

Agnieszka Gratzka, "Frances Stark," *ArtReview*, May, 2012

ArtReview

FRANCES STARK

Art Review:

Frances Stark: *Osservate, Leggete con Me*
Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York
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If there's an art to virtual conversation, as there used to be an art to letter writing, Frances Stark is a past master at it. The latest of her shows to probe the format's conventions, *Osservate, Leggete con Me* comes hot on the heels of the artist's critically acclaimed digital animation *My Best Thing* (2011), in which she turned the modalities of sex-chatroom exchanges into artistic gold. The new works keep the episodic structure but dispense with the plastic Playmobil dolls clad in fig leaves or briefs that made for much of *My Best Thing's* appeal. Pared down to animated texts that spell out, in the manner of subtitles, the spoken exchanges between Stark and her would-be lovers, the two pieces making up this show, the eponymous *Osservate, Leggete con Me* and *Nothing Is Enough* (both 2012), arguably leave more to the imagination - but not a whole lot.

In keeping with the show's title - quoting from *Don Giovanni's* gleeful 'Catalogue' aria, to which the longer of the two digital video projections is set - the experience of viewing the work effectively amounts to reading the writing on the wall. A carefully orchestrated, if deliciously unpredictable, audiovisual parkour spans two adjoining gallery spaces: the first is fitted with an off-white couch for viewers to lounge on as their gaze travels from screen to screen and wall to wall with every new instalment of Stark's salacious Chatroulette romance; the second holds two rows of prim black benches that match the more sombre and contemplative mood of *Nothing Is Enough*, conveyed through rather plodding piano music that is scored by one of several partners the artist dallies with in the first one.

The contrast between these two time-based pieces, which last around 30 and 14 minutes respectively, is underscored by the inverted black-and-white colour scheme that makes one look like a negative image of the other. Whereas in the first gallery italicised white characters in the ornate Apple Chancery font (calling to mind a schoolgirl practising her calligraphy) appear on either side of a black screen, in the second gallery, black letters alternating between the

aforementioned font (reserved this time round for Stark's persona) and the more rigid Calibri font (given to her virtual lover) are projected against a white backdrop.

Taken as a whole, the discrete chat sequences involving nine or so partners - mostly young Italian men whose broken English contrasts with Stark's idiomatic and incisive turns of phrase - read like a *Dangerous Liaisons* adapted to these social-media-savvy times. Brevity being of the essence, snippets of conversation fade in and out of view at the speed of instant messaging in a ceaseless back-and-forth tit-for-tat, one liberally sprinkled with exclamation marks, Internet slang (omg, lol, rofl, wtf and the like) as well as the odd onomatopoeic outburst that would do Rabelais proud. Such delicate moral issues as virtual betrayal or jealousy are raised and just as soon brushed aside. In the final episode of *Nothing Is Enough*, Stark jokingly boasts to her partner in crime, for once linguistically her (near) equal, of having 'so many people to keep satisfied'. Not least her readers.

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