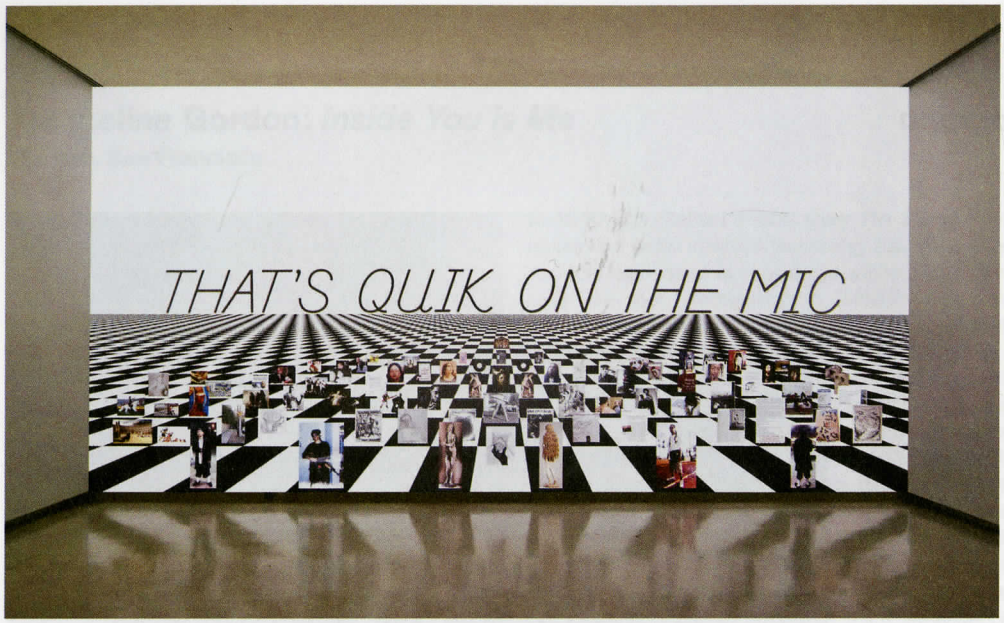

UH-OH: Frances Stark 1991-2015

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Exhibitionism, according to Merriam-Webster, has two definitions. One is "a perversion in which sexual gratification is obtained from the indecent exposure of one's genitals (to a stranger)." The second is less judgmental: "the act or practice of behaving so as to attract attention to oneself." The conflict within the very definition (is exhibitionism attractive or perverse?) highlights twin pressures faced by women to both perform and conceal their sexuality. Operating between these two definitions, Frances Stark exhibits her sexuality and, simultaneously, her shyness. In doing so, she bares all—her best things, her insecurities.

Birds, valiant yet frail, stand in for Stark in her collage work on display in her midcareer survey, *UH-OH: Frances Stark 1991–2015*, at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston [September 17, 2016–January 29, 2017]. A peacock figure frames the entrance to the exhibition—a creature that, like Stark, both flaunts and conceals. Elsewhere, in her 2008 drawing *The New Vision*, a female figure lifts her skirt to hide her face. It seems paradoxical, perhaps, to exhibit shyness; exhibiting is always an invitation to be both celebrated and shamed. It's asking to be seen, accepted, loved—and in so doing, it's opening oneself to rejection. Perhaps, then, exhibitionism is necessarily masochistic—and whether it is attractive or perverse is to be determined not by viewer but the exhibitor herself.

UH-OH's emphasis on Stark's two-dimensional work made these themes of revealing and concealment particularly pronounced. The MFA features wall after wall of Stark's collages, punctuated by video installation rooms—a comprehensive selection of work that dates back to her master's thesis show, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (1993). In this earliest work, we see the beginnings of the fangirl as producer. The artist created carbon transfers of a used copy of T.S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, lovingly and meticulously traced, marginalia and all, unaltered. Stark frequently makes work about her "favorites"—Friedrich Nietzsche, Emily Dickinson, Samuel Beckett—and, like a mixtape one makes for one's crush, reveals her intimate tastes in doing so. Reading, for Stark, is an intimate act, and her loving treatment of texts such as Eliot's is mirrored in her later treatment of the personal cybersex transcripts that inform her video work. ("For some perverts," notes Barthes in *The Pleasure of the Text*, "the sentence is a body.")

The term *fangirl* is often used derogatorily: it describes one who is naïve and uncritical enough to be excited (young), and who is a passive spectator (female). Stark's work proves this traditional perception obsolete: her fangirl is the producer of critical work. In the novel *Heroines* (2012), author Kate Zambreno notes that T.S. Eliot's still-dominant theories of depersonalized writing stipulated that "one cannot portray emotions in EXCESS (in literature or in life)." She continues, "This is a judgment not only of a work of literature but also of propriety, how one should behave. One must discipline one's text, one's self." In her brilliant work of metacriticism, Stark disregards precisely this notion of propriety, discipline, and composure; instead, she willfully "fangirls" all over his text. She exhibits her emotions—some would say in excess. Yet she remains fiercely critical throughout—particularly of the art world.

UH-OH marks the MFA's recent turn toward contemporary art, which was inaugurated with the exhibition's opening, along with a 24-hour party and a screening of Christian Marclay's *The Clock* (2010). The museum uninstalled its contemporary wing's permanent collection to make space for the show, which originated at the Hammer. It was extremely refreshing to see a playful, provocative show by a female artist receive such a prominent spot in a city whose institutions are famously characterized by old-school prestige and academia.

Yet as Stark reminded the followers of her Instagram account, @therealstarkiller, there is still a palpable divide between formal institution and experimental artist. In a post about this survey of her life's work, she wrote that it "was really awkward leaving the museum knowing that the merch deal I signed was so bad that to bring home a few free souvenirs would equal my entire profit of all the merch sales. Uh-Oh! Didn't learn these things in art school." Stark's students, however, did learn these things in art school—the hard way. Stark stepped down from her tenured position at the University of Southern California's Roski School of Art in 2014, a response to the institution's "lack of transparency or ethical behavior." The entire class of 2015 followed—a mass exodus—when their promised funding was retracted. Stark continues to teach, informally—her muse and mentor makes frequent appearances in her work. He's the subject of the video *Bobby Jesus's Alma Mater* (2013)—as the piece's subtitle notes, *paying attention is free*.

Stark's work frequently addresses the economic struggles of being an artist (and all other struggles that accompany being a mother, teacher, woman, reader, and writer). In *Osservate, Leggate con Me* (2012), a video made from Stark's cybersex transcripts, her Italian online lover responds to learning his correspondent is an artist by asking, "so you sell what you make? ... Isn't it hard? Like a whore, selling her own childs [sic]." In the same work, Stark unpacks the grammar and multiple meanings of "stab." This relates to what Stark calls her "pathological openness," which is perhaps more approachable to strangers than to loved ones—because it allows for intimacy without vulnerability. What harm can a stranger do with intimate details of one's life? What does it matter what they think of her?

Stark turned to cybersex transcripts during a period of writer's block. She realized that while spending hours on what she thought was an escapist activity—interacting with strangers on Chatroulette—she was actually writing all along. Stark makes work from and about laziness, lack of motivation or inspiration, and economic struggles—but crucially, she still makes work. In her feature-length digital animation *My Best Thing*, she speculates that "art is maybe the opposite of working in the sense that it is a form of resistance to productivity, as is masturbation, wasted seed." Yet she has made work from this unproductivity—from laziness, from masturbation—such that "putting out," however defined, in turn becomes output.

In *In Praise of Laziness* (1993), Mladen Stilinović regarding what he sees as the impossibility of making art under capitalism (as opposed to his native socialism), writes: "Laziness is the absence of movement and thought, dumb time—total amnesia. It is also indifference, staring at nothing, non-activity, impotence. It is sheer stupidity, a time of pain, of futile concentration. Those virtues of laziness are important factors in art. Knowing about laziness is not enough, it must be practiced and perfected. ... Artists in the West [thereby under capitalism] are not lazy and therefore not artists, but rather producers of something." One might wonder, with a bit of nostalgia, what Stilinović, who passed away this summer, would think of *UH-OH*. If Stark has brilliantly and paradoxically found a way to "produce something" out of her laziness, she has also successfully subverted the capitalist demand for productivity.

—Emily B. Watlington

ABOVE: Frances Stark, *Bobby Jesus's Alma mater b/w Reading the Book of David and/or paying Attention is Free*, 2013, multi-channel projection with sound, inkjet mural, and takeaway offset posters, 7:20 minutes (photo: Brian Conley; courtesy of Frances Stark and Marc Foxx Gallery, Los Angeles, and Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)