

Their Insurrection

Ready-made artist Claire Fontaine fuses art, politics, and irony

BY ROZALIA JOVANOVIC

"THIS BOOK IS a tale of seduction. It reveals . . . that a lock is not a hostile obstacle to our desire but a new potential lover whose interiority we have to see with the eyes of the soul and whose qualities and defaults we have to imagine. . . . Chapter after chapter, a disquieting light is shed on the triad of the artist, the consumer, and the lock picker."

This excerpt comes from *Some Instructions for the Sharing of Private Property*, a book by the Paris-based artist collective Claire Fontaine that provides copious directions on how to pick locks. It offers guidance on the workings of pin tumbler locks, beveled holes, and rounded pins, as well as the use of hooks, diamonds, and rakes to foil them. It gives

theoretical information ("The theory of lock picking is the theory of exploiting mechanical defects"), spiritual advice ("We must not let the ego get in the way when we determine the best method for a given situation"), and legal advice ("Contrary to widespread myth, it is not a felony to possess lock picks"). Although *Instructions* seems on its face to be advocating theft—



an anticapitalist act—it bears a striking resemblance to the *Freedom Fighter's Manual*, a 15-page propaganda pamphlet produced by the CIA and airdropped over Nicaragua in 1983 for the stated purpose of “liberating” that country “from oppression and misery . . . of the traitorous Marxist state.” Like Claire Fontaine’s book, it contains instructions—with niftily drawn diagrams—for causing civil disorder through simple, but regular, actions like spilling liquids, threatening bosses by telephone, and creating Molotov cocktails with which to firebomb police stations. Ultimately, as both these works show, context is king.

Of the 150 pages of *Instructions*, only one—the last—was written by Claire Fontaine. The rest is composed of snippets of manuals that the artists found on the Internet, appropriated, and recontextualized for their own ends. This sort of deliberate borrowing is essential to the collective. Even its name is cribbed from a popular brand of French notebooks.

Claire Fontaine—whose latest show, “Working together,” opening at New York’s Metro Pictures this month, explores the “metastatic balance that cooperative systems have to reach in order to last”—formed in 2004 to provide a “shared space” in which the two founders, James Thornhill and Fulvia Carnevale, could collaborate and create work apart from their individual identities. In its own words, the collective “represents an explicit position of cooperation . . . where the cult of the romantic, self-centered, and inspired artist is finally pulverized.” Like many such groups—Bernadette Corporation, Gelitin, and Reena Spaulings, which is also a gallery—Claire Fontaine uses its pseudonymous nature to co-opt the practice of art for the purpose of staging ambitious and confrontational projects with a generous dose of subversive wit. It does so in the ironic persona of a “ready-made artist,” a construct it takes to task in a text accompanying its first U.S. show, “Foreigners Everywhere,” as having “no influence over the cultural apparatus, even less over its political function.” In actuality, of course, the collective’s oeuvre demonstrates an enduring engagement with political culture both past and present.

“Foreigners Everywhere” is a case in

point. Mounted in 2005—the same year the collective held its first solo exhibition, at Galerie Meerrettich, in Berlin—and appearing worldwide, it had as its centerpiece a neon sign spelling out the title phrase in a language that varied with the venue: At Reena Spaulings Fine Art, in New York, for example, it was in Arabic; in Colorado, Ute; and in Naples, Italy, Romany. “It articulates the problem with immigration,” says Janelle Reiring, a cofounder of Metro Pictures, who was first drawn to the group by this piece. “Everyone’s an immigrant or a foreigner.”

Change, 2006, composed of U.S. quarters refashioned with covert box-cutter blades, first caught the attention of Marco Altavilla, owner of T293 in Naples, the second gallery to represent Claire Fontaine, after Reena Spaulings.

“The collective’s first show at T293, in 2007, was a passionate discourse around the rioting that occurred in Genoa in 2001 at the G8 conference,” says Altavilla. “The reaction of the public to such an issue is usually emotional, yet no polemics or contestations were filed [by the public about the show].” The exhibition included a light box, from the collective’s series “Visions of the World,” that displayed a map of Italy annotated in Arabic, enabling visitors to see the country through foreign eyes. This elicited a flood of viewer comments. “Many of them,” recalls Altavilla, “noted that the essence of Italy seemed to be more connected with the Ferrari and Madonnas than to the monuments.”

Claire Fontaine is not only about quiet transgression, however. The artists have quite openly articulated what many would



ABOVE:
Passe-Partout (Frankfurt am Main), 2008. Hack-saw blades, bicycle spokes, minilamp, key rings, safety pins, Allen keys, paper clips, spoon, and lynch chain.

OPPOSITE:
Production still from *P.I.G.S.*, 2011, in which a matchstick map of Portugal, Italy, Greece, and Spain was torched.



RIGHT:
Change, 2006.
Ten quarters, steel
box-cutter blades,
solder, and rivets.

BELOW:
*Foreigners Every-
where (Romany)*,
2010. Neon tubing,
electronic trans-
former, and cables,
4 x 90 x 2 in.



regard as heretical views. In an interview with *Bomb Magazine*, for instance, they state that “love, real love, can only be communist, and that’s why love is not fully possible in our society.” They gave that sentiment visual form as part of the 2009 Art Basel Miami Beach Art Projects, installing outside a building in the host city a red, white, and blue neon sign proclaiming *Capitalism Kills Love*. One of the building’s owners objected, so the piece was relocated to another structure, where it continued to attract criticism. According to the artists, a local police officer told one of the installers, “Go back to Europe.”

Even more overtly political are the collective’s densely theoretical texts, manifestos, and missives calling for a romantic yet rational reimagining of the individual’s role in society. For “Inhibitions,” the artists’ third exhibition at Reena Spaulings, they created the three-page text *Human strike has already begun*, which reads in part, “Adopting a behavior that doesn’t correspond to what others tell us about ourselves is the first step of the human strike.”

Still, Claire Fontaine never lets the message overwhelm the medium. “No matter how political or theoretical the work is, they still have to make something you’re seduced by visually,” says Metro’s Reiring. “They present it in a nondogmatic way that makes you think about things. Everything that they want to say has to be in that object. And as an object, it’s something that captures your attention.”

The objects in the series “Passe-Partout” exemplify this dual function of communication and seduction. The series, whose name translates as “master key,” comprises sets of subversive sculptural pieces—hacksaw blades, fishing flies, Allen keys, and lock picks, for instance, strung together by a wire like lures on a fishing line—each referring through its title (*Paris 10ème*, *Chinatown*, *Leurre-Aspen*) or a component totem, like a small figure of the Statue of Liberty, to a particular location. Collections of tools for or diaries of acts of breaking and entering, the works are quiet transgressions of the boundaries that divide the artist, the consumer, and the lock picker. **MP**