

(Event Ticker Requires JavaScript and Flash) [Download the latest Flash player](#)

Art in America

INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

ENTER YOUR SEARCH



CLAIRE FONTAINE

5/4/09
 CHANTAL CROUSEL
 by paul b. franklin

PARIS In the context of the abysmal global economy, the latest solo show of Claire Fontaine is disturbingly relevant. Titled “Feux de détresse,” or “Warning Lights” (like those on an automobile), it was conceived as an interrogation of the politics of labor, and an exploration of the world of work as a metaphoric prison for the human mind and body.

A Paris-based collective founded in 2004 by an Italian woman with an advanced degree in philosophy and a Scotsman with a background in fine art, Claire Fontaine takes its name from the French paper supplier—an iconic brand familiar to schoolchildren and office workers alike. The two 30-something collaborators are a self-described “readymade artist,” à la Marcel Duchamp, and refer to themselves as “she.” In trading their individual identities for an invented one based on a consumer product, Claire Fontaine raises questions regarding authorship and the interchangeability of the artist and the objects s/he creates, as well as the use value of both. In so doing, she is deeply indebted to Marx, Barthes and Foucault, not to mention conceptually oriented artists like Bruce Nauman, Jenny Holzer and Pierre Huyghe.

Fourteen works (all 2008) were on exhibit, including sculptures, neon and fluorescent signs, video, found objects and drawings. The pendant sculptures *Optic (Whiskey)* and *Optic (Vodka)* consist of watercoolers filled with freely available hard liquor (plastic cups facilitated imbibing), suggesting an escape from the onerous psychic effects of the workplace. In *Il faut travailler plus pour penser moins* (Work More to Think Less), a wry bastardization—which Claire Fontaine cribbed from Paris subway graffiti—of President Sarkozy’s infamous adage “work more to earn more,” the title phrase is emblazoned on a French flag. Its Orwellian implications speak for themselves.

Extending the theme of forced labor is the video *126419*, in which this number is tattooed on the arm of the male half of Claire Fontaine. Repeating those on the arm of an elderly friend of the artists and survivor of a Nazi concentration camp, these dehumanizing digits function as a vehicle for the transmission of individual and collective memory. The act of transcribing his cipher is, in effect, a labor of love.

Despite the clear political resonance of Claire Fontaine’s subject matter, she relies too heavily on didactic, often heavy-handed texts to convey the breadth of her message, as outlined on her website and in the exhibition press release. The latter, for example, proclaimed the gravitas of her “Warning Lights” project: “Partial exploration of work as the *inside* of prison and of prison as the *outside* of work. Work as the reverse of the prison/productive machine and the prison/punishing machine as a consequence of the refusal of the logic of remunerated labor and of the economical logic in general.” Alas, her new work does not always measure up to the lofty claims of such exegesis.

Photo above: *Optic (Whiskey)*, 2008, watercooler, whiskey and plastic cup dispenser; at Chantal Crousel.

REVIEWS RSS FEED

[VIEW ALL FEEDS](#)

Sign up to receive the Art in America Newsletter

YOUR EMAIL



DECODING IMAGES



Gordon Matta Clark: Splitting, 1974

Gordon Matta Clark

Splitting, 1974

© The Estate of Gordon Matta Clark/ David Zwirner Gallery

ALSO

[The Happy End of Franz Kafka’s “Amerika”](#)

[Jewish Giant, Taken at Home with His Parents in the Bronx, NY,...](#)

[Print](#) [Email](#) [Share](#)

[CONTACT US](#)

[ADVERTISER INFO](#)

[TERMS OF USE](#)

[PRIVACY](#)

[SUBSCRIBE](#)

[PROMOTIONS](#)



Interviews from the worlds of fashion, film, music, and art. Videos and late-breaking cultural news. [MORE](#)



News and highlights from the world of antiques. Auctions, exhibitions, expertise and distinguished collections. [MORE](#)