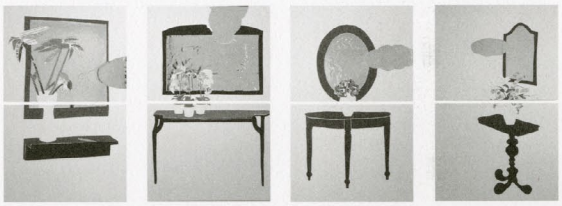
> 'Unfortunately nothing is so difficult to achieve as a literary representation of a man thinking.' And visual representation of someone thinking: isn't that equally as difficult, or even more so? I suppose there is that graphic convention of utilizing small circles bubbling up toward a larger balloon in which is printed a character's thoughts.[8]

8
This comment was made in a wall text accompanying Stark's drawing *Unfortunately nothing is so difficult to achieve as a literary representation of a man thinking* in an exhibition held at ArtPace, San Antonio, May 4 through July 1, 2006.

The use of this convention in the series *Consoles and Mirrors and Flowers* anthropomorphizes the furniture: the console tables function like bodies, the mirrors like heads. Represented on two different supports hung one above the other, the mirrors and consoles occupy the space of the wall just as the objects themselves occupy real space. (The same is true of *Foyer Furnishing* and *Thoughts and Dust Collecting*, which, shaped like the furniture they represent, resist their confinement to virtual space, at least nominally.) The flowers, which connect the two parts of each unit, become cut-out silhouettes against the flat plane of the mirrors while the vases and flowerpots occupy the illusionistic space of the tabletops.

7

Consoles and Mirrors and Flowers (2006)



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Each collage represents a mirror thinking—reflecting—and, at the same time, the mylar ostensibly "reflects" the viewer thinking: standing in front of the work, the viewer is the implied producer of the thought balloon. Reflection is a pervasive theme in this work, and for Stark it usually involves both meanings of the term (mirroring and thinking). These absurd portraits—the mirrors and consoles—are a visual representation not just of *someone* thinking but of *ourselves* thinking, or maybe our thinking selves. Reflection is, of course, what Stark advocates in her moratorium piece: "I wanted to reflect on why it seems so important to begin seriously reconsidering the time frame in which my own work is generated." But, she adds, reevaluation of the "urgency of production" should be undertaken "across the board (and here I mean for everybody)." Stark makes it clear that she isn't interested in passive reflection. The mirrors are made of reflective material but refuse to reflect; their vacancy only underscores their opacity, which prevents them from delivering on their promise of transparency. Like Stark's syntactical wonders, they leave the viewer "waiting anxiously for a cargo of reflections." The subtitles of the four works in the series, which are handwritten almost imperceptibly in pencil along the left edge of each mirror, together constitute an Oscar Wilde aphorism that Stark paraphrased: "The only thing that consoles … you for the stupid things you do … is the praise you always give … yourself for doing those stupid things." Changing its part of speech, the word "console" slips from noun to verb in the subtitle, and the pronoun "you" is alternately the subject and the object of the verb. The solipsistic phrase functions as a textual analogue for the self-reflexivity of the mirror, but the visual and textual slippages underscore the need for active reflection.

> *When we speak, we want our interlocutor to listen to us.*
> (Roland Barthes)

A kind of visual essay, the powerpoint presentation is divided into ten sections headed by phrases that incorporate the word "part," including "private part," "my parts, or rather, my pieces," etc. While the play on words here has to do with the word's connotation, Stark's puns often involve an

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aural component: the double entendre (literally "to hear twice" in French) of the phrase that frames the exhibition; the use of the word "console" as both a noun and a verb; and the incorporation of imperatives like "get on the fucking block and fuck," whose impact relies as much on inflection as the words themselves. In an interview with Raymond Pettibon titled "I'm taking this opportunity to feel some holes in addition to filling them," Stark leaves part of the text unedited in order to retain the perforated quality of speech: "It is generally understood that any taped talk eventually has to be smoothed—blank spaces removed. Lapses in certainty, stammers, silences, all ask to be paved over like multiplying potholes."[9] The "potholes" in Stark's work are paved over by fragments of text, which don't exactly smooth things out—or fill the holes. As Barthes says, "[T]he fragment breaks up what I would call the smooth finish, the composition, discourse constructed to give a final meaning to what one says."[10] Similarly, the pieces of linen tape look not unlike so many hyphens—a punctuation mark that not only joins but divides. These gaps and fissures are part of the fabric of Stark's work, both literally and figuratively, which means the parts always add up to a rather Frankensteinian whole.

In the powerpoint the relationship between language and the body is further linked to thought (or reflection) in a poem that is to be danced out letter by letter, which is followed by Avital Ronell's observation that "Nietzsche was the philosopher to think with his body, to 'dance.'"[11] Closer to thought and the body, speech was a principal target of poststructuralists, who challenged the privileged status it held as a result of its presumptive self-presence. "The logos can be infinite and self-present," Derrida argues, "only through the *voice*." He continues: "Such is at least the experience—or consciousness—of the voice: of hearing (understanding)-oneself-speak. That experience lives and proclaims itself as the exclusion of writing."[12] The focus on writing, or text, which characterized the "linguistic turn" that was ushered in by deconstruction, is closely connected to the theorization of the culturally constructed subject, one of the hallmarks of the shift to postmodernist art practices. For Stark, speech and writing—the sentence and the body—don't constitute a binary opposition, but neither are they conflated. There is clearly a voice—a subject—behind the first-person narrator of her autobiographical texts, whose informal, personal, even intimate mode of address casts the reader in the role of confidant.

9
Frances Stark, "I'm taking this opportunity to feel some holes in addition to filling them," in *Collected Writing*, 42.

10
Roland Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962–1980*, trans. Linda Coverdale (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), 209.

11
Avital Ronell, *Crack Wars: Literature Addiction Mania* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), 49.

12
Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 98.

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In the same way, her use of language in her new work engages the viewer/reader, whether implicitly or explicitly, as an interlocutor. The work's interiority notwithstanding, this voice doesn't signal a nostalgic return to modernist presence, but instead inhabits a subject that's more akin to the one Barthes imagined: "[P]erhaps the subject returns, not as illusion, but as *fiction*.... This fiction is no longer the illusion of unity; on the contrary, it is the theater of society in which we stage our plural."[13] The plural (parts) that makes up the subject (whole) always reveals it, like text, to be fragmented, fissured, contingent. Stark's work might be said to materialize the fragmented speech of this fictive subject—to give a (visual) form to this (verbal) body.

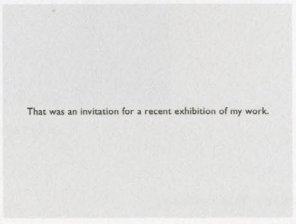
13
Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 62.

> *Work is not the satisfaction of a need, but only a means for satisfying other needs.*
> (Karl Marx)

Stark includes an image of one of her exhibition announcements in her powerpoint, followed by the statement that, "There was an allotment of time and space with my name on it." During that time and in that space, Stark showed "images of various openings being filled, furnished, decorated, penetrated, etc." (many of these images are included in "*Structures That Fit My Opening*" *and Other Parts Considered in Relation to Their Whole*). In other words, she both "furnished" the gallery and furnished—or supplied—it with art. The verbs that she enumerates (which are very different from the ones included on Richard Serra's famous list) are more typically associated with the private sphere than the public sphere.[14] Often located in an entrance hall or foyer, the console table occupies the threshold between public and private or, more specifically, professional and domestic space. Stark first took up the relationship between these spaces and the gender roles associated with them in her 1999 book *The Architect & the Housewife*.[15] Combining images of her domestic space in all its anarchic disarray with anecdotes about her professional associations with curators, gallery staff, and editors, the powerpoint revisits this topic. While space was the primary focus in *The Architect & the Housewife*, time now appears to be the more critical issue.

14
Serra's 1967–68 "verb list" begins: "To roll, to crease, to fold, to store, to bend ...". See Grégoire Müller, *The New Avant-Garde: Issues for the Art of the Seventies* (New York: Praeger, 1972), 94.

15
See Frances Stark, *The Architect & The Housewife* (London: Book Works, 1999).



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Stark's association of the body and text doesn't engage the question of labor and leisure; it links labor and pleasure. To put it bluntly, working within a system that values production over expression necessitates a kind of promiscuity on the part of the artist—a need to put out, or produce, as often and as much as possible. (But to whom is the phrase "get on the fucking block and fuck" addressed in *Readying for Reflection*? The artist? The peacock? The viewer?) Promiscuity is, of course, a term that is generally associated with the private sphere as opposed to the public sphere, where it tends to go by another name. In the exhibition *"Structures That Fit My Opening" and Other Parts Considered in Relation to Their Whole* fragments of the junk mail and exhibition announcements that never seem to stop piling up in Stark's studio are incorporated in work related to both domestic labor (*Hoover in a Corner*) and professional labor (*Thoughts and Dust Collecting* and *Push*, which depicts the front door of her studio). However, it's the pace of the relentless flow of mail as much as its volume that's so troublesome. The timelessness of the literary texts that Stark used in her earlier work (e.g. Emily Dickinson's "the worm doth woo the mortal") contrasts not only with the prosaic quality of the source material she's currently using but also with its topicality. Junk mail and exhibition announcements belong to a world in which the only way to stay one step ahead of obsolescence is to maintain one's output (to keep putting out).

This isn't, or isn't only, a complaint about how the art world has been completely subsumed by the market—a ubiquitous refrain. More specifically, Stark is concerned about the implications of this situation for the artist's work, both the product and its production. "What would it take," she asks, "for an artist to unravel the tangled net of professional associations that obscure the fundamental enthusiasm for and in his artworks themselves?"[16] Or, to put it another way, it seems that artists are becoming alienated from the pleasure that they and others derive from their labor—which is not to say that Stark is under the illusion that art-making is a form of unalienated labor, but one of the consequences of subordinating expression to production is that it turns artists into nothing more than producers for—and reproducers of—the system, rather than producers of art. As she put it in her powerpoint presentation, she wanted to consider "the possibility of liberating oneself from a cycle of disengaged production

16
Frances Stark, "10SNE1?," in *Collected Writing*, 71.

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motivated by a craving for legitimizing praise." Maybe it's time to reflect on how this tangled net makes it possible to have *an opening* but impossible, or at least risky, not to continue to have *one opening after another*.

> *After the final no there comes a yes and on that yes*
> *the future world depends.*
> (Wallace Stevens)

In her contribution to the catalogue for a recent Ed Ruscha exhibition, Stark substituted an anecdote about her preparations for writing the text—including her indiscretion concerning the confidentiality of the work to be shown—for the conventional catalogue essay. The text doesn't lack a discussion of Ruscha's work, it just incorporates it in a highly idiosyncratic way. In this text Stark succeeds in collapsing her very enthusiastic 'yes' with her perennially postponed 'no.' She didn't hesitate to accept this commission (at least not in writing), but her refusal of the conventions governing the catalogue essay parodies the protocols of this genre, registering her resistance to what has become, in essence, a marketing tool.[17] By recounting the essay's prehistory, which is a story about driving to the hotel where she wrote the text and her inability to keep mum about Ruscha's new work, Stark has ostensibly refused to share the limelight. Because she doesn't tell the whole story (the essay ends before she gets to the hotel), the action takes place *before* she starts writing, so, theoretically, she never even gets to Ruscha—the ultimate deferral. However, the essay's structure turns out to be something of a diversion, since, as she did in her moratorium text, Stark weaves a discussion of Ruscha's work into this "prologue." But because the story seems so plot-driven, Stark's digressions about Ruscha's work seem to be just that—digressions. In her tongue-in-cheek subversion of this genre, Stark substitutes conversations she had about the work for the customary discussion of the artist's work.

The narrative progression of the text coincides with the car's progression down Sunset Boulevard, conflating the present (the text we're reading) and the past (the story Stark is telling). Language is the terrain that Stark is negotiating in what turns out to be an homage to the older artist, whose conceptual art practice, like Stark's, has always involved images.

17
On this point, see Rosalind Krauss in "Roundtable: The Present Conditions of Art Criticism," *October* (Spring 2002): 202.

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In Stark's narrative a sequence of textual vignettes echoes the serial composition of Ruscha's 1966 photo-documentary book *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, establishing a link between the two artists' work. Reminiscing about her past, Stark mentions that the only hotel she has ever been to on Sunset Boulevard—the Tropicana—is now a parking lot; her great-grandparents' house in Watts (a neighborhood with a history of its own) is a gas station. It's no coincidence that Ruscha also made work that documented gas stations and parking lots. Stark's landmarks are signs rather than buildings (her text might be subtitled "every sign on the Sunset Strip"), one of which reads, simply, YOU'LL SEE WHY, JUST READ IT!—an allusion to the fact that Stark's and Ruscha's work involves not only seeing but reading. (Across the street, "Empire Building" is "an innocent enough storefront [that says] everything without even meaning to.")[18] In this context "seeing" means "understanding," suggesting that we have only to read the essay to see that it does what it's expected to do. Here, Stark has fully authorized the delay: there's no doubt she's "producing for" the system, but arguably she's doing it on her own terms. While the sign's capital letters and exclamation point attest to Stark's irrepressible enthusiasm for Ruscha's work, the colorful anecdotes that "document" the Strip in her text contrast with his flat-footed photographs (which do nothing but "document its existence, record its having been there"), marking the distance, finally, between past and present.[19]

The future world might not depend on Stark's 'yes,' but her project does. Performing her moratorium on writing *in writing* is one way of saying 'yes' and 'no' (or at least qualifying her 'yes'); refusing to conform to the conventions of the catalogue essay is another. Writing about saying 'no' might give her voice a body, but ultimately it's her *failure* to say 'no'—and the impossibility of doing so—that's made manifest by the text. (In the Ruppersberg text she can *say* 'no' in writing, but she can't say 'no' and write.) Her preoccupation with the decontextualized fragment and the contingency of the relationship of part to whole is, in its own modest way, a critique of totalization, a term that now applies less to master narratives than the structure of the art world. Hers are small acts of resistance, and they're filled with perversity and humor. But it's not just a matter of saying 'no'; it's a matter of saying 'no' to the mutual exclusion of labor and pleasure, the sentence and the body, production and expression, etc.

18
Frances Stark, "Always the Same, Always Different," in Donna de Salvo et al., *Course of Empire: Paintings by Ed Ruscha* (for the United States Pavilion, 51st Venice Biennale, 2005) (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2005), n.p.

19
Ed Ruscha, quoted in Ann Reynolds, *Robert Smithson: Learning from New Jersey and Elsewhere* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2003), 110.

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Or, to let Barthes have the last word, "The important thing is to equalize the field of pleasure, to abolish the false opposition of practical life and contemplative life. The pleasure of the text is just that… for what the text says, through the particularity of its name, is the ubiquity of pleasure, the atopia of bliss."[20]

20
Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 59.

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