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FRANCES STARK

MULTIMEDIA ARTIST AND WRITER Stark had a busy year, with a survey, "Intimism," at the Art Institute of Chicago, and a retrospective at the **Hammer Museum** in Los Angeles, on view through January 24, 2016. She also quit her tenured teaching position at the Roski School of Art and Design, part of USC, in protest of questionable administrative changes. In September, she snagged the 2015 Absolut Art Award, which grants a cash prize and a significant budget to complete a new project. Stark plans to film what she calls a hip-hop-inflected "pedagogical opera" based on Mozart's *Magic Flute*. The artist's videos and mixed-media

drawings have always muddled high and low in a very personal manner, whether she's presenting transcripts of erotic chats she had with foreign suitors—their grasp of English often comically tenuous—or collaborating with Bobby Jesus, a young man she befriended in L.A. and began mentoring, in a rather complicated way. (They joke that he came from the University of South Central, whereas Stark was teaching at the University of Spoiled Children.) *Modern Painters* executive editor Scott Indrisek met up with the artist in Stockholm to discuss the degradation of language and unwanted nudity on Instagram.

Scott Indrisek: Your Hammer show's title is "UH-OH." That's generally the sort of thing one says when something's gone wrong. What role have mistakes played in your practice?

Frances Stark: I thought of it less as an admission of having screwed up and more about the phenomenon of registering concern gutturally. There was an article in the *New Yorker* about the fault lines in the Pacific Northwest, and it had a sentence that several friends sent me: "the paradigm shifted to 'uh-oh.'" This is exactly where I feel we are culturally—from mind-boggling absurdities in the art market to the egregious philistinism of university 'disrupters.' But of course it also

Frances Stark in her L.A. studio, 2015.

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applies to my practice. Is it the artist's magical prerogative to say, "Oh, this fuck-up is OK but that one isn't?" Mistakes have played a role in my work, but more in terms of pursuing serendipitous developments. Surprises and accidents happen both physically and formally, in the realm of composition, but also socially—in terms of instigating new forms of collaboration.

SI: *How do words operate in your work—especially when you are reading them and hearing them at the same time—in terms of how a viewer pays attention?*

FS: All the chat-generated work comes out of the actual experience, where English as a second language is a dominant factor in what shapes it. You're looking at each other on video, but you're not speaking; you're typing. All the text is the way it is because you can see each other, but you're not speaking. And my sense is, this intimacy gained through texting, or sexting: That's a deep focus on language. If you're walking down the street, looking at your phone, you're in there, you've got to keep your eyeballs on it. I have so much pleasure from that. And I like being a control freak when editing the chats into a PowerPoint, like in *Osservate, leggete con me*. You have to look, or you're going to miss it. Reading is such a crucial part of engaging in the work.

SI: *Yet if texting has focused attention in a certain way, most people would argue that it has also degraded language.*

FS: It's definitely not high literature. But I'm talking about the formal influence, of observing a linguistic exchange and an energy exchange—a vibe that you can't put your finger on. I had issues with degraded language before I started getting into the chat work. I felt that, over the years, my studio visits were getting worse. The students, and I myself, were struggling with language. But the groping that would happen in a one-on-one mentor situation was, in fact, its own form of communication. Like saying, "you know what I mean? You know what I mean?"—it may be an absence of articulate specificity, but it's an urgent groping. As far as this simultaneity of recognizing a deterioration of language and, at the same time, a tremendous new focus on language... I remember when texting became cool. I was always a letter writer. And in letters you tried to impress people, to make subtle jokes, trying to control a reaction or have an effect. Then people became less interested in that subtle, close reading of the simplest gestures. But now, people are more expressive with that.

SI: *It's funny that you mention letters. It's interesting to think about your work in the context of a book like Chris Kraus's *I Love Dick*.*

FS: I think that book is brilliant and troubling, and I really identify with it—I used to be that kind of person.

SI: *When you're online, is it actually you, or just some version of you?*

FS: I am pretty close to what I say I am. But I haven't done the online thing for several years now. I guess I really only function online on Instagram [*@therealstarkiller*], and that's gotten less interesting to me as I've gotten more followers.

SI: *Your work is so much about words, yet you're not on Twitter.*

FS: I think I was afraid of it, and I got turned off by seeing it on CNN's



Frances Stark

FROM TOP:
Pull After "Push", 2010.
Mixed media
on canvas on panel,
69 x 89 in.

*Bobby Jesus's **Aima Mater** b/w *Reading the Book of David and/or Paying Attention Is Free*, 2013. Multichannel projection with sound, ink-jet mural, and takeaway offset posters.*

ticker tape. Social media has become more and more despicable, somehow. I had an amazing time with Instagram, but part of it was teaching Bobby Jesus composition: What is it like to decide that this is a better version than that? What does it mean to read your own life and way of seeing? I don't keep a written record of my life, and then I started keeping a visual one. Like how sex chats became an escape—taking photos became an escape, a shortcut: "I would like to write an essay, but how about a picture of that?" And for a while I was really negative, and putting negative shit out there. I also can't really be myself on Instagram, since my son and all his friends are looking at me. I'm not going to post pictures of my ass to get people to say "you have a nice ass!" The kind of things I was doing online before were very much behind closed doors. When I got to Instagram I thought, "Man, this place is nasty, keep it to yourself! I don't want to see your tits, art student! Fuck your tits, thank you!" It just grosses me out in that context. But I'm weirdly jealous, since I was such a queen in my own little sex world and I inadvertently accomplished

something for myself with that.

SI: *How did a piece like *My Best Thing* come about?*

FS: I'd started getting into video chats. It was a bad habit...Turkish guys. I would disappear. And my good friend, this designer who was working with me on my studio, he knew it. I started showing him screen grabs, funny texts, weird dick pics. I had to share with someone. And around that time, Marina Abramović was doing "The Artist Is Present." Someone made a Marina Abramović Made Me Cry Tumblr. My friend said, "We



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have to do a Tumblr: Frances Stark Made Me Cum.” This is how we would joke about it. Of course we never did it, but a year later, *My Best Thing* happened.

SI: *Marina is the godmother to the project! You’ve talked before about rights—like what right do you have to be a teacher. Abramović assumes every one of her gestures has some greater meaning. Most artists, of course, assume the right to say “this is my life, it’s important.” Do you struggle with doubt in that regard?*

FS: I’m a writer, and I put things into form—it’s not confessional. The reason it’s accessible is because it’s very carefully edited.

Nothing is raw confession. Everything is formal, a construction. I’m good at editing, and that’s why people enter into the work. There’s a delight in the form, and then you either get preoccupied with the autobiographical, or not. But I do struggle with—not about what invests me with authority but “why am I doing it in the first place?” And when you step outside of an institutional context and start modeling intelligent behavior to people like Bobby—the rewards are just so radically different. If he says to me, “I want an etymological dictionary for Christmas,” I think: My fucking job is done.

SI: *Some people seem to think your work, or your relationship with Bobby, is fraught in terms of race or class. But it also seems as if it’s just one person’s relationship with another—which somehow has to signify something larger.*

FS: For us it is symbolic, or we allow it to signify a crossing of paths, because of this idea of the University of South Central versus the University of Spoiled Children. What does it mean to be a student of the streets? And what does it mean to be a student of USC—for a whole group of 16 students who went there [the Roski School of Fine Arts], and suddenly learned something else about what the school really was? It was a crazy juncture, a radical paradigm shift in my world, and I have to think about that intersection. I’d probably be better off teaching in prison than teaching undergrads at USC!

SI: *You mention that part of your goal with the opera project you’ll make is to “manifest an erotics of pedagogy.”*

FS: It suggests that for certain kinds of learning and teaching, desire is often key, but not in the sense of “hot for teacher.” It is possible to flirt with your intelligence. In my work *Osservate*...there is quite a bit of this going on. There’s a whole passage taking apart a phrase, “100 stabs,” from a dance hall song; it means 100 *thrusts*, and this extreme sexual innuendo gets broken down and turned into a grammar lesson. It’s really about the joy of understanding and getting into a place where understanding is a dance and seduction is a part of that. As for *pedagogical opera*, a phrase which is apparently both very confounding and alluring, it can in some ways refer to something like Disney’s *Fantasia*—where there’s an informed narrator who might hold your hand a bit to alert you to the complexity of the form. My point is to dispel cynicism and distrust of the pedagogical impulse in art: I’m not trying to teach people, I’m trying to expose the experience of apprehension in a playful way.

SI: *Do you still have faith in art?*

FS: I wouldn’t say I believe in contemporary art, because I feel that I don’t. I believe in art with a capital A, maybe, in the old-fashioned sense—a whole spectrum, from Leonardo da Vinci to Henry Miller to Emily Dickinson—of what it means to transmit consciousness in a special, poeticized form. Whatever that might be. It could be “The Uncanny,” the show Mike Kelley curated at Tate Liverpool, using other people’s art to talk about his brain and a whole cultural history. Art is great! I do believe in art in the sense that it has value outside of the monetary. I’m a total romantic in that regard. Brutally. To the point of melancholy, if you want to go there. At a certain point, believing in art is also understanding that I have to stop trying to get a more comfortable position, and instead make decisions about how to actually get shit out of my brain and into the world. That’s the goal. MP