



Claire Fontaine, *The Americans*, 2018,  
walker and pinwheels, dimensions variable

6 Despite seeing the show multiple times, documentation has had to fill in major gaps for me while writing this.



# Happy for no Reason

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Claire Fontaine, "Happy For No Reason"

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"Happy for no reason," yes, for what could possibly be an authentic reason to be happy in 2021? Like an opioid addict, one is happy for no reason, except that for the moment, an addiction tenuously preserves sanity or its semblance. And the questions of what precisely sanity or sense-making could mean in the present is a theme that resurfaces relentlessly in this exhibition at Gaga/Reena Spaulings by the duo Claire Fontaine, founded in Paris in 2004 and comprised of artists Fulvia Carnevale and James Thornhill.

Images refracted through cracked iPhone screens provoke us to raise this question: if sanity is to reflect on the fracturing of the apparatus, in this case, we view the increasing virtuality of society as a symbol of the fractures of the society itself? A roulette wheel spins in the center of the room without ever landing, provoking the thrill of a moment in which "all bets have been placed" (*Rien ne va plus*, 2018). We can only wait against our will, in perpetual suspension, perhaps consoled by the fact that the game is not yet over, even in the midst of ongoing catastrophe. Several works offer yet another strategy, suggesting that we might repair our relationship to society by investing in the struggles that have emerged to emancipate us from disintegrating patriarchal structures of sense-making. In this show, Claire Fontaine powerfully embraces the undecidability between these survival strategies in the midst of the inherently ambivalent political reality in which we find ourselves.

We live in a time of affective chaos, in which the most basic ways in which we might make sense of the world are scrambled, foreclosed, and obscured. So suggests *The Luxury of Making Sense*, a sculpturalized text pile comprised of texts of the same name for distribution. In this work, Claire Fontaine describes the erosion of the individual's capacity for empathy, the ability not only to relate to the suffering of others but also to feel the experience of the other within one's own body:

The latest research has proven it: mirror neurons are responsible not only for our empathy but for our capacity of feeling things that we watch as if they were happening to us, or as if we were the ones doing them. We don't need to be told that people are in pain to feel the urge to help them when we see them suffering. The reason that prevents us from doing so



is the same one that discourages us from thinking, experimenting, being courageous: we can't afford it.<sup>1</sup>

Echoing themes from an earlier work by the duo, *Capitalism kills (love)* (2008), *The Luxury of Making Sense* laments the death not only of bourgeois love, romantic love, or courtly love, but more tragically, of love in a collectivity that exists in a space exceeding the individualized body. This work gives voice to the love that emerges in the mirroring between bodies that allows us to feel society reflected within our own sensations.

Absent empathy in a time of neoliberal precarity, the body as a vessel of sensemaking becomes injured, desensitized, and flooded with pain. We could read the kinetic readymade, *The American*, displayed in the center of the gallery, in this light. A walker with American flag pinwheels attached to its arms, *The American* captures with ruthless precision the utterly Nietzschean dynamic of *ressentiment* operative in the age of Trump, in which injury becomes mobilized as populist rage. At one level this is brutal work, its brutality is purely reflective of current realities in the United States. There is a clear reference to the devastating number of homeless individuals one sees in certain American cities, who often have disabilities and debilitating health problems, and who are often unemployed and unable to get their most basic needs met. On another register, the American flag attached to the walker captures the performance of fragility and the woundedness of its complicit subjects. If capitalism kills love, we could say too that pain, of a certain kind, also kills love. *The American* reflects the subject whose anger at his own powerlessness in the face of structural immiseration is mobilized towards nationalism and racial antagonism, all the while exposing the dysfunctionality of increasingly hollow notions of liberal democracy that are blind to the vulnerability and needs of the body.

Two lightbox works, *Untitled (Lament)* and *Untitled (Don't Fix It)*, further reflect upon the brokenness of our perceptual capacities for sensemaking, filtering diverse images through the frame of a lightbox which calls to mind an advertisement in an airport or subway. Yet rather than advertisements, these two images are taken from art history and then projected through the screen of a broken iPhone, whose cracks and fissures become magnified on a large scale, rendering undecidable the fragmentation of the object and the fragmentation of the very perceptual apparatus through which we view these images.

*Untitled (Lament)* displays a fragment of Giotto's depiction of the lamentation of Mary. While in the original, whole painting we would see Mary holding the body of her dead son, in this lightbox we see only the mourning angels flying in the sky as they grieve. The image reflects the fragility and

1 Cf. *The Luxury of Making Sense* (2018), text pile.



brokenness of the world, a human-made catastrophe that brings even the angels to tears. Positioned within the lightbox, the image is captured within a form that is eminently commodifiable. Whether the image is sublime, or grotesquely violent, there are no limits, it seems, to what the smartphone will render consumable.

But though we may consume these images, we do not necessarily know how to make sense of them, for what does it mean to make sense? It has a dual meaning—both of sensing physically, and of partaking in a shared understanding, a *sensus communis*, as Immanuel Kant called it, that allows us to make meaning of our individual impressions. Like a scientist contemplating slides and Petri dishes on a light table, the scale and illumination of these works compel a deeper analysis, not only of the source images but also of the fracture-become-image that seems both to impede and to condition our sight. Once the fracture becomes an image, it provokes reflection on the constitutive brokenness of our damaged perceptual apparatus, not only on what the cracks occlude in our vision, but what they are themselves.

Where *Untitled (Lament)* is mournful and catastrophic, *Untitled (Don't Fix It)*, is playful and poetic. It displays an image of Marcel Duchamp's work, *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even* filtered through another broken screen. Layering fractures upon the fractures, *Don't Fix It* references Duchamp's original glasswork, itself broken in transit to a collector. Duchamp exuberantly pronounced the cracks an optimal finale to work he otherwise did not know how to finish. Here, juxtaposed with *Lament*, *Don't Fix It* exhibits a gesture of *detournement* characteristic of Claire Fontaine's work, a wild swerve between disaster and *jouissance* that emerges in the infinite multiplication of fractures. Hovering in the undecidability between devastation and euphoria, happy for no reason, the work speaks to a joyous mania that is perhaps delusional, yet also necessary to recover that which is precious and real in a damaged existence.

Amid these magnified iPhone screens that render public and massive that which is typically private and tiny, a riff on the ubiquitous Apple logo, entitled *Evil/Good* (2017), hovers above the space, suggesting that if we refuse to make sense ourselves, corporations will step in to do it for us. There is a counterpoint that emerges in the juxtaposition of the lightboxes with *Evil/Good*, which marries a religious meditation on the archaic story of the exit from Eden with a notorious symbol of contemporary corporate logics and their capture of desire. The white apple inserts a disquieting familiarity into the gallery as if to reassure us that this experience is brand-approved.

Yet this apple bears one crucial difference from both the apple of Eden and the apple on our computers: it appears without the typical bite taken out of it, whole and undiminished. It is intact, prior to the fatal moment in which Eve succumbed to serpentine temptation. Maybe she already had everything that she desired. The Apple logo in its usual form typically embraces the bite.





Claire Fontaine,  
*Untitled (Lament)*, 2018,  
industrial frameless,  
LED lighbox with vinyl,  
digital print,  
61 1/2 × 109 × 4 in.

It glorifies the desire that fuels our consumption of technology, where with addictive futility we try to suture what has been fragmented. But to display the apple without the bite, as Claire Fontaine does, is to invoke a diabolical reimagining of the history of desire. The bite is the ceaseless cycle of consumption. It is the lack that fixates desire. If there were no lack if we did not exit Eden, what would we long for? Could we then imagine a world in which love was not almost entirely captured by consumption?