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Mara Sartore, "Music is different: an interview with Frances Stark," *My Art Guides*, October, 2015

My Art Guides[®]

Stockholm - Interviews

Music is different: an interview with Frances Stark

During my stay in Stockholm for the [Absolut Art Award 2015](#), I had the chance to interview the winner for the "Art Work" section [Frances Stark](#).

Mara Sartore: When I interview artists I am always very curious about the beginning of their careers, how did you start being an artist? Where you born an artist or did something happen in your life, how did you start practicing and creating?

Frances Stark: When I was fourteen I got into Punk Rock, and that was in 1981, Punk Rock was a fresh, vibrant, "do-it-yourself" scene. I was also getting very into reading and my father turned me on to the writer Henry Miller and I got really immersed into his way of seeing that was my first vision of what an artist was: not someone who shows in an art gallery or makes a bunch of money or is famous or anything like that, but someone who just looks, or in his case looks at America and what makes it tick and critiquing it and living life...anyway he was a model for me and what an artist was. After I was really inspired by him I became a letter writer and it wasn't until when I was years into college studying the humanities and intellectual history that I started taking art classes and learning about contemporary art. My interest in philosophy and writing and reading and the visual sub-cultures that I was invested in very nicely all merged together in this other area, in this other field called art.



My letter writing as a teenager was the beginning of my artist's voice and then once I had already been exposed to contemporary art and I was attracted to the L.A. art scene, I saw a talk by Mike Kelly in San Francisco, so I went to graduate school to study with Mike Kelley and Stephen Prina. That was the draw for me.

That was the start of making work, but I started writing long letters when I was just a teenager. I would make special envelopes for the letters. I would sit with my friends and do drawings, listen to music, even make our own music and write letters about it all. I was really immersed in all kind of things as a young person but the idea of me becoming a visual artist with a unique style was never a thing.

MS: What about your first show, do you remember it?

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FS: The first show I did was with my grandmothers polaroids which I had been re-photographing and it was called “Me Edith”, I even have those words in her handwriting tattooed on my arm. I was learning about post-modernism and being exposed to the pictures’ generation. I went to visit my grandmother once and she gave me a giant baggie full of her polaroids — and she’s had a Polaroid camera since when Polaroids had bellows —she was a consumer of that technology from the start. The picture that inspired this tattoo was a Polaroid she had taken as a way of “reviving” an old sepia toned print of her younger self in a bathing suit. In this very charming image, dating to probably 1916, she was young and not as big as we were used to seeing her. She propped the sepia toned print up on her kitchen table which had a vinyl table cloth and she snapped a polaroid of the original and then wrote Me Edith on the back like she was somehow anticipating that the viewer wouldn’t recognize her. I was very struck by this.



Quick Phone. Courtesy of the artist

MS: Did you see this gesture as an artistic one?

FS: Exactly, so I made this art show using all her Polaroids to explore that. She would take photographs of the TV for example, it was some kind of primitive VCR to record momentous televised events, or a way to possess a photograph of a celebrity from this special distance. The pictures offered an incredible glimpse into her world. She would take a picture of flowers on Monday and write the date and then take one of the flowers on Tuesday and do the same. It was a remarkable view into her domestic experience.

MS: Was it a group show or a solo show?

FS: It was a solo show, I got the whole place which had black walls and it was all for me: I made my little invitation on Page Maker, or whatever the technology was at the time. This would be 1990 and it was in San Francisco in a warehouse South of Market.

MS: The other thing I am very curious about is the relationship between your teaching career and your artist career.

FS: Artist teachers have a history of being a big deal in L.A. All my art school experiences came out of very dominant models of L.A. figures like John Baldessari, Michael Asher and then I studied with Mike Kelly, Stephen Prina, Liz Larner, Lita Albuquerque ...L.A. was about really interesting artists who were teachers. As a young person I kind of worshipped teachers, I loved my English teacher and I thought teachers were great so when I was sixteen or seventeen I guess I just assumed that is what I would eventually do. I taught at many schools once I earned my MFA and had a great experience as a visiting artist at USC and I felt really supported by the faculty. It was very vital and it was growing and so I applied for a tenure track position — and got it— which is quite prestigious in the states. Having an opportunity to be plugged into that particular community of high quality colleagues and students really fueled me. The nine years I spent at USC were hugely influential in

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my practice.

MS: Your art is deeply connected with music and embraces very different genres: from Rap to Punk Rock and Classical like Mozart's Magic Flute. So I'd like to know more about how you're going to work on this opera and also about what happened with Dj Quik who was meant to work with you but eventually declined your request.

FS: The general interest in music is reflected in my practice over the years; one phrase that pops up occasionally is "Music is different". When you look the role that musical instruments played in those early cubist collages, there seems to be a kind of envy of music's dimensionality. It's a durational medium that is invisible but actually touches you inside, how does that happen? I think visual artists envy that power. Contemporary art's system of meaning making and meaning distribution just can't reach that kind of exalted union between the author and the audience. But also, based on my background, I was very contrary towards Pop music with my attitude, because I liked difficult things or certain sounds that were harder, weirder or experimental and through Punk I was introduced to all kinds of music. When I was fourteen and the punk rock thing to do was go see Clockwork Orange and you'd suddenly discover the extreme Rossini and Beethoven selection in that soundtrack and also Wendy Carlos, so understanding even just from Clockwork Orange as a fourteen year old that you can have different genres next to each other...I got my musical education from my interest in subcultures and a lot of those people for example X-Ray Specs, the Punk band. there was a fifteen year old girl writing critical lyrics about commercial culture and observations of society; I associated quite heavily. These were my models...Poly Styrene, Siouxsie Sioux and Exene Cervenka — then I got into the Velvet Underground. Music opened up this whole world of poetry and criticality and expressiveness and historical allusions. I learned history through music and you also learn about ugly history through music. Music was my education and so today, in the current cultural landscape of America, where suddenly with the nation's first African-American president we see a reigniting of incredibly sinister racist forces and at a time when there isn't any new Rock on the radio, mainstream hip hop is far from 'conscious' and not very musical. I have a kid and we listen to the radio in the car when we drive in L.A. and that's part of growing up, having a child exposes you to what pop culture is trying to shove down everybody's throat. When you have a kid Pop culture and mainstream culture is very very real, very very in your face and you can't escape it. You can't escape into the avant-garde, you have to be witnessing whatever mainstream is. DJ Quik stood out on the radio, he's a brilliant producer, wickedly smart rapper and extremely musical. I read an interview with DJ Quik and he was saying that people aren't listening closely anymore. He said that he thought that people aren't into art for art's sake and that he wanted to move to a field outside of Hip Hop where he could be relevant. When I read that I realized

But I don't know if people are really into that anymore, you know, like art for art's sake? They don't get it. Like I say, my talents are being wasted in hip hop right now.
-DJ Quik

Quik Text. Courtesy of the artist



Quik Play. Courtesy of the artist