

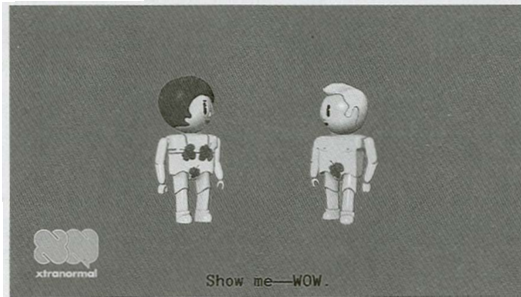
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Jenifer Papararo, "Frances Stark: I've Had It and a Half," *C Magazine*, April 17, 2011

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FRANCES STARK: I'VE HAD IT AND A HALF

THE HAMMER MUSEUM, LOS ANGELES
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BY JENIFER PAPARARO



I've Had it and a Half is a Frances Stark performance in

halves, one divided into parts and parts of parts, portioned up, segmented as if there could never be a whole. As if the pieces didn't have a unifying title, a beginning and an end, or even a sequential progression. It was made of parts and staged as a series of vignettes that seemed unsystematically ordered as if Stark had randomly pulled them from her hat, which she did at one interval.

There were no formal introductions, but as the lights dimmed and the hip-hop soundtrack receded, a six-piece string ensemble, which sat divided onstage, performed a *divertimento* by Haydn as simple lines of text appeared on an otherwise blank screen behind them. The music seemed metrically paced to the text, flowing in short, legible fragments. One section read, "Do you not agree that the reader is able to assimilate only one part at a time? Sometimes he reads two or three passages and never returns; and not mark you because he is not interested, but because of some totally extraneous circumstance; and even if he reads the whole thing, do you suppose for one moment that he has a view of it as a whole, appreciates the constructive harmony of the parts?"

By inaugurating the performance with these words, Stark acknowledged the audience's presence, predicting plausible distractions and slips in our attention, almost guaranteeing them. She seemed to be identifying a symptom of reading, defining a characteristic of the way we read or ingest information. It was comforting, as if our host was congenially relieving us of some sort of responsibility. It also seemed a generous acknowledgment with sincere intent to question her role as presenter and author, and ours as viewers and readers—and, as such, animating our respective positions and generating an uneasy awareness that we were as much characters in this performance as she was.

The opening text is a quotation from Witold Gombrowicz, not the first time Stark has referenced the Polish writer or this passage in particular. By quoting him, she quoted herself, appropriating his words as she referenced her own work. Similar to Gombrowicz, who stated, "I am writing about myself—I have no right to write about anything else," Stark became her own subject. As part of *I've Had it and a Half*, Stark screened video documentation of an earlier performance gutted of any actual words to leave only her verbal tics, and the pauses, the "ums" and



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herself. This single or multifaceted re-verberating subject is still uncertain and I think better left undefined, but it increases in density the more Stark shows her vulnerabilities. The disclosure of her process is synonymous with exposing herself, whether or not this is done by divulging a discontinuous list of insecurities or by intimately drawing us into her personal relationships.

This latest performance didn't deviate from such an approach, but it does mark a turning point. Formally dressed in a fitted, black, cropped suit, complete with hat and tie, Stark took to the stage to address the audience directly, asking us not to take photographs because of the performance's intimate nature. She said we would soon know why.

Again the ensemble began to play and text appeared on the screen behind them. This time it's a transcription of an online conversation between Stark and someone she had met on the Internet. Almost immediately it is evident that their relationship is sexual in nature. "Hey. You have clothes on you?" "Yes. I'm working." This is not the first time they have met, as there is a casual candour to the conversation, but they are still getting to know each other. "What do you work at?" "I am an artist." They send each other images. Stark sends, *Why should you not be able to assemble yourself and write?*, a collage she made a few years ago. It is an aerial view of the artist sitting upright in bed with her knees bent and holding a note that contains the same text as the title.

They talk about her career as an artist; the other person wants to know more and after a "hmm," she sends her website's URL. He likes the work. The conversation progresses, turning briefly to sex online; they sullenly come to the conclusion that two monologues don't make a dialogue. He should let her work. She says, "I am working." He retorts, "fucking artists." Stark interrupted their interchange by getting back onstage to show some images, which she presented as a series of rapidly rotating files that randomly stopped on a single shot. She spoke to whichever image appeared. It was like playing roulette, and a definite reference to the website Chatroulette. However, this game of hers wasn't designed to give us information, but went back to the opening sentiment of acknowledging that we are only witnessing parts and not a

whole, and that these arbitrary fragments might be even more relevant than some understanding of the relationships between them. When the projector indiscriminately stopped on an image of *The New Vision*, a simple black-and-white collage and line drawing that somewhat

absurdly has the subject raising her skirt to reveal her breasts, Stark simply said, "that's my work," and then feigned lifting a skirt to reveal herself as if that's all it takes. This affected yet simple gesture could aptly stand as a metaphor for Stark's drive to unveil herself, her work, her process; but it also seems too facile. Rather, I've had it and a Halis a complex sequencing of exposures that leaves little separation between the personal and the professional. It's not that Stark's personal life has become the focus of her practice, because her work is also her subject, but it's the way they blend and that her source of inspiration seems too intimate to be professional. As the pieces accumulate, we come to understand that she has engaged in many online sexual relationships over the previous year, and that these connections have been her main incentive for working; "this experience makes me want to write." We also find out that she has ended all of them, except one. Using Xtranormal, a free 3D-movie making software, Stark animated and transcribed a portion of a conversation with her only remaining muse. And he is definitely a muse. They all have been. Animated as a stout blond man wearing a fig leaf, he suggests at one point in their conversation, in a computer-generated Italian accent, that she see "uhs" turned her disfluencies into content. There is no doubt the montage was comical, but witnessing her fugitive thoughts played back to back in such mass was also unsettling and almost painful. Who hasn't tried to capture a thought by stammering through a series of "ahs"? But why reveal the extreme of this nervous babble? Not simply as a point of identification, or she wouldn't have taken it so far.

Questioning her own production, her relationship to art-making and writing, and her self-identification as an artist and writer has been the instigation for much of Stark's work, as well as a point of struggle. It's also means for battling her relevance against her inadequacies and counter-intuitively acts as a means of determining a subject that centres on her as an author, but which also resonates beyond 8½ by Fellini. The artist is also rendered in 3D, naked except for three fig leaves, and responds with a promise to watch it. Stark subsequently extended this short animation into *My Best Thing*, an hour and 45 minute video that premiered at this year's Venice Biennale, and which transformed the vignette into a whole with new parts of its own.

Yes, the parts again take precedent.

Since they are all that can be perceived, why attempt to represent the whole? If

it is whole, then it is complete. But that

seems to defy the nature of Stark's par-

tioned performance, as well as under-writes the possibility of witnessing what has been disclosed. Just because you lift up your skirt doesn't mean I'm going

to see everything. As one of her online

friends states, "the more you get naked

the less obvious you are." I'm not sure how to sum up my experience of Stark's performance, except to highlight this sentiment. While I now know intimate things about Stark, that isn't where I derive

meaning. I find her inspiring in part for her unwavering disclosures, but more for her desire to produce, for her synchro-

nized questioning of that drive, and for her fearless ambition to tangle with structures that aren't settled. The arbitrary structure of *Chatroulette* reflects a process already embedded in Stark's practice—one that builds meaning by assembling parts out of chance.

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