

Left: Frances Stark, *Put a Song in Your Thing*, 2011. Performance view, Abrons Art Center, Performa 11, New York, November 4, 2011. Skerrit Bwoy and Frances Stark. Photo: Paula Court.

Opposite page: Frances Stark, *Push After "Pull After Push"*, 2010, mixed media on panel, 69 x 89".



# Friends with Benefits

MARK GODFREY ON THE ART OF FRANCES STARK

OVER THE PAST TWO YEARS, Frances Stark has created an extraordinary series of new works that stage frank, funny, and often bawdy encounters with figures ranging from avant-garde-film scions to dance-hall stars. Through these interlocutions—some virtual, some actual—Stark has expanded her career-long cross-media exploration of the pressures and pleasures of life as an artist, one in which the confes-

sional mode serves as a conduit to wry insights into the workings of the art world. Beginning with her acclaimed film *My Best Thing*, 2011, and continuing through more recent projects such as the sound piece *Trapped in the VIP and/or in Mr. Martin's Inoperable Cadillac*, 2012, curator Mark Godfrey illuminates Stark's investigations of technology and desire and her inimitable reconfigurations of critique and performance.

**Stark regards the social and economic structures of the art world from within, with an exasperated sigh, a resigned shrug, but also gratitude.**

Frances Stark, *Put a Song in Your Thing*, 2011. Performance view, Abrons Art Center, Performa 11, New York, November 4, 2011. Frances Stark. Photo: Paula Court.



A COUPLE OF YEARS AGO, on her way to a class she was teaching at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, Frances Stark came upon her students gathered raptly before a computer screen in a hallway. They were playing with Chatroulette—the free online forum where users are randomly connected to other users and can decide whether to begin a communication or “spin again,” i.e., look for someone else. With webcams and mics, you and your online partner can see and speak to each other, but often it’s easier to begin a typed chat. People all across the world are still using this site as you read these words. Go to the website and you’ll discover that a large proportion are young men wanking.

Intrigued by what she’d seen, Stark got back to her studio and started playing around on the site; over the following months, she became quite obsessed with it. The website surely grabbed her attention for a few reasons. As an artist who has always been interested in language and forms of address, and as someone who had split her time between making art and writing, she recognized immediately that her typed chats, while in some ways recalling Socratic dialogues, were a new kind of text, with particular conditions and conventions. The transcripts were full of new acronyms; there were frequent miscommunications between her and her partners, thanks to their varying command of English; and many dialogues were typed out with one hand while the other was otherwise occupied. Stark has

also been interested for many years in self-exposure and preening pageantry: She has made several collages where peacocks seem to stand as figures for the artist, as well as PowerPoint presentations where she confesses her most private feelings about the professional demands made on her. Going onto Chatroulette involved a different kind of exposure: She knew that the way to keep chat partners from spinning again was to show some flesh. Before long, she was having camera-to-camera sex with strangers, and doing all this in what should have been studio-work time. Yet being distracted and wasting time was nothing new, either—Stark’s earlier works and texts are full of self-rebuke about her frequent inability to get going with a writing commission or a show. She previously asked what it might mean for artistic work to be nonproductive and has represented the studio as a place where stuff accumulates, where paper clutters up into stacks of to-dos that never get done as, for example, in the collage *Push After “Pull After Push”*, 2010, representing the wall of her studio, full of source images but no actual works, and *Pull After “Push”*, 2010, featuring a collaged rendering of herself lounging on a chaise against a background that seems only half sketched out.

But just as works and texts have always emerged from the studio, even if they have dramatized the unlikelihood of their completion, something *did* get made from all Stark’s distracted hours spent in online chats—indeed, a feature-length film, made to pre-

miere at the 2011 Venice Biennale. The piece, *My Best Thing*, 2011, has probably become Stark’s best-known work, a veritable hit. It is divided into ten and a half chapters and follows in sequence two sets of dialogues Stark had with two Internet partners over a number of months. Stark used the typescript (somewhat edited) from her actual conversations, but decided to represent the characters using the free software Xtranormal. With this program, you can select avatars and choose voices for them; you can pick backgrounds and “camera angles” and then type in texts, and at the press of the button the animated avatars say to each other whatever you’ve typed. Stark presented herself as a Playmobil girl kitted out, Eve-like, in a fig-leaf bikini. The two men—the first named Marcello and the second the unnamed son of an avant-garde filmmaker—were Playmobil boys, Marcello in a fig leaf, the second in Y-fronts, both with computerized Italian accents. The background is a default green monochrome—a verdant Eden of sorts, but also a kind of green screen, a representation of the no-place where the dialogues occurred.

*My Best Thing* takes its name from Marcello’s nickname for his penis, which from time to time he offers to show Stark. The film begins with sex, and right from the outset it is laugh-out-loud funny, not only because of the brazen crudity of the dialogue but because there is such a gap between the content of the language and the images of the two stubby Playmobil characters, with their very basic facial

expressions. From these beginnings, the dialogue shifts to all manner of subjects: Stark tells Marcello about her love of Beenie Man and dancehall and sends him a video (incorporated in the animation) of the song "Gimme Gimme," which shows a parade of girls from around the world dancing for the boasting pop star; Marcello tells her to watch *8 1/2*, and she comes to identify with the tortured director in Fellini's film who shoots himself because he cannot face explaining his work—explaining it away, he feels—at a press conference. She describes her anxieties about making a work for the Biennale, and Marcello speaks about the impact of the recession in Italy. It is clear he is a political activist; after the dialogue goes dead for a period, he reappears saying that he has been in the hospital after having been beaten by police. When he disappears again, his place in the dialogue is taken up by the second man, with whom Stark has more sex. By now she is figuring out how to turn these very dialogues into a work and is wondering what it will mean to show this material in Venice. How will she hold the attention

of an audience that needs to move on every ten minutes, what with the social pressures to meet and greet and the anxieties they will feel about missing all the other art? She and the man share thoughts on books and authors, from Jacques Rancière to David Foster Wallace, wondering why so many writers kill themselves. Stark begins to talk about whether masturbation is a kind of resistance to being productive, a time-wasting activity without product, and the guy lays waste to her theories.

As her piece was being feted at Venice, the artist was already busy preparing her next piece, a commission for Performa called *Put a Song in Your Thing*, 2011. The fig-leafed female avatar from *My Best Thing* opened the proceedings, loosening up the audience with a joke; soon after, her place was taken by a projection of Stark during a performance given the previous year, at the Wheeler Opera House in Aspen, Colorado. Stark had cut away all the primary "content" of the Aspen performance to create a monologue of *ums*, *ers*, and *aahs*—language waste, just as she has used paper waste (the bills, forms, and junk

mail scattered around her studio) to make collages that communicate the exhaustion resulting from navigating a world of bureaucratic administration. The artist herself appeared onstage shortly, but behind a scrim, standing before a huge stack of speakers constructed by her sometime collaborator Mark Leckey. Bass-heavy sounds washed over her body as she stood totally still and silent. Texts were projected, all touching on the challenges artists face to perform. As I watched these proceedings, it dawned on me that Stark, in her recent works, was refusing the live conventions of performance art, letting animated or recorded images of her stand in her place, or appearing behind screens.

More than an hour into all this, the pace quickened. Stark projected another Internet dialogue about dancehall and then showed a YouTube clip about daggering, a dancehall craze where dancers simulate particularly energetic sex. Then onto the stage came Skerrit Bwoy, one of daggering's megastars. Now, for the first time, we heard Stark's live voice, coming from offstage, reading a letter about



Four stills from Frances Stark's *My Best Thing*, 2011, digital video, color, sound, 100 minutes.

She told him he made her feel like she was watching a Godard film. She expressed adoration which he deflected with reasons why she shouldn't like him, e.g. "Remember Mickey Mouse? I have raped him!"



For all Stark's disarming lack of inhibition, her unrequested confession, we are as far as can be from the old tropes of expressionism or angst-ridden self-portraiture.

Frances Stark, *Put a Song in Your Thing*, 2011. Performance views. Abrons Art Center, Performa 11, New York, November 4, 2011. Skerrit Bwoy and Frances Stark. Photos: Paula Court.



how she and Skerrit Bwoy had met by chance on a plane and about her invitation to him to collaborate. Soon after, Skerrit Bwoy left the stage and Stark entered, costumed as a rotary phone. After some contretemps involving Lady Gaga's song "Telephone," Skerrit Bwoy reentered, the sound track changed to dancehall, and the daggering began. He bent Stark (now in a nude bodysuit) over, rammed his pelvis against her, swung her around and upside down. But in the end, and in a reversal of daggering norms, it was Skerrit Bwoy lying on the floor by the front seats and Stark jumping from the stage to land astride him and finish the performance with the final stab.

Like many others, I left the Performa event amused, in shock, confused, not quite knowing how to make a sum of all the parts. But for the moment I will put on hold all the questions this performance and *My Best Thing* raise (not least, what it means for Stark to collaborate in what might seem a most misogynistic form of contemporary dance) and move on to her next outing. At Gavin Brown's Enterprise in New York this past spring, she occupied two large rooms and positioned an L-shaped sofa in the first. A sequence of nine dialogues with new conversation partners was projected, as changing lines of white text—the font was exquisitely matched to the subject, with each letter leaning toward the next as if in a desire to connect—were directed onto the four walls in turn. The piece, *Osservate, leggete con me* (Observe, Read Along with Me), 2012, was titled after a phrase from *Don Giovanni's* "Catalogue Aria," in which Leporello enumerates how many women his master has slept with in France, Germany, Turkey, Italy, and so on—shades of "Gimme Gimme." An instrumental rendition formed the sound track to the piece.

The dialogues themselves varied in subject: terms for sex organs in English and Italian; Marcello and *My Best Thing*; the "bad situation" in Europe; "u want to see my cock?"; daggering; the pressures Stark feels from galleries. A Spanish man who has found himself working at Subway despite his training in video production claims, "Earning money with art is like two opposite ideas," and Stark defends her position: "Hey I'm not beholden to my collectors." Stark's next companion is a model, and she reveals to him that she has brought the Spanish Subway worker over to LA to be her new studio assistant! The final dialogue, no more than a bit of text foreplay, has Stark apparently reconnecting with a previous virtual partner who is feeling pretty vulnerable. There is a powerful attraction, but both question whether one more virtual fuck is really that "innocent" or an act of infidelity to their actual partners. The man's last line, "this shit is unreal," hovers between a puerile affirmation of the chat's power and

a poignant and tragic confirmation that in all these interactions, when the webcam shuts down, the participants are alone.

The accompanying work in the Gavin Brown show, *Nothing Is Enough*, 2012, complicated this vision of solitude and disconnection, undoing it in one way and reinforcing it in another. Another projected dialogue, the work was nevertheless the product of a number of collaborations rather than just a representation of conversations. The sound track was supplied by the Y-fronted character in *My Best Thing*, as discussed in *Osservate*, and edited by the Spanish Subway worker after he became Stark's assistant. The text was a dialogue with an Italian architect. So in a very real way, three men joined with Stark as authors of the work. But in the dialogue, Stark and her partner are in a rather dark place. Sex chat has become an obsession, and it's getting uncomfortable; Stark acknowledges that somehow this is a world from which she can't extricate herself. The Internet has created desires that are so strong that, for the man, "Nothing is enough." For Stark, if her sex chats started out as a way of evading studio work, just a year later they have *become* her work, for which she is paid and celebrated.

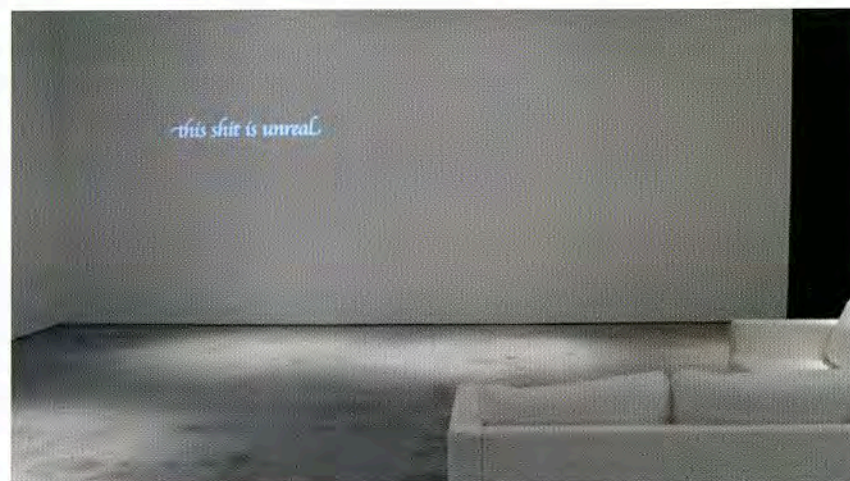
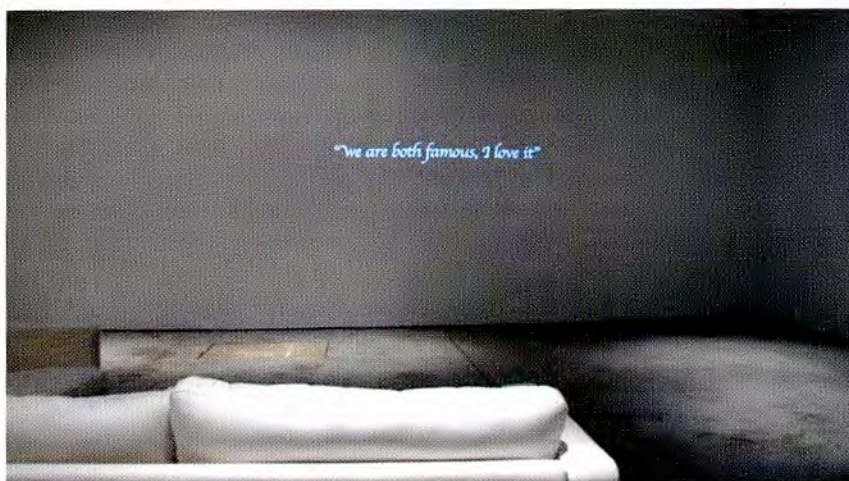
"HOW TO CREATE URGENCY TODAY?" Just before she discovered Chatroulette, Stark was invited to make an insert for *Parkett* and turned her contribution into a reflection on this question, which the journal's US editor at the time, Bettina Funcke, had posed in a text. There are many reasons why the string of works since *My Best Thing* seem so urgent to me. Let's start with the honest and astute ways they address the situation of artistic practice within the art world today.

In her writings and in her artworks as a whole, Stark has often confronted the realities of professional life for the artist: the astronomical debt from art-school fees, having to teach and to answer others' questions when you really need to be asking questions of your own work, the pressure to contribute to group shows, and so on. She has looked back to the writings of Daniel Buren and to Alighiero Boetti's complaint that the artist is expected to be at once shaman and showman; she has also come at these questions from the viewpoint of a feminist and a mother. But *My Best Thing* and the works that have followed bring new depth to Stark's nuanced representations of the anxieties of creativity and her investigations of the contexts and structures in and through which contemporary art is commissioned, exhibited, and distributed. *My Best Thing* revolved around the worries about completing a work to premiere in Venice and the artist's concerns about audience attention spans; *Put a Song in Your Thing* seemed until later on to have been in part a resistant

*famous for meeting italian guys on the internet*

**you are the artist n. 1 I fucked in internet**

Two stills from Frances Stark's *Nothing Is Enough*, 2012, digital video, black-and-white, sound, 14 minutes.



Frances Stark, *Osservate, leggete con me* (Observe, Read Along with Me), 2012, three-channel digital video, black-and-white, sound, 29 minutes 34 seconds. Installation views, Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York.

response to the parameters and conventions of Performa; and in *Osservate* we hear about the pressures gallerists exert on the artist to produce even as they announce a sale.

Instead of offering distanced critique, Stark regards the social and economic structures of the art world from within, with an exasperated sigh, a resigned shrug, but also gratitude, knowing that she depends for a living on commissions and sales, that many would trade their problems for hers, and that for thoughtful conversation about her work, she relies on her relationships with gallerists, curators, and collectors. Her superhonest take is a fresh kind of institutional critique—fresh because she wrests it away from being an orgy of art-world hand-wringing. Andrea Fraser's recent works have a similar honesty; like Stark, she refuses to see the "institution" in a monolithic way, and she also confesses her own

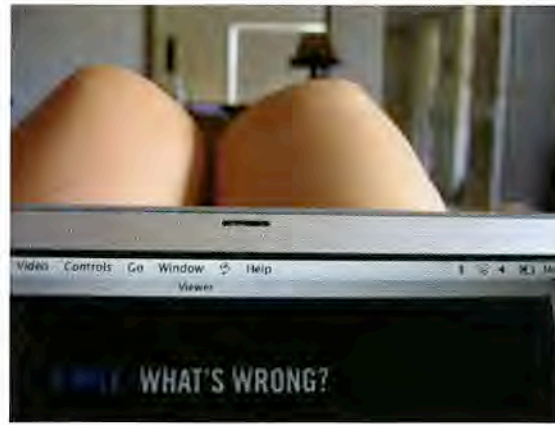
implication in the art world's economies, and her related fears and desires. But whereas Fraser's works and texts tend to be addressed to gallery viewers and art-world readers, Stark has created (or maybe stumbled into) situations where she ends up explaining, lamenting, and defending the art world to strangers who have had absolutely no contact with it, and their smart questions have the effect of making her viewers from the art world look at its structures anew.

Still, as much as these works address artmaking and the art world in general, the focus is on Stark herself. It is hard to think of another artist so nakedly present in his or her work, and it can seem staggering that Stark is so willing to disclose intimate details. She says, "There's just no separation for me in terms of what is personal and what is my art." But for all the disarming lack of inhibition, the unrequested confession, we are as far as can be from the old tropes

of expressionism, or angst-ridden self-portraiture, or the kind of privately autobiographical art that is so annoyingly off-putting (think of Tracey Emin, for example). How does Stark manage this? Partly it is to do with the way she presents herself—as a simple outlined figure in earlier drawings or as a Playmobil avatar—so that we aren't looking at a tortured image of the artist, but a dumb stand-in. Partly it is by making her work with programs and materials anyone can use—from Xtranormal animation to PowerPoint to collages done with stencils and scraps of mail. Since there is no mystery around the processes of making, however intimate their subject, Stark's works never seem inaccessible or private. Stark plays on a further twist: Just as she uses the everyday devices of a screen-based culture (PowerPoint, for instance), so she realizes that this culture is in fact obsessed with the confessional, and that as subjects

Just as Stark uses the everyday devices of a screen-based culture, so she realizes that this culture is in fact obsessed with the confessional.

Two stills from Frances Stark's *Structures That Fit My Opening* (and other parts considered in relation to their whole), 2006, PowerPoint presentation, color, sound, 25 minutes.



C R Y

we are increasingly expected to display our "private" tastes and to gawk at others' intimate confessions. In this context, to reveal her own penchants (whether for Italians or dancehall stars) is not to make any claims about her special status, but just to take her place among other subjects. All of which is to say that Stark, within the work, is so self-reflexive about her approach to putting life into art, raising narcissism to the level of a theme, referring to herself as "the attention whore," that it's impossible to feel alienated by the work's personal content.

As for the content of her disclosures, as well as thoughts about making and displaying art, Stark confronts us with the details of her virtual sexual life, with her evident pleasure in hours spent looking at naked men from around the world, and with her dancehall obsession, inviting us to join her in figuring out what to make of all this. She is brutally honest in a way few artists have dared to be about the complexities and contradictions of desire and about the ways the Internet has created new opportunities and appetites. Far from wishing to produce a critique of the way sex is represented in the culture, she has no qualms about showing how sexy she finds a Beenie Man video, for all its apparent misogyny. She lays herself open to the charge that she is exoticizing dancehall, but the truth is that beyond her attraction lies considered thought about the identification between herself and the dancehall stars. Identification militates against exoticization. Beenie Man is a kind of mirror image of Stark; Skerrit Bwoy, meanwhile, stands as the star of a cultural form that is amazing to Stark because it is at once so theatrical (dagging is, after all, a hyperbolic performance of sex) and so unapologetic. The artifice and perhaps the sheer outrageousness appeal to her, given her sense that artists are always performing for their audiences; maybe it is years spent in self-policing art schools that drew Stark to this absolute lack of guilt.

But for me, the most urgent aspect of these works

is the way Stark connects Internet sex to political and economic contexts and how, against the odds, she imagines a movement from disenfranchised disenchantment to the promise of community. Marcello's beating makes clear that he is involved with radical politics and that this has gotten him into trouble; the other men whose words appear in *Osservate* may not take such bold measures, but they are evidently affected by the rising unemployment across recession-struck Europe. In settings where we aren't usually asked to think of unrest and unemployment (the Venice Biennale or a New York gallery), Stark prompts us to consider that the reason so many kids are online in chat rooms is that they are out of a job. There are other artists whose works confront the global economic crisis, sure, but Stark comes at it from an unexpected angle, and far from being didactic or dry, she produces work that is funny and self-questioning at the same time as it shows the imbrication of this crisis, and other sociopolitical matters, in the fabric and language of our everyday lives.

Stark is not starry-eyed about virtual social connections. Some of her partners view her (only half-jokingly) as a "fucking American girl that doesn't speak Esperanto because she thinks that English is the best" and are bitter about the presumed cultural and economic superiority of the US. And virtual social life is never presented as the antidote to loneliness. Quite the opposite—witness the rather somber tone of *Nothing Is Enough*. But the overridingly optimistic claim of these works is that from today's conditions of defeat and disconnection might spring a form of connectedness that is nothing like the Facebook version of networked friendship, because it is beyond the reach of commercialization. Stark represents this new form of community in these works not only by playing dialogues where complex ideas are shared between strangers who happened to discover each other by a simultaneous will to masturbate—but also by opening up her production to

new forms of collaborative authorship. Stark has previously worked with artist friends (Leckey, Paulina Olowska, and others), but in the recent works, her conspirators come from disparate backgrounds. In terms of their authorship, these works serve as a model for the kind of community that the works concern on the level of their content.

**A MONTH OR SO** after the Gavin Brown exhibition, Stark presented another commissioned work for a new context: *Trapped in the VIP and/or in Mr. Martin's Inoperable Cadillac*, 2012, a sound piece to be played in the BMWs supplied to VIPs for the drive from Manhattan to the inaugural Frieze New York art fair on Randall's Island. Stark realized from the get-go that this context was a ridiculous setting for a piece but also one she could use to good effect. The sound recording begins with a monologue by Stark about her decisions about what to do for the commission, read out against the incongruously poignant background of rain falling and a Haydn divertimento. She describes meeting the titular Mr. Martin at a skate park—he is dealing drugs, we are left to infer, and is passing the time by reading a book called *The Art of Seduction*. She gets interested in what the book says about Casanova, whom she has been idolizing "under the impression that his epic promiscuity was something of an exemplary nomadic philosophical practice." Referring to *My Best Thing* and *Osservate*, she says that this is also how she has liked to regard and represent her own sexual activities—as philosophical practice. But the book presents Casanova as an exploitative character and has her wondering whether she has not also been using men for her own purposes. She invites Mr. Martin to make a work with her that would address these questions, offering up her artist's fee of five hundred dollars, but he ends up disappearing, just as Marcello did before. But then he calls her, having just been released from jail after being accused (wrongly, he says) of burglary. From this point, we

begin to hear his voice alongside that of his Hispanic friend Bobby, who is a recording engineer, and Stark's: They are apparently hanging out in a car together, getting progressively more wasted and attempting to make a recording to represent the story of the man's arrest and the impounding of his car. They talk about the daily harassment of young minority men by the police and wonder what parts of the narrative they should rerecord. The piece concludes with a story told by Mr. Martin: On a trip to Alabama with his father years before, he narrowly avoided being lynched by two white men with shotguns.

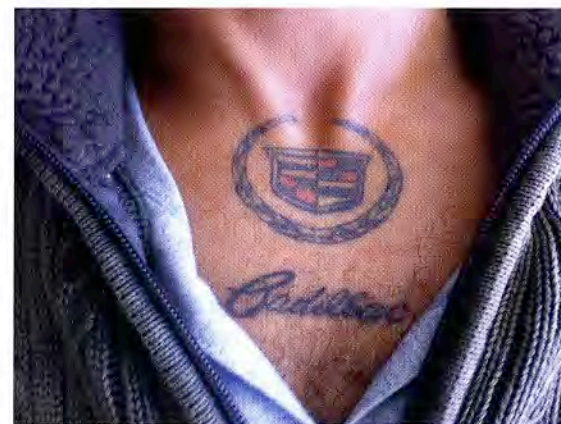
It's hard to imagine what the VIPs made of the sometimes-stoned drawl of Stark and her new friends, but the more one considers the specificities of the work's context, the more acute an intervention it seems. The route to Randall's Island would have taken the VIPs through East Harlem, but the luxury car shielded the passengers from the realities of New York and delivered them to their destination as if they had never left their comfort zone. Into this protected no-place, Stark inserted a story centering on a very different car that confronted her captive audience with difficult subjects of race and class, of police discrimination, of racial violence. If, while preparing the piece, she had ventured beyond the studio (so often the site and subject of her works), so too when presenting it, it was as if she opened the VIP car to everything it was designed to shut out.

The sound piece and Stark's contact with her collaborators, Bobby and Mr. Martin, are, at the time of this writing, leading Stark in many directions. Struck by Bobby's resemblance to pictures she had collected of Mary Magdalene, she became interested in how religious images often figure in contemporary narratives of escape from gang life, and also in Kanye West's depictions of himself as Jesus and as a messianic figure who can point a way out of the ghetto. "Is *hip-hop* just a euphemism for a new religion?" he asks on *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*. For Stark, these new interests echo and balance out earlier investigations where she has alluded to sin and redemption—she titled her first survey exhibition "The Fall of Frances Stark." Reproductions of Hans Memling's 1481 *Christ Blessing* have found their way onto the wall of her studio, and she has been reading Wilhelm Reich's 1952 *The Murder of Christ* and his reinterpretation of the Christ narrative in the wake of the calamities of midcentury.

With these varied references in mind, Stark invited Bobby and Mr. Martin to her class at USC, where she asked them to pose as models for her drawing students while she read from Flannery O'Connor's story "Parker's Back," in which a previously nonbelieving man tattoos the face of Christ on his back. New drawings and projections will

develop from these scenarios and might incorporate the images she has collected and that have been produced in her class. A full reading of these works will obviously have to wait until their completion, but what seems clear already is that, just as in the sequence of related works starting with *My Best Thing*, Stark began with sex but ended up holding out for an ideal of noncommercialized friendship, so in the new cycle of works, she begins with images of Christ in order to provoke questions of what salvation might look like today, for an artist making work in continually compromised circumstances, or for the people of her LA, struggling against prejudice and economic hardship. At stake in both series of works are the ethics and politics of conviviality. Whether our communities are online or in our cities, whether we meet across international or local divides, and whether we like it or not, we live together in new ways now. Without at the same time trying to downplay her own desires, or indeed without denying her hunger for attention, Stark embraces these conditions of interdependence, recognizing that the most urgent question is what conviviality might now mean. □

MARK GODFREY IS A CURATOR OF CONTEMPORARY ART AT TATE MODERN IN LONDON. (SEE CONTRIBUTORS.)



Above: Frances Stark, *Trapped in the VIP and/or in Mr. Martin's Inoperable Cadillac*, 2012, digital recording, 21 minutes 7 seconds. Publicity image (Mr. Martin).

Below: Frances Stark's life-drawing class, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, April 16, 2012. Background: Mr. Martin and Bobby. Foreground: Frances Stark.

