

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Zachary Cahill, "Frances Stark," *Artforum*, October, 2015

ARTFORUM

Frances Stark

THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO



Frances Stark, *this is not exactly a cat video: w/David Bowie's "Star Man,"* 2006, video, color, sound, 10 minutes 9 seconds.

For all its investment in media technology, "Intimism," the first survey to home in on Frances Stark's digitally based work, was at its heart a writerly exhibition. Stark weaves text through numerous media, from drawing to video to (in this instance) the museum's Instagram feed, even applying something like an essayistic approach to designing her exhibition layout—a strategy that Charles Ray, an early mentor, once described to the artist as "writing in space." While the resulting show readily displayed Stark's playfulness and undeniable joie de vivre, it had an equally undeniable dark side—much of her work situates itself squarely at the seductive but shadowy nexus of hypercommunication, celebrity culture, sex, and late capitalism.

Curated by Kate Nesin, "Intimism" was one of the best uses of the museum's designated contemporary-art space in recent memory. The exhibition's title referred to a fin de siècle movement within painting that focused on intimate scenes of everyday life. Stark's employ of Intimism extended to the literal. In the first room of the exhibition, the artist hung the Art Institute of Chicago's painting *Madame Vallotton and her Niece, Germaine Aghion*, 1899, by Félix Edouard Vallaton. The work, a placid painting of an infant playing while an adult looks on, served as a kind of domestic emblem of the show. The quiet scene it depicts was undercut by the interjections of Stark's own child making a ruckus in a video playing in an adjacent room.

In two other rooms, respectively, the digital projection *Nothing Is Enough*, 2012, served as a subdued counterpoint to the video *Osservate, leggete con me* (Look, Read Along with Me), 2012, a line-by-line text duet of sorts set in the key of a romantic farce, with excerpts from the artist's chat-room conversations (taken from chats similar to those that provided the text for Stark's well-known 2011 video *My Best Thing*) and an accompanying aria from Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. The somber and nearly

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elegiac *Nothing Is Enough* (also playing on the form of textual duet) alludes to the hangover Stark experienced after the wide acclaim she received for *My Best Thing* (screened twice during the run of the show), for which the artist became “famous for having sex with Italian guys on the internet,” as she reflectively notes in *Nothing Is Enough*.

A suite of ten elegant ink drawings, *Clever/Stupid Pirouettee*, 2014, which recalls at once Barnett Newman’s zip paintings and a weather vane, carried the air of artistic self-consciousness but remained nonetheless buoyant in its effect. Across the hall in a separate exhibition space, the video *Bobby Jesus’s Alma Mater b/w Reading the Book of David and/or Paying Attention Is Free*, 2013, aligned text with a sprawling iconology drawn from Stark’s personal life, alongside rap lyrics and art-historical allusions. The “stage” on which these reference points coexisted, executed in forced vanishing-point perspective upon the museum’s wall, looked like a crazy-quilt chessboard as the projections danced upon the vinyl wall treatment. With its staccato beat tied to the delivery of the intertitles, the work strikes a defiant pose, functioning as an after-the-fact rejoinder to Stark’s detractors in the aftermath of her abrupt departure from her tenured faculty position at USC last winter.

Thinking through the complexity of ideology and language in his book *The Pleasure of the Text*, Roland Barthes writes, “To keep these spoken systems from disturbing or embarrassing us, there is no other solution than to inhabit one of them.” This is what makes Stark’s work so critical to an understanding of our contemporary experience. She is not simply discussing technology, the endless encroachment into our intimate lives by capitalism, and the erotics of hypercommunication; she is inhabiting these zones and writing herself into these systems.

—Zachary Cahill