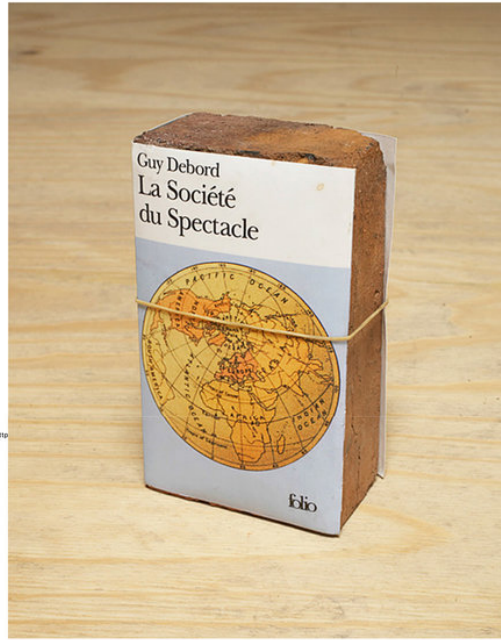


## Claire Fontaine

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Claire Fontaine by Anthony Huberman, 01.10.2008



Claire Fontaine, *La société du spectacle brickbar*, 2006, brick and brick fragments, elastic band, and archival print on archival paper, 7 x 4½ x 2½ inches. Courtesy of the artist and Reena Spaulings Fine Art, New York.

Claire Fontaine lives in Paris. Her “assistants” are Fulvia Carnevale and James Thornhill, an Italian-British artist duo. With a readymade name—taken from a popular brand of French stationery—Claire Fontaine also describes herself as a readymade artist who finds herself working within the context of a politically impotent contemporary society. As her assistants, Carnevale and Thornhill make her objects, paintings, neons, videos, and, in the case of this interview, answer questions about her work. Written texts are also at the core of her work and accompany each exhibition.

Exhausted by the ruins of authorship, of political activism, of the May '68 rebellion in Paris, and of strategies of opposition, Claire Fontaine prefers what she calls the “human strike,” a subjectivity that gets rid of itself, a whatever singularity. By exemplifying readymade and stereotypical identities imposed by social or cultural superstructures, she becomes an empty vessel. Despite her state of exhaustion, Claire Fontaine creates an art that seeks to transform political crisis into subjective emancipation. She understands that making art can't oppose or rebel or subvert the political condition of late capitalism, so she presents herself as an artist on strike, a readymade subjectivity, a hole in the landscape through which a revolution might creep, arriving from elsewhere.

**Anthony Huberman**

Since we're celebrating its 40th anniversary, and because we're meeting in Paris, let's start with May 1968. The rejection of authority that was so palpable on the streets then is a spirit that lurks behind your work. Guy Debord is someone we often associate with the student revolution, but your 2007 piece *Sony PSP playing La Société du Spectacle mute* mockingly compressed his magnum opus into a handheld PlayStation player. And wrapping the cover of his book around a brick silences him once more.

**Claire Fontaine**

Guy Debord is dead. He was a funny, tragic guy, but in our lifetime, we've only had the chance to see the effects of the Situationist religion, this purism and extreme moralism that doesn't help to change anything at all. We needed to make fun of such a paradoxical position. But today, maybe it's like shooting the ambulance.

**AH**

How do you see the relevance of the legacy of May '68 in artmaking today and how does it inform (or misinform) your work?

**CF**

The art legacy of '68 is very poor. We generally hate commemorations, and the conventional habit of enforcing this punctual obligation to remember what happened in '68 neutralizes the real influences of those events, ones that continue to run through our bodies and our society today. Sixty-eight is an idea, a deformed fantasy about inconsequent freedom, about rebellion without retaliations: a very unrealistic constellation of projections. Revolutionary families rarely leave a fortune to their kids, who often have to work harder than their parents. Rebellious parents very often sacrifice the childhood of their sons and daughters in order to prolong their own well into adulthood. All the problems coming from an unachieved revolution and all the identities forged by hopes that just disappeared are never mentioned. It's interesting to see how people dealt with the eclipse of that infantile idea of liberation after '68. If you prefer, feminism, refusal of work, refusal of the identity imposed by the state and the family are all themes that inform our work and come from the Italy of '77 and the Italy of that decade in general. We consider what happened in the '70s more important, more radical, more precise. But of course these events wouldn't have been possible without '68.

**AH**

Let's back up and get more specific, for those who don't know your work. Claire Fontaine is an Italian artist and a British artist, both based in Paris, who use the name Clairefontaine, a brand of paper available at any French stationery shop. Some key concepts contained in your works are "readymade artist" and "human strike." You've also written extensive texts describing these notions. Your works have included neon signs, brick sculptures, flags, coins, lock-picks, phrases written in smoke, videos on PSP Playstations, and stenciled copies of Warhol Marilyns, among many others. You work with the galleries T293, Chantal Crousel, Air de Paris, Neu, and Reena Spaulings. You ascribe to anarchist politics. Of course, I'm sure it's absolutely horrible to be summarized in such a crude way. Of all the categories and boxes I've just put you in, which one makes you the most angry?

**CF**

What makes us the most angry is any classification that is stupid. It's surely the same for everyone. Being harshly criticized can be very interesting and sometimes totally necessary even though it is never a pleasant experience. This hasn't happened to us very much so far. There is very little critical engagement with our work and it seems as if it doesn't interest intellectuals and art historians. They might think that we perform the critical engagement ourselves with our own texts, which is totally wrong. What makes us angry is when people misunderstand our position, when it's not a fertile misunderstanding but a literal interpretation such as "this is political stuff" or "this is opportunist, cynical stuff." It is embarrassing how literal the reception of our work can be! When we play the fool in order to point things out that do not make sense in society, people call us idiots. This is more depressing than outrageous.



Claire Fontaine, *STRIKE*, (K. font V.II), 2005-2007, white fluorescent tubes, colored gel, steel wall mounted or free-standing frame, movement detector, and circuit-breaker, 21 x 5½ x 1¼'. Installation view, Tate Modern, London. Courtesy of the artist.

**AH**

My favorite works are *STRIKE*, *Ibis redibis non morieris in bello*, and the *Foreigners Everywhere* signs. Which are the works that you consider the most representative of your practice at this moment?

**CF**

I would say the works that are very important for us at this point are those from the "Equivalents" series, in particular *Equivalent VIII*, and *Diviser la division* (Divide the division). *Equivalent VIII* is a sculpture that refers to a work with the same title by Carl Andre from 1967. It's composed of 120 fire bricks lined up in the same shape as the original work. But Claire Fontaine's piece subverts the silence of the minimal object and covers each brick with a photographic scan of a Folio series book cover. The covers have been transformed: the spine has been stretched so they fit the size of the brick. Since the books have been transformed into solid objects that have the same weight and thickness, they have all become equivalent, just as they are for the inexperienced reader, and within the logic of the market. Folio books all have a reproduction of a modern artwork on their cover and we were intrigued by the lack of connection between the titles and the images that accompany them. By associating the covers of these chosen petrified books, we obtained a puzzle of visual and verbal elements, a sort of story. At the same time, the sculpture insists on the problem of illegibility. It looks like a tomb for these books; it says something about the use value of culture, about the commercial accessibility and the intellectual barrier around cultural commodities. The other work, *Diviser la division* is a double neon that will be

shown in this year's Art Focus 2008 exhibition in East Jerusalem. The Hebrew and Arabic translations of St. Paul's sentence "Divide the division," or "Divide the divided," flash on and off in the two languages alternatively, one on top of the other. They never coexist. Of course, the violence of the translation is at the core of our gesture: in Arabic the sentence sounds more like "Break the division." We don't only refer to the partition of territories, we also think of the impossibility of being politically on one side rather than another at this terrible stage of the conflict. Sentimentally, one can't help choosing a side—this is obvious—but politically, one has to refuse a binary partition and seek brighter criteria for the interpretation of facts. Hannah Arendt once wrote that she didn't love "any people or collective—neither the German people, nor the French, nor the American, nor the working class, or anything of that sort. I indeed love only my friends and the only kind of love I know of and believe in is the love of persons." Friends, of course, can be on both sides.

**AH**

That's a relevant quote to bring up because Claire Fontaine seems to be made up of two sides. You, Fulvia, and you, James, are the assistants of Claire Fontaine. You've said, "Claire Fontaine is composed of assistants, its management is an empty center." By wanting to be nothing more than her assistants, what are you running from? Does it relate to a kind of preemptive form of emancipation?

**CF**

Being assistants is not a way to flee something but a way to go toward a more honest and strong position. It represents an explicit position of cooperation, where compromises and discussions are very important and where the cult of the romantic, self-centered, and inspired artist is finally pulverized. This is an emancipating position: refusing to be victim of a stereotype is always very liberating.

**AH**

Yet stereotypes are generic identities, and calling yourself Claire Fontaine is like calling yourself Mr. and Mrs. Smith or Dupont and Dupond: an indistinguishably generic name. Does this point to what you (and Giorgio Agamben) call a "whatever singularity"? A way to dissolve your own identity?

**CF**

No, we wouldn't say so. "Whatever singularity" is a concept that doesn't relate to lack of identity or identification—on the contrary! It is the faithful description of the political situation of being a subject in the contemporary world. Being common is being strong and desirable, undiluted in a crowd. Naming is a convention created to unite creatures, not to separate them. We wouldn't need a name if we didn't need to be called, recognized, and loved by others. Giving ourselves another name opens a space where new things are possible; it is a positive place of de-subjectification, not an attempt at hiding our "real identities." Names can coexist. It's possible to be called Monsieur Fontaine *and* a democrat; for women, who change their name with marriage, it has been the case for more than 2,000 years.



Claire Fontaine, *Change*, 2005. Twelve 25-cent coins, steel box-cutter blades, solder, and rivets. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Neu, Berlin.

**AH**

Speaking of being two things at once, I wanted to bring up the question of anarchist politics and art's relationship to the market. You work inside the market: you show in galleries, you sell art, you are *inside* the system ... How do you respond to those who make the easy accusation that you're complicit with capitalism? Is any artist not complicit with capitalism? What does "complicity" even mean, in art, today? Is art somehow a model for contemporary management?



## CF

Inside, outside ... these are things we don't understand. Who says that? There is no such thing as a defined *outside* of capitalism anymore, and the *inside* is so full of holes that billions leak out of banks just because of some unauthorized trading by an anonymous broker. Maybe in our latitudes the idea of the outside was a childish illusion to begin with, fed by the two blocs that used to face each other during the Cold War. But there is a real impossibility of working outside a capitalist system. The idea of working against capitalism was born from the utopia that a different type of economy could exist, run by different laws, where the power wouldn't produce oppression and repression. History has shown that socialist countries cannot make it without a world revolution. However, when those countries are convinced of this, they have already become dictatorships and/or ultracapitalistic countries. Our present situation is highly complex; many pockets of the third world exist inside "rich" countries, and these same rich countries happily practice the new form of colonialism that some people like to call globalization. Social classes have multiplied but everyone inside them is a lot more isolated and structurally competitive. Artists are a good example of this situation: they are self-employed because they are worker and boss in one body (as Godard always says). It is impossible for them to federate in a union or a cooperative, or if they do, it becomes immediately pathetic. For people who can't identify with their own job or who identify with it too much (as an ideal), democratic forms of struggle are a very bad fit. Many artists we know have two or three jobs because they can't or don't want to make money through their art. So, saying, "I am an artist" means many different things. This dysfunction in professional identification is more and more common; that's why it will probably be a desertion from within that will destroy capitalism. But we are not prophets. And by the way, we don't know what "complicity" means in art today. We don't even know what "art" is. It is many different worlds, many different people... .

**AH**

Godard, in fact, famously withdrew from making movies in 1967, paralyzed by his uncertainty about how to proceed in light of the political state of affairs in France. He then stormed the Cannes Festival in 1968, forcibly preventing the curtains from opening, causing the cancellation of the event. He eventually got back to making (excellent) movies. Is Godard's hesitation one you feel you're faced with—to stop making art in order to engage more actively with politics?

**CF**

No, never, because nothing is happening right now. Nothing like Godard's gesture is possible anymore. The idea that we can or should plan every single possibility of our lives in advance is a very contemporary but perhaps also reactionary idea. It's just impossible. No one can know how one would react to the next insurrection, whether one will be the protagonist or the enemy of those who are rebelling. Those who pretend to be able to do so are prisoners of an ideology. We have no regrets right now, but of course the situation can and should be transformed. In fact, revolutionary moments are times when priorities automatically change. Then you never have to ask yourself, Do I go there or not? What will happen to me if I do this? You just can't help being where you have to be; nothing can stop people from taking the side that has to be theirs. There is no hesitation in decisive moments, and if there is, this is already a political position.

**AH**

You once said that art is what you do to stay awake while you wait for a radical rejection of our contemporary society to arrive from elsewhere. And you've talked about art as being a problem, as something that adds problems to the world, accompanying the world as it slowly moves towards change ... change that will ultimately come from elsewhere. Can you talk a bit more about this and how it relates to your own artmaking practice?

**CF**

There is a fascinating form of revolutionary messianism that we like. It consists in thinking that everything you do every day can secretly help to



prepare the event you expect. It is actually an active expectation, much better than a depressive one. If you wish, you can compare Claire's work to this attitude, even though I wouldn't summarize it in this way. We have different types of work that engage with different questions and problems; we are not existential Leninists, if this is what you wish to know. But I hope you know this already!

We consider that any revolutionary movement is one toward more pleasure and not just a desperate gesture for getting rid of pain, oppression, or poverty. Art deals with desires and poses the question of pleasure in an impertinent way—under the angle of the extreme fetishism of the commodity. The '70s were the historical period of the biggest conflict between the social and the commercial conception of pleasures. On one hand, the capitalist offensive back then started to pulverize the human and political conditions for sharing pleasures. On the other, it colonized desires and the body, transforming them into tools for accumulation and possession. Now this process has reached its peak and contemporary art is at its core. Probably because the painful indifference toward our feelings that characterizes any commodity doesn't exist in a good artwork. The artwork is a thing that responds to the feelings of everyone, that allows people who are not artists to perceive the world as artists do, as a continuous and difficult dialogue with objects, memories, sensations, possibilities, and interdictions. If these "things" have any power, besides their crazy price, it is a power to confusedly communicate something about this other world where life and intelligence shape objects, whereas in capitalism it is usually the other way around.

**AH**

Artworks certainly do have that power! You bring up the idea of an active expectation, a setting of the stage for a revolutionary interruption of our lives that will come from elsewhere. Can the artwork itself ever perform an interruption? Can you describe your concept of "human strike"?

**CF**

Art should perform an interruption of the usual perception. The problem is determining how an aesthetic interruption can transform our lives, how this gap can or cannot provide us with weapons to fight our problems. Human

strike is a refusal to perpetuate a behavior that seems to be natural but actually creates a toxic dynamic. Of course it has to do with attacking authority but sometimes authority is also rooted in ourselves. So human strike is a way to change ourselves, and through that to change all of the relationships people have with themselves. Relationships have the ability to transform the world, since they always involve power.

**AH**

In terms of refusing to perpetuate a behavior, do you see yourselves as making art or are you making documentaries about a “whatever readymade” artist, one step removed from the possibility of actually making art? Can you describe your concept of the readymade artist?

**CF**

This idea of making a fictional piece on a hypothetical artist never came to us. It’s funny! I think what we do is pretty much art, at least for a few people who share a common (if contradictory) idea of “art.” Contemporary art is a very strange thing; it is a whole space of problematization. Nowadays, its field of action nearly coincides with its crisis. The readymade artist is a diagnosis of this very crisis, an interesting symptom. It’s a concept that refers to the problem of subjectivizing as an artist, to the difficulty in believing that what you do is unique, and that your inspiration and your art belong in a magical and sacred space. But it is a lot more than this, and this might not be the right context for a longer elaboration.

**AH**

Okay, I could suggest to readers that they refer to the many texts written by Claire Fontaine that discuss these ideas in depth. Instead, I’ll ask you to tell me about your love for communism.

**CF**

Well, this is a very personal question, a politically intimate one. We can say that communism is not a dreamed-up freedom or a phantom that only haunts exhibition spaces and cultural products. For us, communism is a redistribution of poverty more than wealth; it is a specific relationship to the chronic insufficiency that exists with us all—toward our body, our childhood,

the immediate urgency of our desires. We think that love, real love, can only be communist, and that's why love is not fully possible in our society. People who believe that being a communist is being an exemplary person are totally wrong; being a communist today is being in conflict, oscillating continuously between victimhood and compliance. It is by not abandoning this sense of back-and-forth and "becoming" that we see the only way to react against the general mediocrity and the desperate landscape that is being designed for our lives.

**AH**

*How do we want to be governed?*, the title of a recent group exhibition, comes to mind.

**CF**

We would prefer not to ...

**AH**

That's fair. And what about these kinds of interviews? What questions do you prefer not to answer? What are the aspects of your work that you prefer to leave unexplained?

**CF**

This is a double bind! But okay, here's something we don't want to explain but will anyway: we often are reluctant to discuss the formal research involved in our work, and people might suspect we are too shy to do so. In fact, the struggle to find the satisfactory form is actually the biggest part of our work. We remain silent about it due to a question of priorities. We always have to reconstruct the references we use, the political context we're referring to, and the circumstances of how the works are produced and exhibited. But we don't find the time to explain why we choose one presentation or form rather than another. We often promise ourselves that for our next lecture we will describe our practice in exclusively formal terms, but we run out of time and never manage to do so.

**AH**

My last question is one I like to ask many artists I work with. In as general or as specific of a sense as you wish: what are you most curious about but don't understand?

## CF

We are very curious about the movement around the refusal of technology, the neo-ruralist population that migrates and leaves cities for political reasons, and this overall reactionary vision of progress as catastrophe. We are curious about it because we think the next rebellions will be ecologically based: they will take place when people see that their life is endangered by their habits and that, if the system doesn't change, they won't have any choice but to get sick and die. Alerts are always launched when it's too late to react, but what kind of life could we invent by refusing poisons and aiming toward an abstract, ahistorical health? "Health" has today become an objective notion, a form of capital, but the definition of a healthy child or a healthy worker has changed enormously through time and is still different according to one's country or social class.

The question that we ask ourselves is how could this refusal on the part of a few be more than just a moral gesture toward the many who can't afford to be involved in this secession? In this kind of position, there is very little space left for the participation and transformation of the urban environment, and the only people who think about these questions do so in a green and reformistic way that won't go very far since it's often sponsored by the same companies that contribute to the disaster. We can't imagine how it could be possible to envision a massive secession and a regressive refusal of technology—it seems like running away from the thing that is responsible for building us, or being morally ashamed by the lifestyle of our time. Pollution and catastrophes are a consequence of the religion of profit, of a certain vision of living creatures, and of a certain idea of pleasure and comfort. These are the things to change but, of course, we do not know how.