

Riot Girl

Art collective Claire Fontaine on May '68, radicalism and how not to be a "drivelling idiot"

Interview by Dessislava Dimova

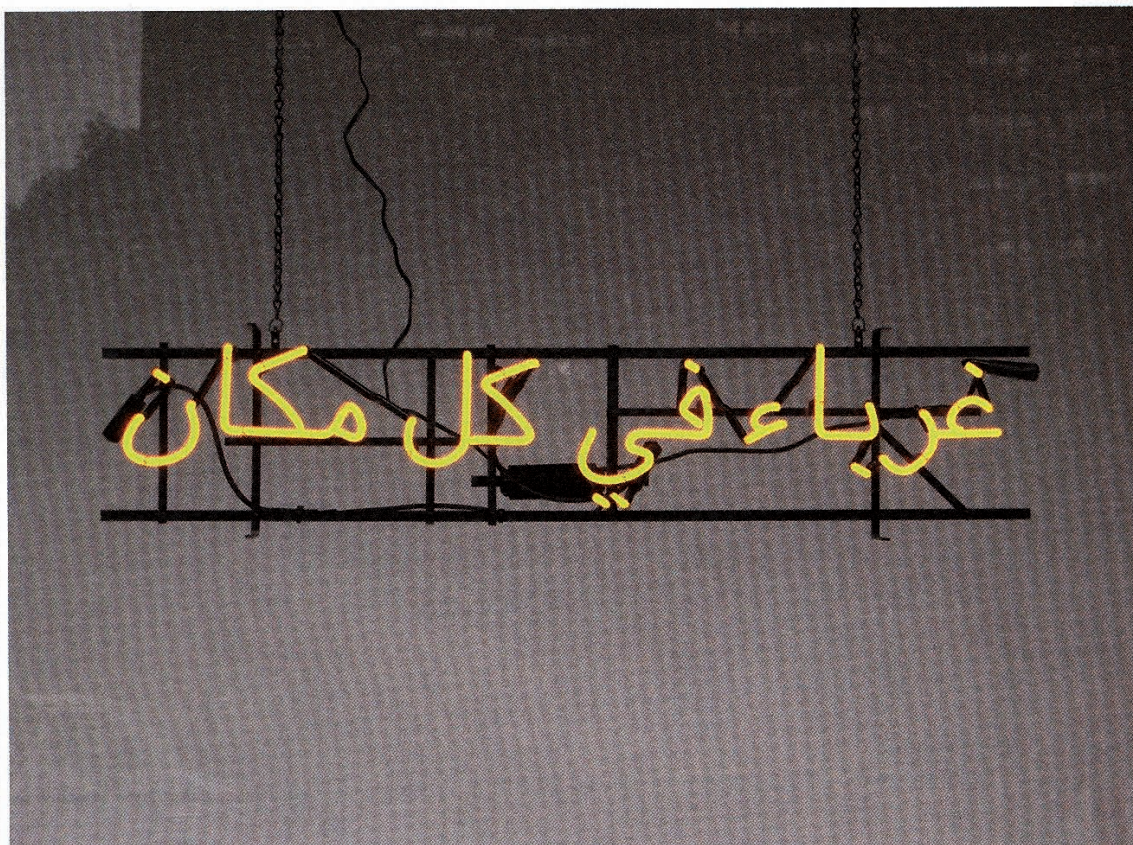
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THE PARIS-BASED ART collaborative Claire Fontaine came into existence in 2004. Adopting the name of a famous make of French stationery and a third-person singular female persona, "she" has presented a brand of art in a variety of media. All of it displays a confident awareness of recent themes within contemporary art – such as appropriation, consumerism and the "crisis of singularity" – while consciously echoing and questioning the visual strategies of conceptual art. In her short career, Fontaine has exhibited at international galleries, including solo presentations at Air de Paris and Reena Spaulings, and has participated in numerous group exhibitions, at Tate Modern and Kunsthalle Zurich among others. Here, the collective discusses the relationship between an all-embracing art market and a growing need for critical reflection within contemporary art.

Dessislava Dimova: Do you define yourself as a political artist? How would you describe the current relationship between art and politics? Is art a space where you can express yourself politically?

Claire Fontaine: It is not possible to define an artist as "political" on the basis of the subject matter she addresses in her work. Possibly she could be considered political because of the image of the world she manages to pass on through her practice, and on the basis of the social and economic relations she manages to build around her human and professional position in society. Claire Fontaine doesn't fool herself about the

possibly exemplary nature of any given stance; the illusion of the avant-garde ended along with the belief in a brighter future. Now we're living in a twilight where everything is rather confusing. We send out signals that are like distress flares along some path, but nothing really throws a clear light. Our times are complicated: there are still many major anthropological transformations affecting us deeply that are yet to be properly understood. Art is on the margin of all that, but it's at the heart of the market. The relationship between art and politics nowadays, I think, has to be analysed through a less inhibited and anxious concept of the market than in the 1970s. We have the facts, we can't escape them – it's a matter of understanding and transforming them. We have to fight and invent new forms, probably less spectacular but more subtle ones, in order to preserve everything that matters to us, despite the violence of the present catastrophe. The art world is a space of desire. It essentially belongs to collectors who feed it by sacrificing their wealth on the altar of all the dreams that money can't fulfil. And as a space of desire, it is difficult to regulate. Among those desires probably lie some revolutionary ones; all that is kept in a closed circuit, of course, but that's always the case in reactionary times. Let's just say that the space of art is for us an intellectual, mental and emotional place that allows us to save problems and phenomena that would otherwise be condemned forever. That's why we stay there and consider that this space, despite everything, is precious.



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DD: Your work *The true artist produces the most prestigious commodity (after Bruce Nauman)* seems to be a perfect metaphor for our current situation. The market adapts easily to criticism. Whatever one makes, no matter how critical or subversive one is trying to be, is perfectly marketable. I don't see how it could be possible to try to function outside this system or how it could be sabotaged, even if these two ideas fed the art world's ideology throughout the 1960s and are still fascinating. Do you see a real conflict between the market and politics in the art world? Do you think that we can still talk about art even knowing that the market compromises critical aspects of artistic work, or is that a completely obsolete notion? As an artist, where do you place yourself in relation to the backdrop of institutional criticism of the 1960s and 1970s?

CF: Institutional critique arose from a context of luxury that today is totally unimaginable. Just picture it: masses of people reading the same things, sharing a whole universe of references, images, dreams. Confused, certainly, and not powerful enough to bring on radical change, as we now know, but still there was a huge number of people ready to feed a sophisticated and intricate space of debate. There was also a diffuse desire to work at the making of life forms, of the self, of thought, and therefore to give form to a space that was alien to the market where you could survive, create, fight and be together. All this has been stamped out, probably not for ever, but for a good while. Then we'd have to start by administering to ourselves an enormous shot of lucidity

so we can understand what structures and spaces could exist outside institutional settings where young and less young adults can live without having to beg, and where they can keep thinking, raise children, share their emotions, rebuild a semblance of culture without being blackmailed into urgent activism or having to leave the cities for extremely questionable rural utopias. The people I love today are often lonely, sometimes very poor and overwhelmed by enormous logistical problems; they are condemned to shame by a situation which is actually a product of easily recognisable political and economic circumstances. At the moment, the simple facts of building a family and having a job are Herculean ventures, if you don't want to do it like some pitiful petit bourgeois, hating and fearing your neighbour. People in the 1970s and even more in the 1960s had it much easier than we do. As for us, I believe we should be much more honest and definitely more supportive of one another if we want history to remember anything other than two or three exceptional individuals who have managed to occupy the conventional position of the appointed agitator. Being worried about co-option seems to me a form of luxury. No, there's no longer a given ready-made outside of the system. We live in a time of war and that's why the market has been thriving, because of the cultural and material battle that is being led against the poor. It's true that some of the artists I respect sometimes manage to make some money, which is good, but they're too isolated to do anything interesting with it. We should first and foremost make



sure that sharing becomes again a source of happiness if we don't want to all end up sad bastards, drivelling idiots surrounded by pathetic admirers.

DD: Your work *STRIKE* is a powerful commentary on our current ability or inability to engage in political acts. You've written about the idea of a human strike. Is that something that might enable us to take action? Is negation a valid tool of action?

CF: Human strike is the tactic all of us already sort of use – without theorising about it – to survive day to day in a society in which we don't recognise ourselves. It can take on various forms. It's the opposite of a political programme so it's very difficult to evaluate its effects on our political environment. I don't think all kinds of action are impossible nowadays, it's just that the price we pay is higher and higher for acts that are more and more modest. Today what is known as public opinion is in too much of a state of shock to make it possible to trace with accuracy the range of the growing penalisation of every act of dissent. Let's not forget that people who were arrested at the counter-summit at Genoa ended up getting exemplary sentences of several years each, even those who simply happened to be there at the time. In France, the government is still extraditing Italians who were involved in the political struggles of the 1960s. It is shredding to bits their lives and those of their families and friends because it won't give them amnesty after 30 years; it is literally persecuting them. All those police, all those controls, all this fear can only mean that power is weak and desperately needs to protect itself. Actions to change the present state of things already exist, but they're happening in places where no one is looking for them. As soon as everyone can know clearly who owns the newspapers, and with what purpose "news" is being transmitted, we'll have no other choice than to reactivate public space and restore a dialogue to figure out what is going on, even just in our own neighbourhoods. With the transformation of the media, we're heading for big changes in human relationships. I think we need to be strong and optimistic, and to find ways to tolerate the sadness and vulgarity of the present.

DD: For me, discussions about art and politics raise the old question about how to differentiate between art that is autonomous or committed – in other words, art that functions within its own categories and issues – and art that functions within real life. How do you see your work relating to those two aspects? I'm also talking about relational aesthetics and its idea of an art that creates utopian models for society. How can we envision art engaging with society after the failure of those projects?

CF: I believe that life is the starting and the end point of all art. Even the most hermetic art for art sake's only talks about a part of life and human thought, and in this case it is the art world. If we assume – which we do – that art cannot be cut off from its sociopolitical context and the discussions that accompany, fertilise or murder it, then every artistic practice can be situated on an easily recognisable political chessboard. But then the hypothesis that some types of art can affect people's lives more directly than others is hard to verify. We believe that art as a professional field is less directly im-

plicated in people's lives than, for example, the professional fields of surgeons, policemen, judges, teachers. Relational aesthetics wanted to play with the confusion between art and life, but with a slightly resigned and post-avant-garde perspective. I don't believe that there was any revolutionary ambition in the actions that were tagged under this label. Perhaps there was some desire to transgress, but that doesn't make any difference. I don't see any sincere claim to utopia there. Our own position is that to be an artist is to have a career in certain material and economic conditions which are those of our society and times. From there, either you consider, along with the precarious workers in the entertainment industry (*intermittents du spectacle*), railway workers and civil servants, that it's still time for corporatist revolts (although, as artists, our claims would be somewhat pathetic and absurd). Or you believe that future protests and revolts will be human and aim for the abolition of the system of values and desires that governs global capitalism. While we wait for the abolition of social and economic separation, it is obvious that everyone finds him- or herself isolated in his or her struggle, while he or she keeps a job or refuses to have one. The way one does one's work can also be a form of struggle and human strike. It's not very exciting, but for now that's what's possible.

DD: How much influence do you believe the situationists had on the events of May 1968?

CF: I think '68 was a tremendously complicated event of which we know the absence, the shadow, the paralysing weight, but not so much the perception its contemporaries had of it. It's buried under layer after layer of mythology and quaint folklore. Certainly the situationists were present in Paris and elsewhere, but I believe the main thing is that they produced a vast amount of documents of all kinds, visual as well as literary, and in retrospect that's what makes their presence sensibly more important than that of the other players of the time.

DD: Do the events of May 1968 still have any resonance within the Parisian community 40 years on?

CF: There is no such thing as a Parisian community. Paris is a city of gangs and isolated individuals. That's a fact: the public space belongs to the police and merchants, and the private space is expensive and suffocated. As a result, sociality is virtually nonexistent and social circles are very closed. It's hard to tell who reaps the fruits or the legacy of this historical moment which feels so removed from us. Dork Zabunyan, a young French philosopher, has explained in an essay that the point is to somehow liberate 1968 from itself, to keep in touch with the problems this outburst elicited instead of putting it at a distance like a historical fact among others, dead and stuffed. 1968 did not happen only in Paris and in any case, the Parisians of 2008 do not exactly strike me as better fitted to embody the truths which emerged then, if that's the question. Commemorations always amount to confiscating the subversive potential of the moment, nothing more.

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