

Claire Fontaine



AIR DE PARIS

Claire Fontaine

Claire Fontaine is a Paris-based collective artist founded in 2004. Borrowing her name from the popular French brand of school exercise books, Claire Fontaine appropriates the notion of ready-made through the use of neon, sculpture, painting, text and video. Her work comments on global events, politics and society through their “détournement” of powerful symbols and status objects, and criticizes the political impotence and the crisis of singularity that seem to define contemporary life today.

A monograph about the artist has been published in 2012 by Walther König entitled *Foreigners Everywhere* with texts by Bernard Blistène, Nicolas Liucci-Goutnikov, John Kelsey, Hal Foster. She has published with Mute an anthology of her texts entitled *Human strike has already begun and other texts* (2012), with One Star Press *Some instructions for the sharing of private property* (2011) and with Dilecta *Vivre, vaincre* (2009).

Les Printemps seront silencieux, Le Confort Moderne, Poitiers.

02.02 - 28.04.2019.

© Photo Aurélien Mole

AIR DE PARIS



Siamo con voi nella notte (Italian), 2007-2020

Blue Led letters, framework, transformers and cables.

19 5/8» x 433» x 3 7/8»

Museo Novecento, Piazza di Santa Maria Novella 10, Firenze, Italy, , 12.12.20 - 11.03.2021

© Photo Leonardo Morfini



Ozone Flag (I), (II) et (III), 2020
Printed polyester, cotton and rivets
243,84 x 152,40 cm each
Edition of 3 each
©National Palace of Culture, Sofia, 2020



Dior Autumn-Winter Runway show, 2020-2021, Tuileries, Paris (cur. Maria Grazia Chiuri)



CONSENT, 2020

green LED 3D letters, programmer, framework and support

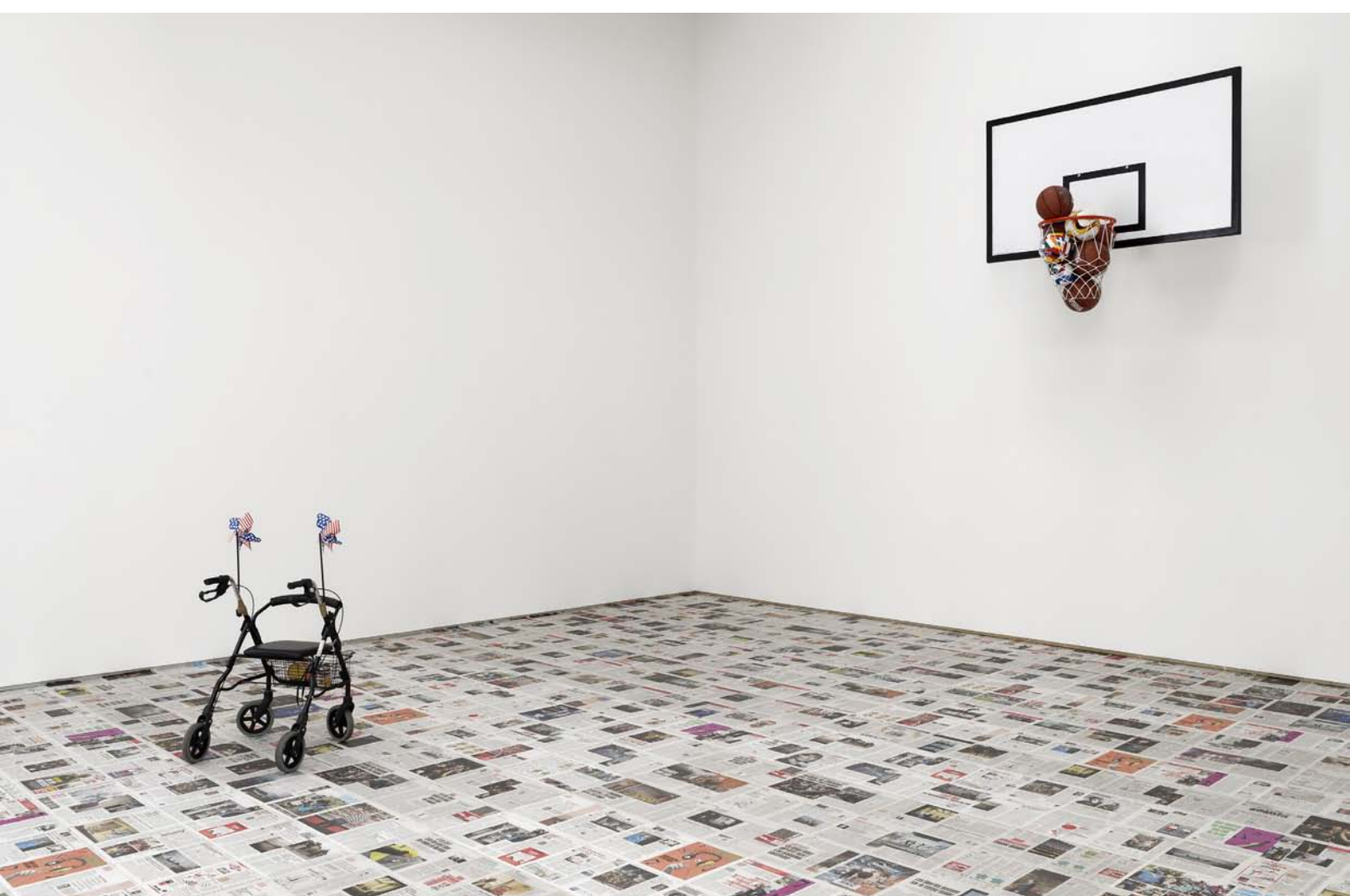
60 x 339 x 25 cm

Unique

© photo Daniel Salemi - Betak



Too Late to Read, Longtang, Zurich, 2019.



Les Printemps seront silencieux, Le Confort Moderne, Poitiers.
02.02 - 28.04.2019.
© Photo Aurélien Mole



The American, 2018
walker, pinwheels and canned goods
70 x 50 x 45 cm
Unique © photo Aurélien Mole



Untitled (sous les pavés le bac à sable), 2014
wood, tarpaulin, sand and 120 cobble stones
30 x 120 x 140 cm
Unique
© photo Aurélien Mole



Untitled (Postcard rack/ #me too olympia), 2018
postcard rack and renewable offset postcards
150 x 50 x 50 cm
105 x 148 mm (each postcard)
Edition of 3 © photo Aurélien Mole



Untitled (Postcard rack / L.G.B.T.Q. / L.G.B.T.Q. shaved), 2017
postcard rack and renewable offset postcards
variable dimensions
Edition of 3 © photo Marc Damage



The Trickster, 2014

Plinth, mannequin, make-up, false eyelashes, shoes, socks, underpants, vest, trousers, shirt, jacket, top-hat and silver make-up and paint.

233 x 52 x 40 cm

without frame plinth 40 x 51 x 35 cm

Unique

© photo Aurélien Mole



Les Printemps seront silencieux, Le Confort Moderne, Poitiers.
02.02 - 28.04.2019.
© Photo Aurélien Mole



Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité, 2018
hi-viz vests, curtain poles and metal fittings
250 x 120 x 300 cm
Unique © photo Aurélien Mole



The luxury of making sense (text pile), 2018
double sided photocopy, spray-paint and plinth
variable dimensions
Unique © photo Aurélien Mole



Untitled (My Ass), 2017
readymade bidet and cardboard box sized plinth
variable dimensions
without frame
Edition of 8 © photo Aurélien Mole



The series of neon signs *Foreigners Everywhere* in several different languages is named after an anarchist collective from Turin that fights racism through its different activities. The ambivalence in their name made me wonder what might happen if it was physically and materially displaced into different sites and contexts. It's clear now that immigration and emigration are not simple epiphenomena linked to the economy. They are existential and perceptual experiences in their own right.

Etrangers partout (QDM), 2010-2013

group show *Tous, des sang-mêlés*, MAC VAL, Vitry-sur-Seine
 April - September 2017
 © Photo Aurélien Mole



Foreigners everywhere (French), 2013

Foreigners Everywhere series

Suspended, wall or window mounted neon, framework, electronic transformer and cables.

16 x 173 x 12 cm

© Photo Sidney Guillemin



Foreigners everywhere (Armenian), 2013

Argon, neon glass, framework, electronic transformer and cables (yellow)

11 x 137 x 5 cm

Edition of 5

© photo DR

Etrangers Partout, La Bouilladisse, Frac PACA, 09.19.13 - 11.30.13



Foreigners everywhere (Polish), 2013

Argon, neon glass, framework, electronic transformer and cables, green

14 x 129 x 12 cm

Edition of 5

© photo DR

Etrangers Partout, La Bouilladisse, Frac PACA, 09.19.13 - 11.30.13



Foreigners everywhere (Romanian), 2013

Argon, neon glass, framework, electronic transformer and cables

11 x 182 x 14 cm

Edition of 5

© photo DR

Etrangers Partout, La Bouilladisse, Frac PACA, 09.19.13 - 11.30.13



WAGENI MAHALI KOTE

Foreigners everywhere (Swahili), 2013

Argon, neon glass, framework, electronic transformer and cables, white

11 x 170 x 5 cm

Edition of 5

© photo DR



Foreigners Everywhere (Spanish), 2008

Argon, neon glass, framework, electronic transformer and cables. Color : E12 Aqua

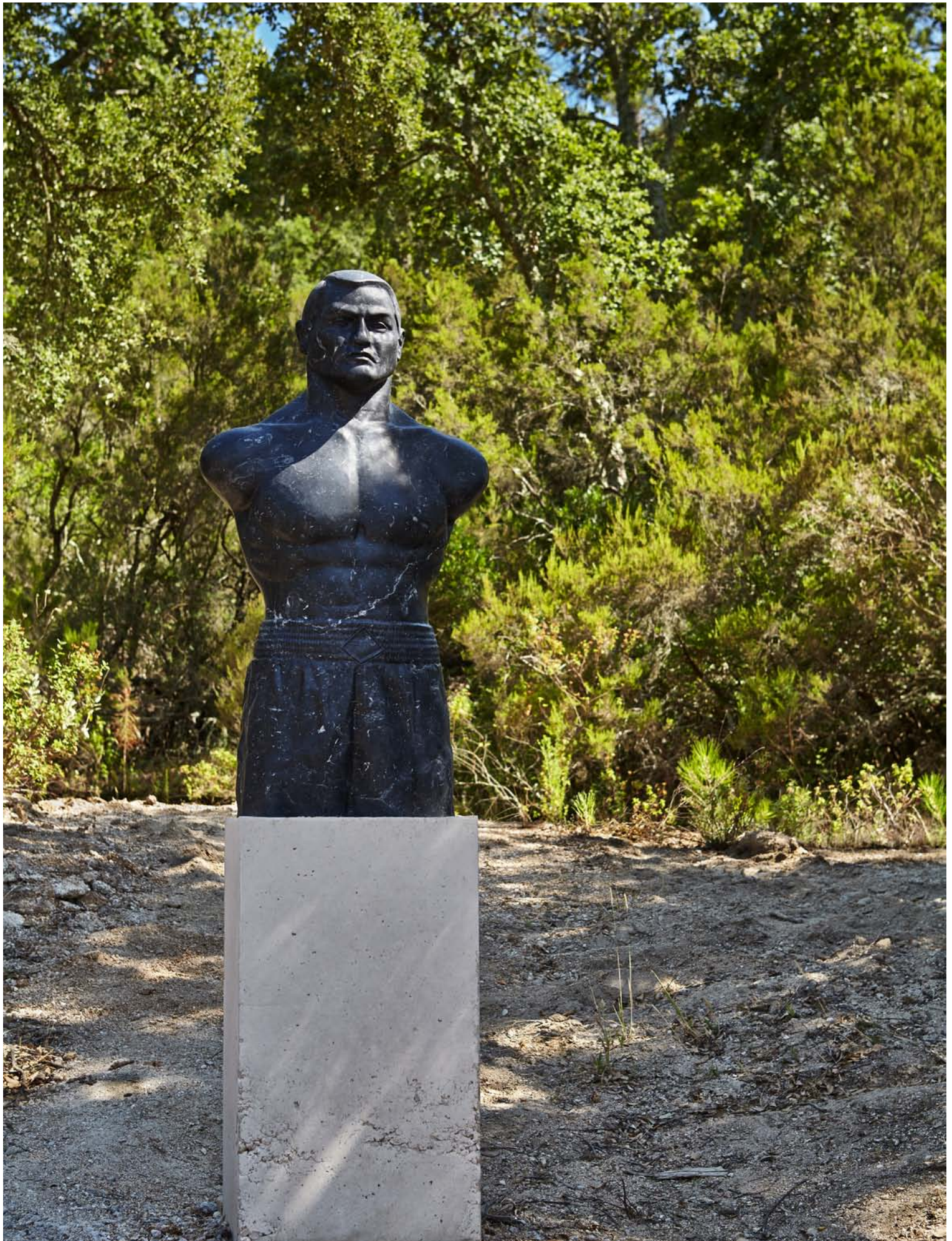
9,8 x 215,9 x 4,5 cm

Edition of 5 © photo DR

Jumex, *The Traveling Show* cur. Adriano Pedrosa : Intruders (Foreigners Everywhere, 2004-10), 2010



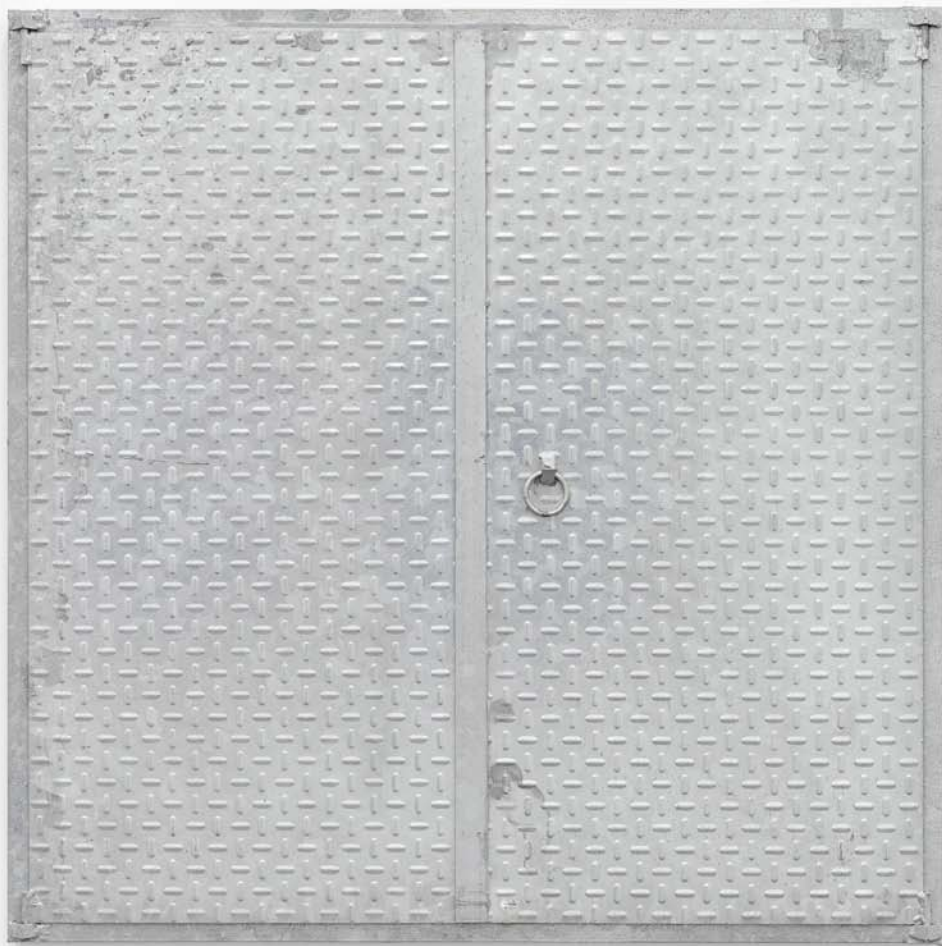
group show **Beyond Borders**, Triennale de Beaufort, De Nachtegaal
21.06 - 21.09. 2015
© Triennale de Beaufort, 2015. Photo Lieve Neerman



Bob, 2010
View at Domaine du Muy, Le Muy, July - October 2015
© Photo JC Lett
Courtesy Domaine du Muy



Love is never enough, Air de Paris, Paris.
October 31 - December 19, 2015
© Photo Aurélien Mole



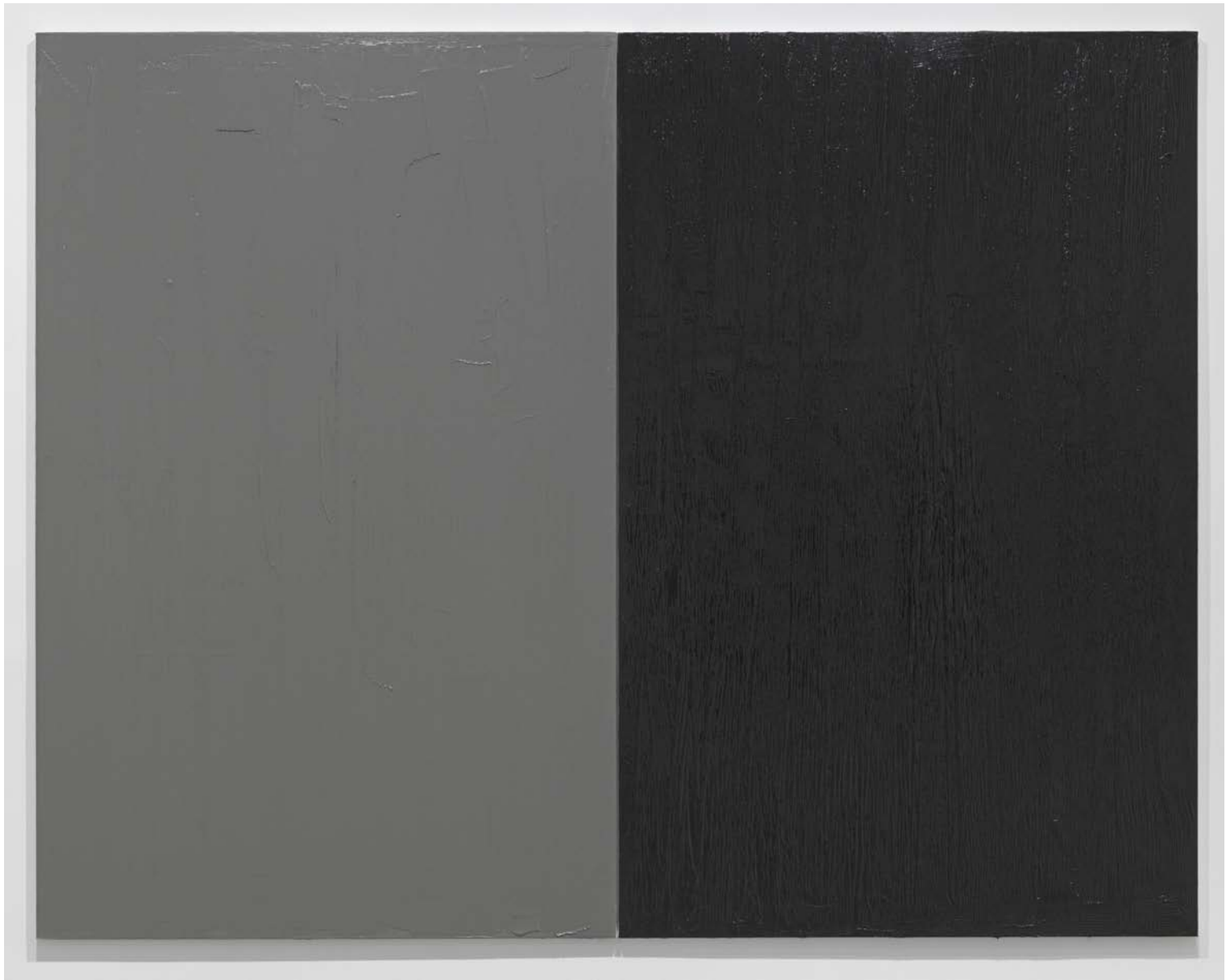
Untitled (Trap), 2015

Readymade galvanised trap door, chains, solder and painted framework

105 x 105 x 3.5 cm, Weight : c. 50kg

Edition of 3

© photo DR



Untitled (Fresh monochrome / concrete / black), 2015

Anti-climb paint on canvas

210 x 268 x 4 cm

Unique

© photo DR



Love is never enough, Air de Paris, Paris.
October 31 - December 19, 2015
© Photo Aurélien Mole



Untitled (Chien), 2015
Digital inkjet matte print. Mounted on aluminum
120 x 70 cm
Edition of 5
© photo Aurélien Mole

art history
in search of characters...

readymades belong to everyone

Glady Stewass
LEE LOZANO
GUERRILLA GIRLS
Jenny Holzer
BARBARA KRUGER
VALIE EXPORT
Cady Noland
Marta Roth
SPURRYMAN
ART AND FEMINISM
LOUISE LAWLER

UTOPIA PRESS

If you are sick of watching the expressions of traditional male creativity and the worship of market oriented proceeds. If you are not an ignorant and know how much social movements, technology and ultra-literature have transformed authenticity during the past sixty years. If you think the time has come to finally use the freedom that women have fought, and continue fighting for everyday, then you must take action and make wonderful, extraordinary and frightening artworks that will change people's perception of reality and will touch their soul like no political speech can.

To be an artist you don't need to be gifted with your hands, you don't need to have a sense of color or composition, you need the deepest sensation of being alive, you need a desperate quest for intensity and meaning, you need to understand that readymades belong to everyone because we are ourselves readymade subjects and we break this spell and reinvent life.

Because we are convinced that the time has come for women to rewrite and destroy the rusty chains that will hold them back from making freedom possible for everyone, don't wait any longer!

history is in the making : be part of the story!

art history
in search of characters...

readymades belong to everyone

pop art
FERRIS
WARHOL
BEUYS zu Ehren
CUBISM
BROODTHAERS
DUCHAMP

UTOPIA PRESS

Following its creation in New York in December 1967, the agency "readymades belong to everyone" is pleased to announce the opening of its french subsidiary, a few ready made appartement a son les mards.

If you are an amateur or professional art lover, a collector looking for total involvement in an ambitious artistic project, we have developed, just for you, a program that today takes its place at the corner of contemporary artistic debates.

With us, you will find all the facilities you need to have your name definitively linked with a work of art, a work that will have been waiting only for you and your signature to be called into being. As the work's sole and absolute author, you will find yourself among the greatest names in the catalogs and programs of all the best museums, galleries and private collections.

Because we are convinced that the time has come for a total revision of authorial rights, we are counting on you and your enthusiasm : together, we will write a new chapter in the history of contemporary art.

history is in the making : be part of the story!

Untitled (advertising, advertising), 2015
Digital vinyl print on frameless industrial lightboxes (two elements).
2 x (160 x 123 x 10 cm)
Edition of 3
© photo DR



group show **The Crime Was Almost Perfect**, Witte de With, Rotterdam, 2014

© Photo Cassander Eeftink Schattenkerk

© Witte de With



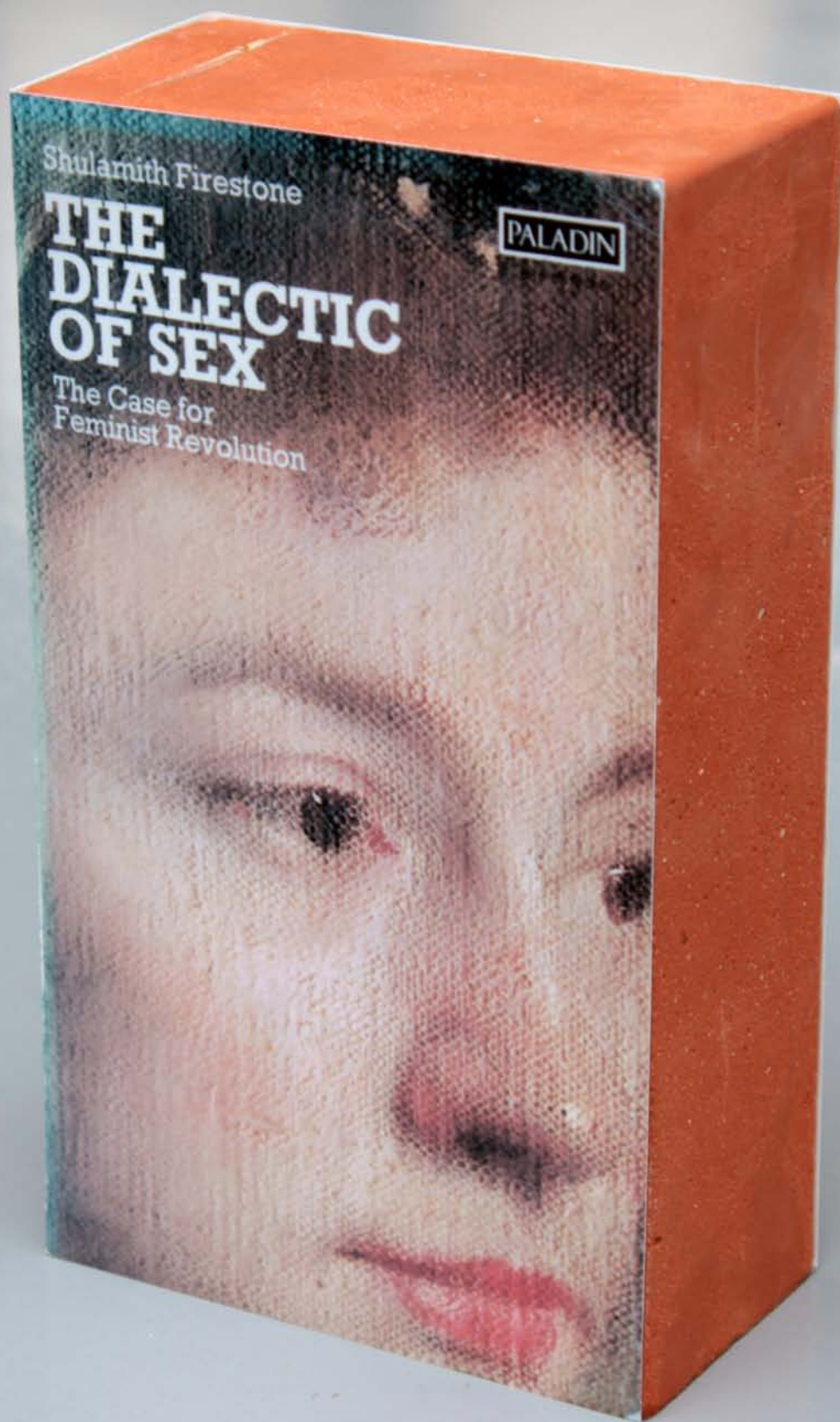
Dictionary of Untranslatables Brickbats, 2014

Two elements: bricks and brick fragments, glues and archival digital prints

260 x 196 x 59

Edition of 3

© photo DR



The dialectics of sex brickbat, 2014

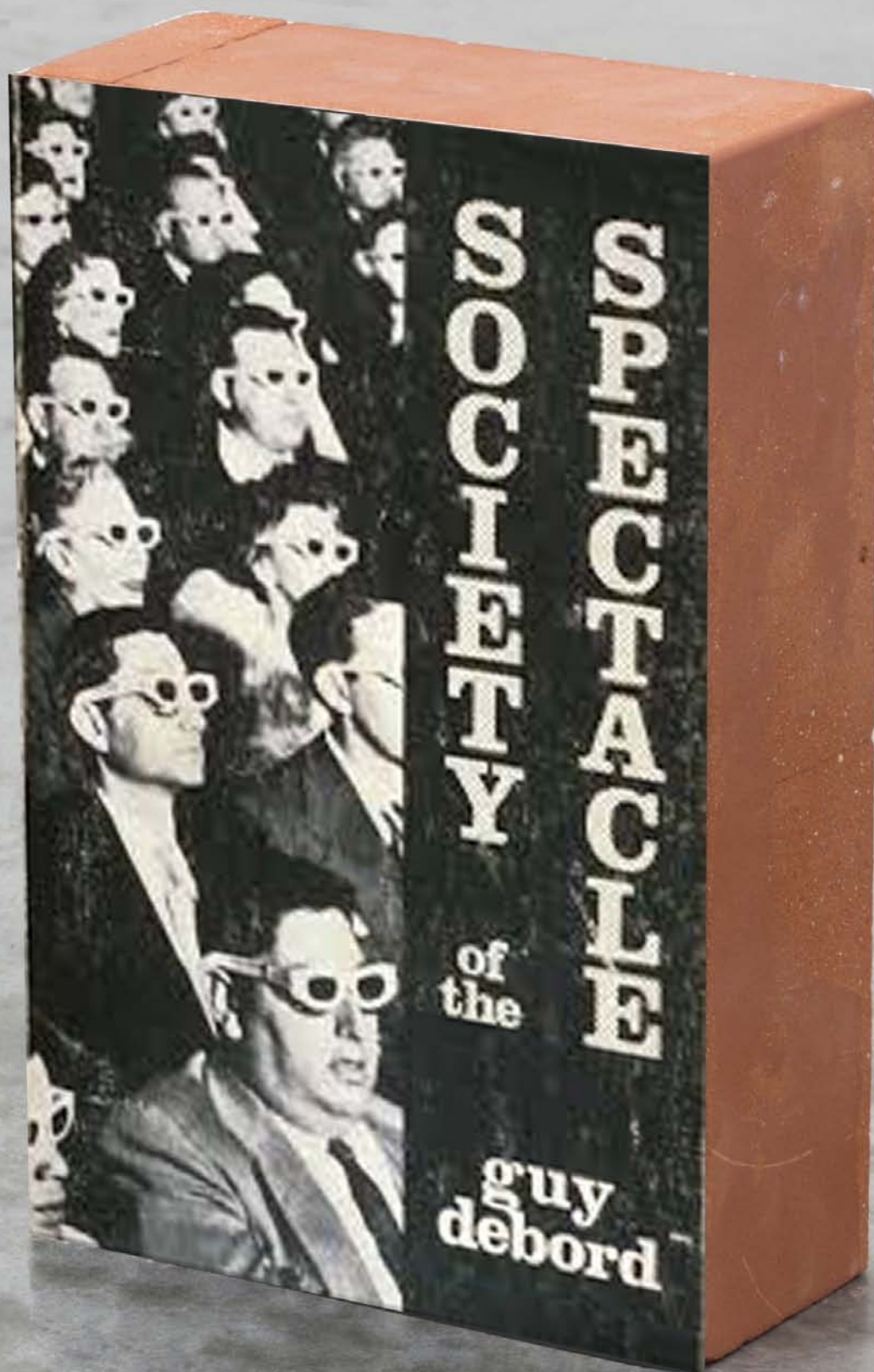
Brick and brick fragments, archival digital print and optional elastic band

196 x 113 x 59 mm

Edition of 5 © photo DR



Défaire le genre brickbat, 2007
Firebricks, folded archival print on paper
23,5 x 15 x 5,8 cm
Edition of 3 © photo DR



Society of the Spectacle Brickbat, 2006
Firebricks, folded Archival print on paper
21,6 x 13,5 x 6 cm
Edition of 5 © photo James Thornhill



Suspension (Lighter), 2014
lighter, jubilee clip and beaded chain
variable dimensions
Unique
© photo DR



Using Walls, Floors, and Ceilings: Claire Fontaine, The Jewish Museum, NY
November 8, 2013 - April 20, 2014 © The Jewish Museum, NY.
© Photo David Heald



Sell Your Debt, Queen' Nails gallery, San Francisco, 2013

Jurors (Art)

Jurors are always apt to be wrong. The only argument in favor of this jury is that the three differed in their selection of the first, second and third prizes, showing how close the decision was. But even the conviction of having been fair does not change my doubts on the right to judge at all.

Statement published in the catalog of the Bel-Ami International Competition and Exhibition 1946-47: *The Temptation of St. Anthony* (Washington: The American Federation of Arts), p. 3.





Untitled (No Present), 2013

wall mounted or suspended neon, 6500 k, 12 mm neon glass, back painted. Frame mounted electronic transformer
177 x 20 x 5 cm

Edition of 5

© photo Peter Hauck



group show **Atlas critique**, Parc Saint Léger, Contemporary art centre, Pougues-les-eaux, 2012



Passe-partout (Shanghai), 2012

Hacksaw blades, bicycle spokes, razor blade, paper-clips, allen keys, safety pins, nylon cord, mini torch and key-rings
variable dimensions

Unique

© photo DR





The House of Energetic Culture, 2012

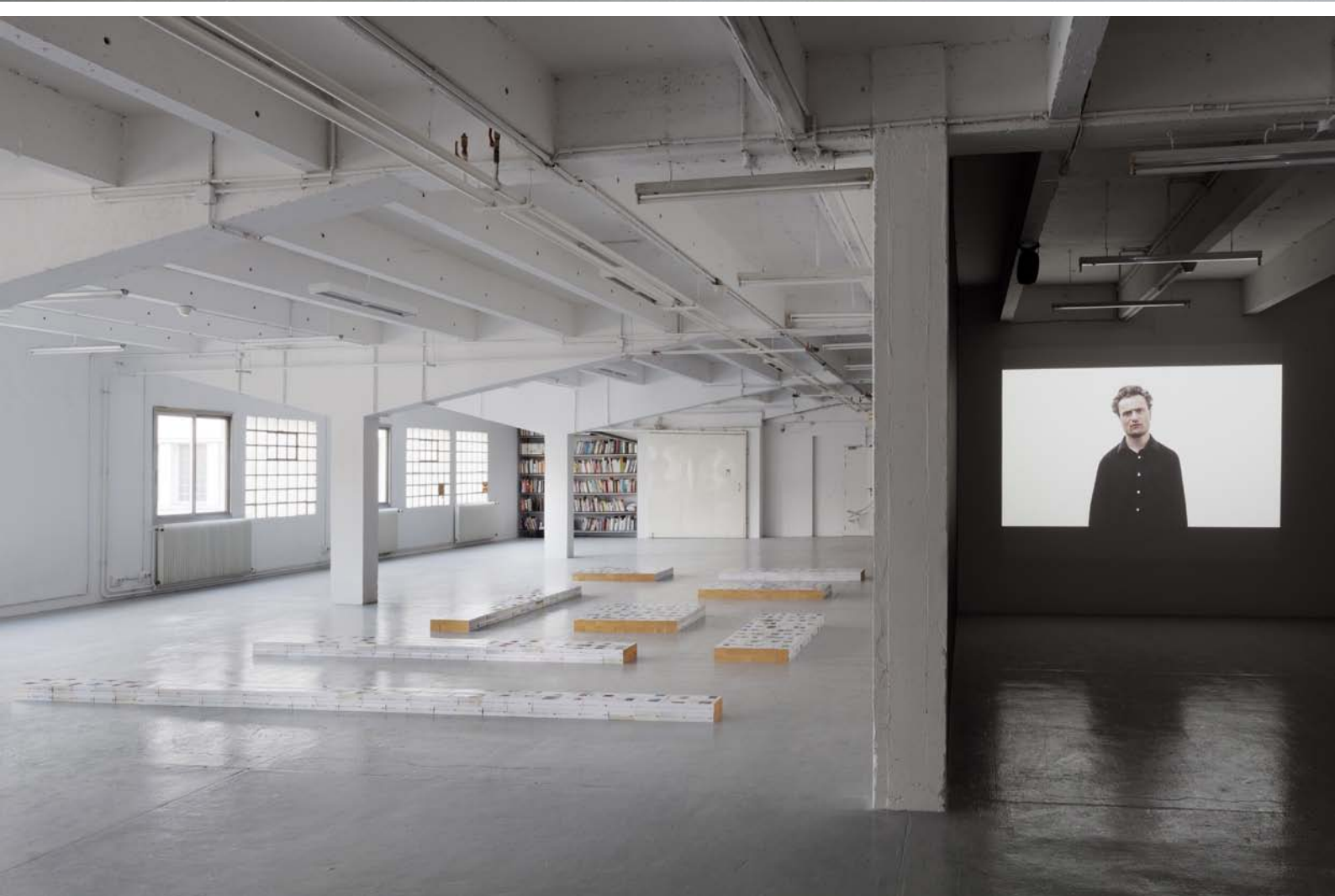
Double and triple outline neon glass on aluminum characters, aluminum framework, transformers, flasher unit and cabling
approx. 2850 x 200 x 150 cm

Edition of 3

Manifesta 9, Waterschei-Genk, Limburg, 2012



group show Néon, who's afraid of red, yellow and blue?, La Maison rouge, Paris, France, 2012



Equivalences, La Douane, Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris, 2012



Généralités, Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris, 2012
© photo Kleinfenn



Untitled (Suspended Battering Ram), 2011
American made battering ram, cables and fasteners
variable dimensions
Edition of 3
© photo Marc Damage



Fighting Gravity, Regina Gallery, January 28 - March 12, 2011



Some intructions for the sharing of private property, Onestar Press, Paris, 2011

© Photo Kleinfenn



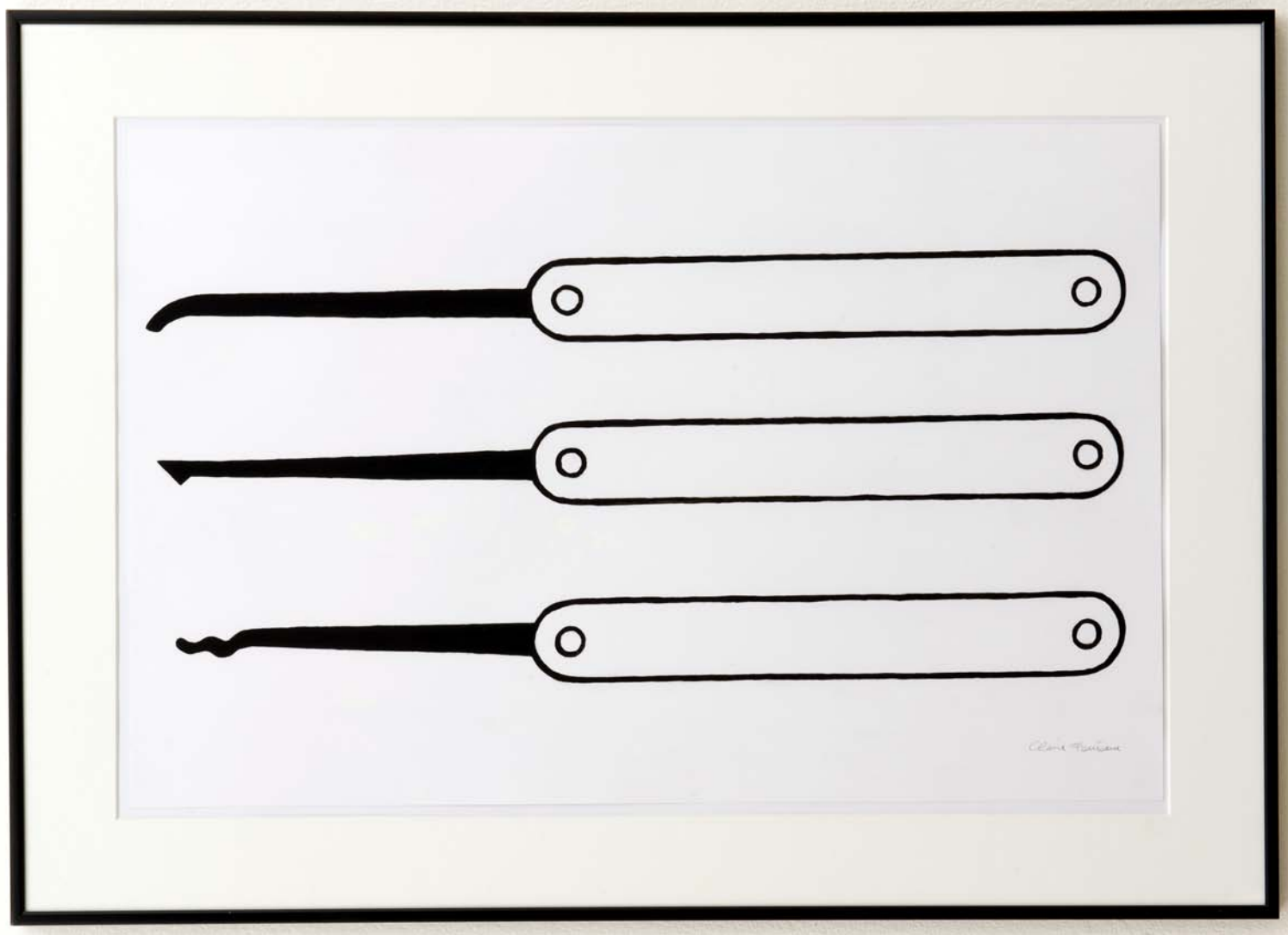
Covert Table, 2011

Ikea table, lock-picking station, modified single handcuff with key, modified quarter , micro sd card and aluminium ring, key
hider, resin, plastic screws and zip ties

80 x 75 x 75 cm

Unique

© photo Kleinefenn



Studies for some instructions for the sharing of private property : Hook, Diamond, Rake, 2011

gouache and pencil on paper

38 x 58 cm

framed 71 x 51 cm

Unique

© photo DR



WE'RE ALL FROM SMÅLAND

We are all from Smaland (black), 2011
spray paint and silkscreen on canvas
94 x 94 cm
Unique
© photo Marc Damage



Burning of P.I.G.S., 2011
Matches, variable dimensions

group show **Res publica**, Modern Art Museum, Moscow, 2011



Untitled (Lost), 2011
modified street bollard, sleeve, bolt and child's coat
84 x 40 x 33 cm
Edition of 3
© photo Marc Damage



No Family Life, Air de Paris, February 11 - March 19, 2011
© Photo Marc Dommage, DR



No Family Life , 2011
white painted neon, transformer and animator
20 x 206 x 15 cm
Edition of 3
© photo Marc Damage



France (burnt/unburnt), 2011

Map of France made up from match sticks, burnt or unburnt
variable dimensions

Unique

© photo Marc Domage

No Family Life, Air de Paris, February 11 - March 19, 2011

© Photo Marc Domage, DR

Lien Vidéo : <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UwnwjyEU5VU>



France (burnt/unburnt), 2011

Map of France made up from match sticks, burnt or unburnt
variable dimensions

Unique

© photo Marc Domage

No Family Life, Air de Paris, February 11 - March 19, 2011

© Photo Marc Domage, DR

Lien Vidéo : <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UwnwjyEU5VU>



Recession Sculpture (GDF), 2011

domestic French gas meter, copper pipes, gas tap, solder, motion dectector and Karcher brand vacuum cleaner
265 x 50 x 60 cm

Edition of 5

© photo Marc Domage



Untitled (Changing station), 2011

stainless steel changing station, micro aquarium and fresh water clams

58,5 x 93,5 x 37,5 cm

Edition of 3

© photo Marc Damage



Hope, 2010
white vinyl readymade and plinth
37 x 14 cm
Unique
© photo DR



Playstation PSP playing Guy Debord's *La Société du Spectacle* (1973) -mute, 2007

Playstation PSP, film mpeg4, mute

88 min

16,5 x 7 x 2 cm

Edition of 5 © photo Marc Damage

Footnotes on the state of exception

1. War happens. We don't know anything about it, and this is what they keep telling us. Since childhood, war – always one and multiple – was on our plate, in what shouldn't go to waste. They resented us for our presumed ignorance of war, as if we had ignored a pain or sickness, or simply as if this always-absent-war was now over for good, something one had to remember, like a dead family member. Something sad.

2. Well-being. All those born far from war, or after it, know very well that it isn't over. They know it in its state of possibility, as a nightmare that always might come true. And when war explodes in the distance, wasting the childhoods, the kitchen smells, the bed sheets of others, its perception becomes disquieting. The past has dug a grave in the present and again buries the living there – so they say, but it's a lie. Because war is truly another name for our present, and not a story of distant days. It lives in bodies, it flows through institutions, traverses relationships between strangers and acquaintances, even here, in this moment, for a long time now.

The more we pretend to be innocent and alien to events, the more guilty we know we are. Guilty of not being present where blood is shed, but somehow present anyway...

They used to tell us, "you kids have it all" as if saying "you son of a bitch", but who has invoked and built this wealth, this inexhaustible source of war?

Sometimes we suspect that if war is elsewhere, life must be too.

3. Rest in peace... We know everything about war, in the same way that we know everything about prison, since "peace" and "free life" already contain these, already imply them. Despite this, war has become someone else's job, what we are *forced* to ignore. Everywhere in public space we are asked to forget about its possibility or its reality, to be surprised by it and never an accomplice. We are thanked in advance for our vigilance. We are either collaborators in the social peace or partisans of terror.

War no longer concerns us, we look at it and it doesn't look back, it is too close. Its distance from us is not the same as that between a spectator and a football match, where we can still desire victory for one team and defeat for another. It resides in the limbo of things that we would prefer to *abolish*. So that we never have to take a side or believe that words have a weight that can be felt in the body, or that life has a meaning and that this meaning can also drive it to its end.

4. ...and live in war. If we don't know what it means to live in war it's because we don't know what it means to live in peace. The more we are governed, the more we live in fear and the more we need other people to arm themselves in our place, and that's how war continues. Past struggles for the rights and freedoms of expression are not knowable for us as an experience (of conflict and victory), only as a *result*. We are nothing but the dazed heirs of a fortune that's impossible to spend: an archaeological inheritance crumbling a little more every day, with no use value.

These old victories are not even acquired, but something already lost, because we can't fight to defend them when they are threatened. Becoming-revolutionary is a process that seems to exclude our participation. Forgetting the oppression of control in exchange for

the guarantee of protection, we have expelled ourselves from our own history. And so we mistake the struggle for the war, and we let it become at the same time criminalized and delegated to professionals. Rather, the struggle is what emerges everywhere from the disproportion between what governments demand and what the governed can give them. In the struggle one seeks the people who will accompany and support us, whereas in war one goes alone and comes back alone (because it's always the others that die.)

5. *The game of war.* Historical avant-gardes and war: a love story and not even a tormented one, a romance with almost no obstacles, apart from a few expatriations. One could still – before the state of exception – play the exceptional singularity, play the game of war with one's friends and rivals. But this is no longer the case, for us. The war-paradigm of rivalries between small groups, the war-matrix of the guerrilla's imaginative, paramilitary strategies, the surrealists, the situationists, the mao-dadaists (and the list goes on) lived in a world where words and experience entertained a passionate conversation that could turn extreme, change into a scandal or even be brutally interrupted. These were toy-wars, wars for snobs. Nowadays we can frame and exhibit these beautiful gesticulations and return to the curfew of our already-filmed everyday life, to surfaces saturated with advertising images, to our socio-economically integrated solitudes. Let's understand once and forever that the battleground has changed, that we need to invent much more ambitious *dérives* if we want to escape the amplified normalcy of our perceptions.

6. *Visions of the world.* As soon as our consciousness is immobilised, we've been comfortably tucked into the nightmare of an unreadable, deaf-mute present, in a territory marbled by anxieties.

The cells in which they disappear those presumed guilty, the barred rooms with chairs and a desk where tortures result in confessions, these continue to exist, and even though we can't see them, we perceive them. Their smell, their silence, their white lights populate the invisible, administrative levels of everyday life. They have not disappeared. The eternal night of the television news brings us this intuition along with images of the actual war theatres.

From police stations, hospitals, motorways, schools, prisons, high-security zones and barracks, to the trucks, trains and planes exporting hatred in the name of war, or what we agree to call war – all these things fill us with fear. Because they contain us and we contain them.

7. *Coherences.* Sometimes, in the insecure rhythms of our lives, we recognize a line of coherence. It's the same line that transmits the knowledge of a war we haven't experienced but whose effects and affects circulate within our bodies. The line that connects the most common gestures of our everyday life here with the disasters that happen elsewhere – an electric line, a paratactical line conveying this link made of a lack of links. Eichmann lined up numbers upon numbers without ever being bothered by the idea that these represented human beings sent to the slaughterhouse. Contemporary art has even made this habit of participating in the disaster without being able to question it into its basic, structural principle. It builds surfaces of coexistence between incompatible elements, it questions what we can't understand, and nevertheless it contributes – as

much as these lines do – to the functioning of the machine. The means either to stop our becoming or to transform our subjectivity don't seem accessible to us any longer. The form of our life has been designed by somebody else: we are now free only to choose the form of our products and to hope that our private property will protect us from war. Meanwhile, private property is itself the first stage of war.

8. *The night where all singularities are whatever.* The simple soldier or the armed partisan of a cause are always represented as anonymous, as cannon fodder. Doomed to be pulverised for a nation or an ideal, they are abstract bodies, clockwork lives. The simple citizen, or the free civilian, on the other hand, is the unique individual, different from any other, taken up in the specificity of his social relationships, which are supposed to isolate him from his neighbour, to magnify him in his irreducible identity. Nevertheless, we can look everywhere for this truly human individual without meeting him in any region of the work world: over the counter, in the supermarkets and in the offices, we interact with interchangeable and insignificant singularities, all reproducing the same task so as not to be expelled from the productive process.

9. *Exceptions.* On the other hand. Experience, as impoverished as it is, teaches us that love is not an attachment to a pre-defined subject, that what we love or what links us to the other is their singularity as such, their whatever-singularity. Because love has neither a specific cause nor a reason that can be communicated. The more we are governed or integrated into a discipline, the more controlled and isolated we are in our performances and our behaviours. Government sees the masses, but only looks at individuals. A loved singularity is whatever and non-interchangeable, whereas a productive singularity is isolated and individuated, and yet replaceable at a moment's notice. The productive rules of universal substitution make our certainty begin to vacillate. The knowledge that the organs of control possess of our lives makes us all exceptions in the eyes of power. And when we meet the arm of the law, what it does with us will not depend on established conventions, but on the contingency of this particular friction. Our present has become unpredictable, each instant a potentially exceptional moment. This, precisely, is the new configuration of war, that of Identifying Power versus whatever-singularities, leading some to guerrilla suicide, others to an anonymous solitude surrounded by objects.

10. *Rules of the Game.* Living in society has become a new experience. And terrifying. Traditional humanism assures us that progress consists in the improved administration of our lives. But now we know that the discipline that governs us can just as well produce merchandise as corpses. Our perception of this new state of things does not translate into words, it is made up of images and gestures. This new solitude has changed us into extraordinarily contemplative beings. Thousands of devices offer us an intermittent and hypnotic visualization of the monopoly of violence that governs us. Our contact with geopolitical information increases but is less and less intimate, and vocabulary, summoned to define all these exteriorities, begins to fray. The bodies receiving this flood of frontline news have become misaligned. Gazes rest on screens. Memory-screens, image-screens: a

fragmented reality gives rise to the need for new distractions. Our perceptions are aligned only sporadically: here is the most devastating effect of the new war. This is also the reason we cannot counter it on the terrain of images or of iconoclasm (the dark screen is not the same as a monochrome, since the painter never pretended to inform us directly about the state of the world).

And yet, the spectator never had so much influence, because his condition was never so shared.

It's the ethical use value of our perceptions that remains to be negotiated and established, but it's already there as potential, waiting for the gesture that will put it into circulation. Because in times of war it's not only monetary exchanges but the entire economy of desire that is touched by inflation.

HUMAN STRIKE
HAS ALREADY
BEGUN

'Grève humaine' is the French expression for 'human strike', designating the most generic movement of revolt against any oppressive condition. It's a more radical and less specific strike than a general strike or a wildcat strike.

Human strike attacks the economic, affective, sexual and emotional positions within which subjects are imprisoned. It provides an answer to the question 'how do we become something other than what we are?' It isn't a social movement although within the uprising and agitations it can find a fertile ground upon which to develop and grow, sometimes even against these.

For example, it has been said that the feminist movement in Italy during the 1970s demolished the leftist political organisations, but what hasn't been said is what leftist political organisations were doing to the women who were part of them. Human strike can be a revolt within a revolt, an unarticulated refusal, an excess of work or the total refusal of any labour, depending on the situation. There is no orthodoxy for it. If strikes are made in order to improve specific aspects of the workers' conditions, they are always a means to an end. But human strike is a pure means, a way to create an immediate present here where there is nothing but waiting, projecting, expecting, hoping.

Adopting a behaviour that doesn't correspond to what others tell us about ourselves is the first step of the human strike: the libidinal economy, the secret texture of values, lifestyles and desires hidden by the political economy are the real plane of consistency of this revolt.

'We need to change ourselves': everyone agrees on this point, but who to become and what to produce are the first questions that arise as soon as this discussion takes place in a collective context. The reflex of refusing any present that doesn't come with the guarantee of a reassuring future is the very mechanism of the slavery we are caught in and that we must break. To produce the present is not to produce the future.

'How do I do it and where do I start?' Surely everyone knows this better for oneself than anybody else ever could: no more leaders, no more teachers, no more students, here comes the time of inventing new mediations between people, and we are already in the midst of the work of the human strike. There are no preliminaries, no intermediary steps, no organisers in charge of the logistical aspects. The work of the human strike strikes against itself. It transforms at the same time what we see and the organs we see with. It transforms both ourselves and the people who made this transformation possible. It kills the bourgeois in all of us, liberating unknown forces.

Explaining what human strike is, how to map it, how to articulate it, is like giving a technical lesson of sexual education to the person we wish to seduce. It is like describing to ourselves the overwhelming ocean of our possible madness whilst sitting safely on the shore. A female voice from the movement of '77 said:

The return of the repressed threatens all my projects of work, research, politics. Does it threaten them or is it the truly political thing in myself, to which I should give relief and

room? [...] Silence brought the failure of this part of myself that desired to make politics, but it affirmed something new. There has been a change, I have started to speak out, but during these days of silence I felt that the affirmative part of myself was occupying the entire space again. I convinced myself of the fact that the mute woman is the most fertile objection to our politics. The non-political digs tunnels that we mustn't fill with earth.

Writing about the human strike is itself the experience of a double bind, it's like walking on a suspended wire between making things possible and exorcising them through language.

There are no lessons of human strike, it is nothing but a disquieting possibility that we must remain intimate with. We are remunerated neither for the work of love nor for being able to find the right words to bridge the social fractures that separate all of us. We do not get paid for making everyday life more enjoyable or simply possible for ourselves and for other people. The unremunerated labour of the affects continuously crushes the insulting pyramid of capitalistic values but this conflict is effaced day after day.

Without the mothers' excess of love for their children there would be no one left to exploit. Without the refusal to believe that we can still communicate non-commercial sensations and feelings to each other, the prostitutional business of advertising would lack even the syntax to make itself understandable. Wherever it takes place, human strike declares the end of the criminal fiction of the equivalence between money and

time, money and space, money and food, money and bodies.

If the current negotiations on the right to pollute the planet have just reached a dead end, we could already read in a French newspaper on 11 May 2009 that:

in order not to ignore the irreparable damage that the development of industrial civilization causes to the ecosystem, we have decided to put a price on the natural resources that are pillaged day by day. It's established that one hectare of forest is worth 970 euros and that one hectare of meadow is worth 600 euros. It's established that the value of the extinction of the bees is calculated on the basis of the cost of artificial pollination made by humans.

There was no mention of the cost of the extinction of the humans who would not know what a bee is, its presence in the warm air, its colours, the wax, the honey, the flowers inclining under its weight or the meaning of Mandeville's tale. No logical movement can oppose such a state of things, a new wave of irrational actions must disorganise the ordinary progression of the disaster. Human strike simply declares the effective bankruptcy of the market economy that pretends to own life but endlessly annihilates it.

No mourning of the impossible revolutions can get in the way of the human strikers because human strike is not a mission, nor a project or a program. It is the gesture that makes legible the silent political element in everything: women's lives, the dissatisfaction of rich people, the anger of privileged teenagers, the refusal to

submit to the mediocrity of necessity, ordinary racism, and so on.

When we inhabit language we place ourselves on the permeable membrane between life and desires, where it clearly appears that life and desires are made of the same fabric. Desiring together makes things come true even when they are not technically true. Witches were burned for having truly been flying in the night and for having actually kissed Satan's ass. When we come out of prison we are delinquents, even if we were innocents when they first arrested us by mistake.

We constantly become what other people want us to be, but starting a human strike means inverting that movement and refusing to act upon the actions of others through the use of power; it means opposing a philosophy of management with the material presence of potentiality. Reality can be more than what any realistic representation of the facts offers. The very concept of reality progressively starts to fade when we lose touch with the possible and the impossible that human strike points to.

NYC, 17 December 2009

EXISTENTIAL
METONYMY AND
IMPERCEPTIBLE
ABSTRACTIONS

1. Thinking Against Ourselves

'Human strike' designates the most generic movement of revolt. The adjective 'human' in this case doesn't have any moral connotation, it is just more inclusive than 'general', because every human strike is an amoral gesture and it is never merely political or social. It attacks the economic, affective, sexual and emotional conditions that oppress people.

The interest and the difficulty of this concept lies in the fact that it is a concept that thinks against itself. And thinking against ourselves will be the necessity of the revolts to come, as desubjectivisation (taking distance from what we are, becoming something else) will be the only way to fight our exploitation. In fact our new working conditions see us being exploited as much in the workplace as outside of it, as the workplace has both exploded and liquefied and so gained our whole lives.

Thinking against ourselves will mean thinking against our identity and our effort to preserve it, it will mean stopping believing in the necessity of identifying ourselves with the place we occupy.

The movement of thought normally used to describe facts and processes of life cannot be applied to the investigation of the particular form of behaviour that we call 'human strike', because the human strike transforms the common ways of understanding and expressing things that actually entrap us in the very situations from which we must escape. Because our perception always includes the position from which we perceive.

Human strike, therefore always strikes partially against itself, and this is why when the historical toll is taken of its manifestations, as for example in the case of the feminist movements of the 1970s in Italy, it is hard to separate the constructive aspects from the destructive ones. It is difficult to bring out the positive sides, because the achievements of this kind of strike are inseparable from the lives of people, they cannot be measured in terms of numbers, wage increases or material transformations, but only in different ways of living and thinking. To the distracted gaze of a superficial spectator, a landscape crossed by human strike might even seem more damaged than radically revolutionised.

What we are looking at, then, is a movement of desubjectivisation and resubjectivisation, of exit from a condition – from a certain type of identification that goes with obligations, stereotypes and projections – and an entrance into a new state, less defined, more uncertain, but freed of the weights that burdened the previous identity and allowed the perpetuation of the status quo.

For example, when *Bartleby* opposes the lawyer with the inertia of his generically negative preference, he politely withdraws from the obligations of his job and revolts without directly confronting the hierarchy. His rebellion creates a ground that nothing can get a grip on, because he does not say what he would prefer to be different (he does not formulate a claim) or what he dislikes about his condition (he does not express a denunciation). His gesture robs the power of its power, at which point that the lawyer who employs

him experiences inappropriate feelings for Bartleby, something akin to love, and falls prey to the impression that his virility is being shaken. The roots of his authority are undermined by the situation and he finds a part of himself, the one which takes sides with Bartleby's revolt, hostile to his own role as a boss.

2. Real Abstraction

It has happened in the past, and recently in Egypt, for example, that soldiers have deserted and joined up with the rebels during revolutions. At a certain point, a part of them begins to think and to act against themselves, urging them to abandon their position and their identity, which seemed to have been made only of obedience until the moment they flipped. But how can such a process be applied to our lives?

We need to take a step back and ask ourselves what kind of relationship exists between the knowledge, of ourselves and the world, and our subjectivity. And what is the relationship between the knowledge that others have or think they have of our subjectivity and the way this influences our potentiality.

At the risk of simplification, the Marxist tradition, through the method of historical materialism, attempted to expose the criminal abstraction of exchange relationships within capitalist societies. It shed light on the real relationships, stripped of the features of social classes, based on rapacious disparities which contradict the physiological equality of human beings.

According to Alfred Sohn-Rethel, the two famous initial chapters of Marx's *Capital*, in which the mysterious nature of commodities is described and explained, should be re-examined in the light of a problem. For Marx, commodity is the only abstraction that is not a product of thought but of behaviour, namely that of exchange or 'exchangeism', as he calls it:

If in *Capital* the fundamental epistemological meaning of the Marxian discovery of real abstraction does not become explicit, this is due to the fact that this discovery has to do with the domain of political economy and not that of knowledge.¹

In other words, the separation between theory and practice, that makes thought myopic and unsuited to understanding its unconscious relationship with the commodity, causes the impossibility of formulating this state of things (abstraction being realised through shared habits) as a problem located between thought and life, one that must be confronted by any revolt. Elsewhere, Sohn-Rethel even writes that:

the expression 'historical materialist theory of knowledge' is a contradiction in terms. The concept of 'knowledge', as it is understood by all theoretical philosophy and all theory of knowledge from its beginnings (with Pythagoras, Heraclitus and Parmenides), all the way to Wittgenstein and Bertrand Russell, etc., is a fetishistic concept that creates an ideal figure of 'knowledge in general', a knowledge deprived of any link to the historical and economic context.²

A suspected proximity in fact exists between the birth of Greek philosophy, with its categories abstracted

from social relations and derived from nature, and the creation of the first currencies that begin to circulate precisely at the same time as concepts like the substance or the Parmenidean One. According to Sohn-Rethel, a true *perceptive incompatibility* exists between the tool used (the theory of knowledge we have inherited, which comes from a secret complicity with capitalism) and the object that we are trying to visualise (social and human relations within society).

Basically, the types of knowledge applied to the processes of subjectivisation and revolt are pernicious variations of idealism that conserve the division between hand and head – which is, in his view, the root of the impossibility of communism. This separation between head and hand, of course, corresponds to the division between intellectual and material labour, but also to the inevitable schizophrenia between our working self and our affective self, between our analytical self and our practical self, our political self and our existential self. There is a gap between the being that we are within oppressive relationships, in everyday relationships in general, and the being who is capable of analysing them and putting them at a distance, of describing the causes of the political impotence that afflicts us. And in this gap the pertinence of the analyses is worthless, and cannot allow us to transform our lives. The same subject, in short, cannot see himself in a given situation and find a theoretical way to get practically out of it, because he thinks from the position in which he finds himself, with what is available to him in that condition. If other tools were available to him, immediately his condition would be a different one.

3. Existential Metonymy

But let's examine the problem from another perspective. Starting from the moment in which this particular commodity – currency – is created, whose function is to be a means of exchange about which we can say that its use value is only that of permitting exchange value. We can also say that there are equivalent behaviours in our society, uses of the self whose function is identical to that of currency. We could even formulate the hypothesis that as the value-form contaminates the entire realm of objects, including those that are not commodities, in the same way the value-form that injects exchange value into behaviours colonises or infects all human behaviours (including the most spontaneous, emotional and disinterested).

These social relations are imperceptible abstractions as such – exactly like the exchange abstraction, about which Sohn-Rethel writes that 'being conscious of the abstraction as it is taking place is an impossibility in itself, because the abstraction would not be produced if the consciousness was focused on the abstraction instead of the exchange.'³ This abstraction-distraction, in fact, prevents us from applying to our behaviour, in order to transform it, the very thought that made that behaviour possible. If we believe in exchange value and enter into the behaviour of exchange – in which we are already constantly immersed – we cannot understand, at the same time, the way in which this behaviour constitutes an absurdity. The paradox is that commercial exchange truly is a social link created by an activity that denies it, because the use of currency allows every owner

of commodities to abstractedly (but concretely) pursue his own personal interest, without obstacles, without ever thinking about society.⁴ Sohn-Rethel describes this phenomenon as ‘practical solipsism’:

the formal identity of the ‘private’ self [of the owners of commodities] is abstracted from their existence and the interests of that existence, and has no other reality than that of pure thought. This principle, although it isn’t consciously understood, is certainly part of the exchange abstraction [...] It is the subject of the apperception, which apperceives the exchange abstraction and its various elements.⁵

Apperception is the perception we have of the fact of perceiving. Aristotle writes in *De Anima* something extraordinary about this faculty when applied to sight:

if to perceive by sight is just to see, and what is seen is colour (and the thing that has colour), then if we are to see that which sees, that which sees originally must be coloured. It is clear therefore that ‘to perceive by sight’ has more than one meaning; for even when we are not seeing, it is by sight that we discriminate darkness from light. So the principle of sight itself somehow has a colour.⁶

Centuries after Aristotle, Marcel Broodthaers wrote, in *The Crow and the Fox (After La Fontaine)*, in which he revisited the famous fable by La Fontaine:

The crow and the fox are absent. I can hardly remember them. I have forgotten the paws and hands, the games and costumes, the voices and colours, the shrewdness and vanity. The painter was all colours. The architect was made

out of stone. The crow and the fox were made of printed characters.⁷

The qualities sensorially perceived, the properties of these beings or of the coloured objects, are so deeply associated with our senses that they must somehow be made of a similar fabric in order to be perceptible, just as the architect must partly be made of stone in order to be able to build. This metonymic materialism, which returns in Broodthaers’s poem as in a dream and gives rise to the observations of Aristotle on coloured vision as a scientific intuition, can perhaps more clearly shed light on the question of the perception of the possible, on how subjects can come to know their own potentiality.

Agamben comments on this same passage from *De Anima* in ‘On Potentiality’, writing that when Aristotle asks ‘why is it that in the absence of external objects the senses do not give any sensation?’ the answer is: because in that case the sensation is a potentiality, but not yet realised.⁸ The physical organ related to the colour or to the material literally sleeps in their absence, at a point that we might not even know that we can perceive something if the occasion for doing so never presented itself; then our coloured self, our stone-like self, remains mysterious and hidden and we’ll never be painters or architects.

Freedom is a perceptible fabric within society and it is a part of subjectivity that can be activated – as revolutions and insurrections historically prove – but it cannot be known without being experienced.

Our apperception itself must be stimulated in order to get thought out of its natural state of astonishment and to free it from what Deleuze calls 'the philosophical good will'. A different, poetic form of materialism is needed in order to short-circuit this state of things, to bring daylight into this dark zone of legibility of the past and present that is our potentiality.

4. Witnessing by Means of Life

The human strike as a social practice brings with it a form of theoretical-practical knowledge that immediately troubles the hierarchies of the society of exchange, because it is supposed to make economic relations emerge where we only see social, or even just human relations.

There is a form of existential metonymy that consists in transforming the self into a tool for the creation of visibility. Foucault has called this type of practice 'witnessing by means of life'. In a lecture given on 29 February 1984, shortly prior to his death, Foucault focused on the 'life-form as the living scandal of truth', and 'of the lifestyle and life-form as the place where truth emerges'.⁹ The ethical problem of living according to one's convictions is not exactly what is addressed in this research. What Foucault was trying to grasp, even in their most eruptive and explosive forms (such as Russian nihilism, anarchism and terrorism in general), as 'practices of life until death for truth', is the way in which subjects have managed to transform a theoretical and political viewpoint into a practice

of life, though perhaps one that is wild or extreme. Revolution within the modern European world, he writes, hasn't only been a political project but also a life-form. If one analyses the ways in which life as a revolutionary activity or the revolutionary activity as a life have been organised and regulated, accordingly to Foucault, one can find three forms: the secret sociability (secret societies and clandestine resistance groups); the instituted organisation (the political parties and official organisations), and the witness through life which is a kind of militancy taking the form of a style of existence. This style must rupture the conventions, the habits and the values of society, 'it must manifest directly, by its visible form, its constant practice, and its immediate existence, the concrete possibility and the evident value of an *other* life, which is the true life.'¹⁰ Making life into a weapon and a battleground at the same time is the specificity of this third aspect of revolutionary life. In this specific case lifestyle is supposed to act as the incarnation of truth and the display of a certain set of values, but it is also a concrete and direct contestation of other people's ways of life. Cynicism in its original form – which is the starting point of this course by Foucault – was a philosophy that went with a certain ethics made from poverty, scandal and nudity that were all ways of manifesting the truth against social conventions and conformist habits. Where human strike touches these matters is in the fact that adopting a different behaviour materially deregulates the social machine and causes the appearance of the disturbing truth of freedom and an image of a possible life. The capitalist system for example does carry an image, or several images, of life that, if not embodied by people, cause it to fail.

5. Barbarous Truth and Imageless Politics

Human strike certainly is a way of witnessing by means of life, but it is never an exemplary gesture. Its logics are simply different from and incompatible with those that lie behind the submission of our subjectivity to the world as it is, and first of all they are incompatible with the logic of commodities, which is supposed to be the load-bearing wall of the architecture of our interests.

When we talk about existential metonymy we are talking about a new materialism that takes the need for freedom as a truer reality than market speculations or the fluctuations of currency exchange rates. Our potentiality can only become perceptible for us if we free ourselves of the parasite of the economy and refuse to think only the thinkable.

Curiously enough, Foucault concluded the course of 29 February 1984 by talking about art as a form of scandalous rupture. In the modern world, he writes,

art itself, be it literature, painting or music, has to establish a relationship with the real that is no longer a matter of ornament, of imitation, but a matter of laying bare, unmasking, scraping, digging, of violent reduction to the basic aspects of existence. [...] Art becomes a place of eruption from below, of what has no right or possibility of expression in a culture. [...] The courage of art in its barbarous truth should go against the consensus of the culture.

This quote that almost seems reminiscent of Benjamin's concept of positive barbarism opens up a different space

of abstraction that appears related to the abandonment of representation as a political and existential practice. What happens in modern and contemporary art seems here to carry the formula for a possibility that could be transposed in other territories of reality. If representation is the reproduction of a model (in a figurative sense as much as in a political one) then this radical refusal for imitation could lead, if extended, to an imageless politics, something that doesn't need to reproduce any existing experience or structure, a politics of potentiality based on the materiality of this barbarous truth.

15 October 2012

Footnotes

- 1 Alfred Sohn-Rethel, 'Travail intellectuel et travail manuel' in *La pensée marchadise*, Editions du Croquant, Broissieux, 2010, p.119.
- 2 Ibid., p.74.
- 3 Ibid., p.94.
- 4 Ibid., p.140.
- 5 Ibid., p.139.
- 6 Aristotle, Chapter 2, Book III, *De Anima (On the Soul)*, Penguin Classics, 1987.
- 7 Marcel Broodthaers, *Le Corbeau et le Renard (d'après La Fontaine)* (1967) film, 16mm, colour, 7'.
- 8 Giorgio Agamben, 'On Potentiality', in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 199, p.178.
- 9 Michel Foucault, 'Ten: 29 February 1984, Second Hour', *The Courage of Truth: The Government of the Self and Others II, Lectures at the Collège de France, 1983-4*, Graham Burchell (trans.), Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, pp.177-190.
- 10 Ibid., p.184.

Claire Fontaine: *Your Money and Your Life*



— por Sofia Nunes

Intense, exciting, irreverent: an interview with Claire Fontaine

Sofia Nunes (SN): Let's start with your identity. Who is Claire Fontaine? When and under which circumstances did she emerge?

Claire Fontaine (CF): Claire Fontaine is a shared space that frees us from the

traps and the constraints of authorship, it gives us the freedom of de-subjectivization, of not having to correspond to one's biography. We created this artist in 2004 in Paris.

SN: How do art and theoretical writing coexist, negotiate and differ within your work regarding the politics that each of both practices comprehends on their own?

CF: One of the specificities of Claire Fontaine is precisely this coexistence between visual and literary, theoretical space. Contemporary art is a space of absolute freedom and it allows for experimentation with any medium, including writing. The politics of the different medias are the same: the aim is not domination and imposition of one's supposed excellence over the more mediocre players in the system, the aim is to think with freedom and all sort of tools about subject matters that are difficult, dismissed, problematic, or outside of a moralistic or politically correct frame.

SN: A hundred year has passed since Duchamp reversed a urinal and called it art. What does it mean to Claire Fontaine to use the readymade today? What new possibilities do you find in this strategy?

CF: The readymade is a gesture that points to the miracle of human intelligence and the magic hidden in a banal object or situation. Duchamp did say until the end of his life that the infrathin was some sort of magic that couldn't be explained, and we agree with that — it's a form of subversive re-enchantment of the world. We work also a lot with hijacking and expropriation, rather than appropriation. We play with the reverence towards the reference that we all feel, and the need to have an existential use-value for each content or form that we feel interested in. Possibilities are infinite for these practices in a world where everything seems to have been already done and said — everything is “already made” so why bother with the new? Let's try the intense, the exciting, the irreverent.

SN: Art History is being appropriated by your feminist sensibility that keeps assaulting what you call “toxic masculinity”. We know that neoliberal societies learned to be more morally opened and inclusive for the profit of capital, so what set of problems do *Untitled (advertising, advertising)*, 2015, or *Untitled (L.G.B.T.Q, shaved)*, 2017, bring to the fore that in your opinion Art History discourses keep repressing and excluding?

CF: With our work we try to awaken the natural intelligence in each person, the capacity of thinking freely that we often repress for fear that it will cause us problems or losses. Art history — there Duchamp works as a reference with a use-value — will never know the best artwork in the world if it has been made in the deep jungle away from human eyes and the media, it is a narrative

controlled by power like all official narratives are, we are not scandalised by it, ^{FO, 10-11-12 / 2019} on the contrary, it would be surprising if it wasn't the case. We try to focus on the potentiality, the possible, the capacity of people to experience freedom here and now at least in the separate space in which they encounter our artwork, and maybe then they can bring these discoveries in other regions of life.

SN: Claire Fontaine's work often speaks the language and techniques of the capital, including coins and banknotes, neon signs, PlayStations, billboards, advertisings, merchandising postcards, company logos. "Your Money and Your Life" exhibition is not an exception in this matter. Would you agree that "art should absorb its enemy, even the most mortal one" (I am quoting Theodor Adorno) in order to resist or criticise it?

SN: We are not big fans of Adorno, there is too much morality in some of his analysis. In our artwork we are doing what artists have done since the first painting on the Lascaux walls: we are talking about our environment, our landscape, what surrounds us on a daily basis in the urban space and on the internet. The commodification of the world was already well advanced when Debord wrote and filmed *The Society of Spectacle*, now we have reached another level of it. But it must be underlined that we describe what slips through the cracks, what disturbs us, what looks like something familiar but isn't. We don't believe in shocking our spectators, life is way more shocking than art could ever dream of being these days. We try to create the conditions to question daily objects, images and situations by presenting them in another context where we can take the time to question them or their hijacked versions.

SN: In this exhibition it's just as if the commodity form precedes not only the objects but also the subjects. But you don't see object and subject as separate entities once they interact with each other. Considering your magic illusionist *Living Statues*, how do they fuse living forms and petrification, and what problems do they pose to that contamination?

CF: Commodification does potentially envelop everything nowadays. We *do* make an enormous difference between subjects and objects. The *Living Statues* are objects that pretend to be subjects that pretend to be objects. They tackle partly playfully and partly painfully the self-objectification of people but they also talk about creative begging. Begging is seen as the opposite of productive work, but this is a very simplistic reading. Through these works we show that any artwork begs and that without the attention, the love and the care of the viewer the artwork doesn't survive. Of course the metaphor of the begging street artist sheds a light on the contemporary artists' condition. These sculptures aren't self-portraits but they are still-life from the urban context, they compete for attention with the landscape in the

gallery and in the city, but of course the accent is on the unseen body of the poor, the foreigner, in disguise under the clothes and the masks, replaced by a mannequin in the white cube. FO 10-11-12 / 2019

SN: Several times you have used Giorgio Agamben's expression "whatever singularity" to address the idea of an emancipated subjectivity forged by art. How do you envisage the potentialities of that "whaterness" and how do you consider it facing the new emerging identity politics with its specific and defined subjects?

CF: The concept of whatever singularity is amoral, it doesn't refer to an emancipated subjectivity and it is nothing to do with art. We mention the readymade as an example of whatever object that becomes an artwork and we refer to whatever singularities as the most diffuse form of subjectivity, capable of the best and the worst, what Cambridge Analytica called the "persuadable" and targeted in order to get Trump elected, Brexit voted for etc. Identity politics can take different forms and they are all rather exciting whenever they manage to fight for a specificity of a social or racial group and by doing so they throw it out of the window. To be clearer: Angela Davis says that identity politics find their best context of expression in intersectional politics. The power position that certain groups find themselves in is interesting precisely because it is not essentialist, it can be changed, it can shift by applying pressure, creating a different visibility.

SN: Your recent powerful light-boxes *Untitled (Naked after beating)* and *Untitled (They sexually harass and torture, then photograph and publish)*, 2018, visually addresses the brutal violence committed on the Yemeni prisoners. The images were taken from mobile phones with cracked screens. Which technopolitical resonances can we find in the clash you make between cracked images and digital circulation? It seems like a broader witness also takes part in this particular group's wound...

CF: There is definitely a reference to the fact that, once reproduced and blown up as an integral part of an image, the accidental crack becomes irreparable. It is printed on the same plane as the photograph that the broken screen shows, but it is somehow at a higher resolution because it is "real", its presence doesn't come from a group of pixels although it is transformed into one by the camera that captures it. These works refer explicitly to the darkness of prisons, their being offline and physically as much as psychologically destructive. They portray something that almost we can't look at, although it is a just drawing of the brutality that happens far away from our eyes, but are we really wanting to look?

SN: When our empathy with non-human living forms, such as plants and animals, already reified like humans, increases, Claire Fontaine speaks about

the lack of empathy between humans, see *The luxury of making sense* (text pile), 2018. How do you see the need of inter-human love and friendship together with the ecological human-decentred critique of biopolitics? Is this a question for you?

CF: This is indeed the most important question for us, the question of communism conceived as a form of coexistence of human and non-human life on earth, based on values that exceed the monetary translation of every resource into cash and take into account all the priceless factors that make our survival possible. The day we will stop looking at each other in an instrumental way will be the day we will start seeing nature like a complex and miraculous ecosystem that isn't only a reservoir of food and energy. *The luxury of making sense* is a text that speaks about a specific idea of love created and transmitted by a certain social class, it mentions the mirror neurons and our selective empathy but most of all it underlines the fact that having a coherent and dignified life is already a form of luxury.

SN: *No future*, Sex Pistols said. You say *No present*. The projection of futures gone with modernity and our uninterrupted global times steals the present from us. With what temporality do you dream?

CF: Our neon signs aren't declarations of our intentions. They are crystallisations of ideas and phrases that circulate in our time. *No Present* refers, in its ambiguity, to an ungenerous contingency of austerity and solitude, which has been everyone's usual experience since 2008; but of course it does pinpoint a time where everyone has in their pockets all their friends, family, colleagues, lovers and acquaintances texting them, emailing them, confiscating their attention from the present moment that slowly crumbles down. The more under surveillance we are, the less the present exists. An intense present doesn't take place when we are all connected but when we can say collectively "we" and maybe switch off our phones to be just with the people that we can see and touch right now. That's the temporality we dream of.

Claire Fontaine (<https://www.clairefontaine.ws/>)

Galeria Avenida Índia (<https://galeriasmunicipais.pt/exposicoes/galerias/avenida-da-india/?qd=futuro>)



Ed. 10-11-12 / 2019



Claire Fontaine

Our Common Critical Condition

The fiftieth-anniversary issue of *Artforum* included an article by Hal Foster entitled “Critical Condition,” with the subtitle “On criticism then and now.” The adjective “critical,” which he uses here to define a condition, refers both to the medical sense of the term, as well as its philosophical sense, where “critical” comes by way of the Greek verb *krino*, meaning *to discern, to separate things by means of the intellect*. Having no need to remind us of this, Foster moves directly to the heart of his problem, which is also our own: he locates the historical moment where criticism lost both its prestige and power, and aims to describe, in as detached a manner as possible, the cause of this catastrophe. He evokes the motives and questions that inhabited the context and milieu of the arts before 1968, both in the pages of *Artforum* and elsewhere. He does so by recounting a series of essential memories from the past in order to produce an illuminating diagnosis of our present moment; the whole thing is so brief that we are left with the impression of having heard an important conversation suddenly cut off.

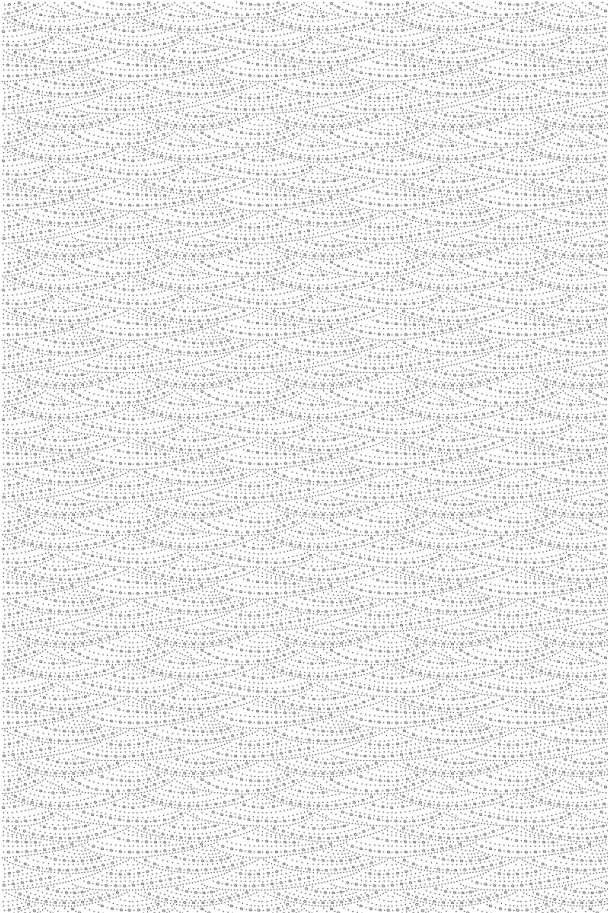
From the first lines of the article, we are transported to the heart of the impassioned debates surrounding minimalism and theatricality; the temperature of the conversations is summery, their tone fervent. Foster cites Krauss, Fried, Stella, Judd, and Greenburg, among others. The art world of the time, seen from where we now stand, seems small, fueled by authentic enthusiasm; the practices that artists experimented with back then aspired to an existential dimension, and were read as metaphors for attitudes, methods for figuring out ways to participate in the public sphere, or to distance oneself from it. The market was only one background noise among many, and not yet the endless, deafening throbbing we have now grown accustomed to. But Foster doesn’t stop here: the text is by no means nostalgic, but explains that art writing at that pivotal time was, as Fried himself confessed, terribly stressful; anxiety and ambition were its principal motors, and the fear of being unable, with art writing’s theoretical language, to equal the heights of art’s expressive power, reigned supreme. The entire aesthetic field, as Foster describes it, found itself under enormous strain; it was, he writes, “already breached from without and eroded from within.”¹ “As we know,” he continues,

the external enemy was called “kitsch,” “theatricality,” or simply “mass culture” (Pop was the open traitor here), while the internal enemy was the extended arena of artistic activities opened up by Happenings, Fluxus, and Minimalism. These activities were problematic for late-modernist critics not merely because they exceeded the proper media of painting and sculpture but because they threatened to push art into an arbitrary realm beyond aesthetic judgment.²

The “arbitrary”: behold the name of the troublesome guest that was soon to invite itself into all art writing and every exhibition space around the world, with no plans to leave. Foster concludes his article by catapulting us into the present day, though not without bitter irony regarding the prophecies of the pre-’68 era that never played out. Speaking of the pairing (today obsolete) of art/criticism, he describes it as a means of accessing the past, which opens onto both the present and future:

Today this concept seems almost bizarre. We can call it what we like—naïve, parochial, chimerical—and we can dismiss it as a petty expression of a will to power whereby art history is read forward into contemporary practice in such a way that an elect few are scripted in and everyone else is dropped out. Yet, forty years on, we should also acknowledge what was lost when this concept was junked.³

These final lines are all the more troublesome as they seem implicitly to condemn *Artforum* and the regions of the art world it has been exploring now for fifty years. But how can we judge something that deliberately abolishes its own limitations for good, all while remaining unhealthily attached to the need to be recognized as “art”? What other possibility could have presented itself?



Allan Kaprow, *Yard: Overhead View*, 1961. Gelatin Silver print.
Copyright: Ken Heyman-Woodfin Camp.

If, in that moment of profound crisis, art had dissolved into life, or—which is much less likely—revolutionized life had transformed into a work of art, a radical transformation would have taken place, entailing a reorganization of labor, affect, economy; making—or not making—“work” would have become the true question of human life. Maternity, friendship, the labor of love, and care for each living thing would now be approached as works of art with a beauty as much ethical as aesthetic—approached as worthy sources of inspiration and imitation.

But that didn’t happen.

“When you do life consciously, however,” writes Kaprow in 1979, “life becomes pretty strange—paying attention changes the thing attended to—so the Happenings were not nearly as lifelike as I had supposed they might be. But I learned something about life and ‘life.’”⁴ This conscious, reproducible life, imprisoned by quotation marks, can be imitated and disturbed by performance, but it cannot, even when liberated from these quotation marks, be as fascinating and intense as Happenings aspired to make it. Kaprow was reflecting here on the outmodedness and insufficiency of traditional art practices, whose ambition remained too modest to measure up to the concerns raised by the expansive practices in the arts. But he also made us face the impossibility of imagining a truly revolutionary art in the

absence of radical change in life, which art was unable to produce, and which various social movements had promised but failed to realize.

It’s at this point that the debate on art had to laboriously enter back into the narrow (and vague) field of what is, at present, contemporary art. The “arbitrary” appeared then as the ideal analgesic for dealing with this failure, the adjuvant of a return to the confused order which could only occur under the sign of the progressive marketization of art and its inevitable loss of cultural relevance.

The alternative was certainly not—as history has sufficiently proved—a return to the paternalist dictatorship of modernism, with its ludicrous religion of the autonomy of art. But the avant-garde provided no credible counterpoint, for it had not adequately resolved its relationship to politics as the governing of men, as administration, and as repressive apparatus. This is how we have found ourselves in a present where everything is at once contained and forgotten, at least when it comes to our dominant aesthetic experiments and their accompanying commentaries; but given that in this present everything is possible at every moment, this analysis itself is incomplete and surely obsolete already.

The poignant lack of reference points, the feeling of being faced with both a virtually infinite field of possibilities and a fear of being unable to escape repeating, however unwittingly, something that has already been done—these are the consequences of this state of affairs; these are the demons with which every contemporary artist must converse, starting with their first experiments within school walls, up until the end of their days. Unbeknownst to them, the arbitrary has multiplied singularities, but made them *whatever singularities*: every artist develops his or her own language and nurtures the impression of being the only one to speak it. We no longer write or create in order to intensify life, for life is no longer something we all share, something in which we all accompany one another, but an individualized affair of accumulation, labor, and self-affirmation.

We live like this with no hope for political change (however necessary) in our lives, nor a common language capable of naming this need or allowing us to define together what is particular to our present. This condition is new, no doubt unique in Western history; it is so painful and engenders such a profound solitude and loss of dignity that we sometimes catch ourselves doubting the sincerity of artworks that are created under such conditions—for we know that their fate is uncertain, and will most likely disappoint.

Nevertheless, the field of art has never been so free, vast, and attractive to the general public—and this is perhaps precisely what makes our present condition a profoundly critical one.

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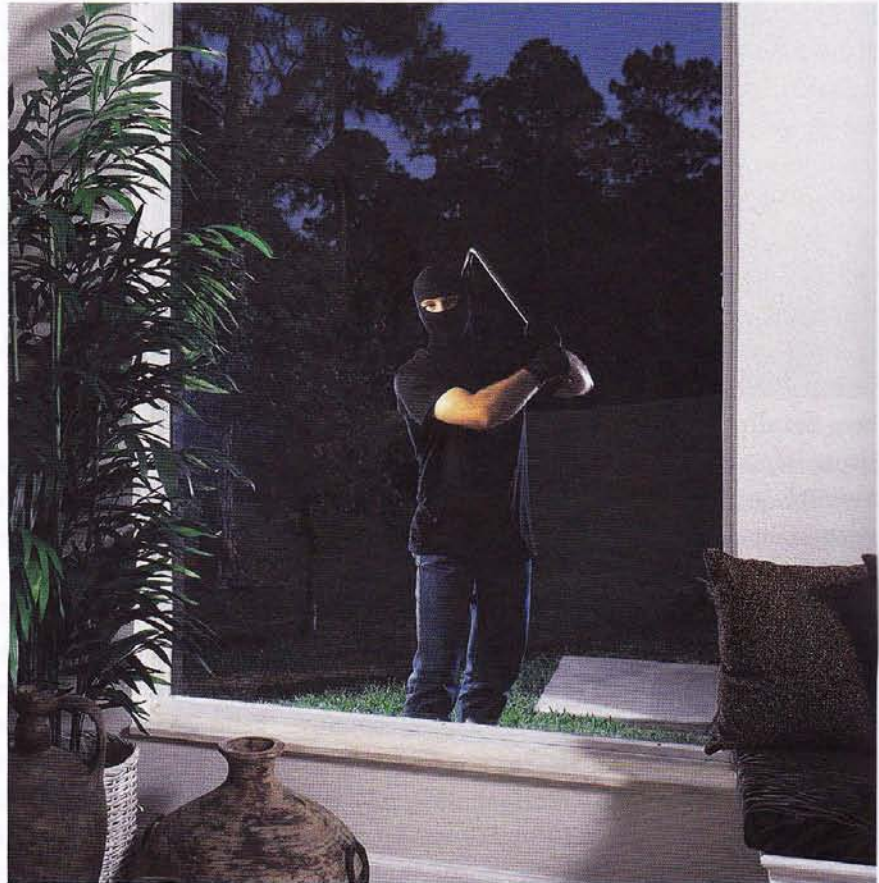
Translated from the French by Kit Schluter.

Claire Fontaine is a Paris-based collective founded in 2004.

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CLAIRE FONTAINE

TOWARD A CANONIC FREEDOM



Claire Fontaine, „Untitled
(Thief)“, 2015

A canon is a law, a principle, a criterion; in music it refers to a variation of the same melody repeated over and over. “Canonic” is what exerts such an authority that it can be used as a unit of measurement for similar types of expressions. But what can this concept possibly mean in contemporary art, where every artwork is supposed to be something new, different, unseen, a step further into unlearning figuration and faithful representation of the visible reality, a deeper dive into abstraction, minimalism, into the silence and the unspeakable poverty of being alive in the twenty-first century?

The dialectics between “new” and “old” at the time of the technical reproducibility of each and every form are blurred. In fact, it has become almost impossible – and probably not so interesting – to create something “totally new” today. Nevertheless, novelty in art is still crucial, at least since the market has colonized our desires with its own endless creativity: new desires can even sell old products; as long as things become libidinally invested they will be bought. Therefore what doesn’t become commercial (doesn’t become desirable) these days slowly leaves the surface of reality and moves to a subterranean

and neglected existence; it leaves the domain of the visible. (If ever “visible” and “commercial” were to coincide, this would certainly be the end of every form of art.)

But how is it that an artwork can live the double life of commodity and priceless gift to the human community; be simultaneously a product of culture and an object of fetishism? One might think of creation as a form of anamnesis in which we are always inhabited by forms and contents that preexisted us. Memory is a toolbox and culture has an existential (and practical) use value (otherwise it's nothing but the Adornian pile of rubbish); in Jonathan Lethem's essay “The Ecstasy of Influence: A Plagiarism,”¹ Lethem shows how putting the emphasis on an author's supposed uniqueness – how hiding the constellation in which a cultural product shines and the genealogy from which it is created – is, in fact, destructive. We think and speak through the commons, language being the first and most important one. Every aesthetic feeling, every form of empathy and emotion, rests – to simplify brutally – on our capacity to project and recognize ourselves in what we feel and see; on our capacity to be a mirror, responsively and emotively, for the surrounding world. And that's what the concept of canon seems to suggest too: everything is but an inevitable variation on the same melody that wins over other accords because of its unquestionable quality. But we all know that things are profoundly different: supremacy and submission aren't the two opposite poles between which creativity oscillates; abstraction and the readymade, for example, have political implications and the imageless thought is the only way to think outside the suffocating power of dogmatism.

If genealogy and filiations do threaten something, it is just the part of commodity that exists in each cultural artifact or artwork. Artworks in particular don't (and shouldn't) compete with each other for attention, like products do in shops, because they aspire to being understood emotionally, intellectually, existentially. The freedom of the spectator begins exactly with the artist's own freedom and doesn't end with it, because freeing oneself as an author means freeing the others to whom the artwork is presented, putting them in a position where they can also experience freedom and not only admire mastery.

The eternal return of authority cannot be just moralistically pointed out as a problem; it has to be perceived as an emotional pattern that we share, a symptom, coming from patriarchal culture and the way its millenary dominance has fashioned our desires. For example, there could be a totally different way to write this text: we could refuse to quote a certain constellation from the '70s, refuse to quote men, refuse to quote theory even as a toolbox and to dive into how feminists have approached the question, in particular the relationship that artists as workers entertain both as host and parasite with life and its tragic consequences. There is a certain way to sacrifice the plenitude of one's present in order to get a symbolic reward, an inscription within history, culture, or being part of a list of names on a website, that should be addressed compassionately as a pathetic weakness.

In 2001, a canonic (?) text from *Tiqqun* 2 titled “How to?” suggested an approach that would open up yet another possible way to categorize objects and beings, to stop consciously and unconsciously building hierarchies that help us better adapt to the world as it is:

"What to do? In other words: needless to live. / Everything you have not lived, History will give it back to you. / What to do? It is the ignorance of oneself cast onto the world. / As ignorance of the world. / How to? The question of how, Not of what a being, a gesture, a thing is but of / how it is what it is. The question of how its predicates relate to it. / And it to them. / Let be. Let be the gap between the subject and its predicates. The abyss of the presence."

Authorship and its authority are made to be canonized, structured around a deadly idea of coherence that can imprison subjectivity inside an identity in order to use it as a brand, a marketable fiction.

To free ourselves of the burden of the author function author we can look to Agamben, who, in his essay "Aby Warburg and the Nameless Science," shows that with Warburg, images that migrate from one epoch to another change meaning as they encounter the "selective will" of a determined time. The task of the artist and the theoretician is to free the electromagnetic energies contained inside them by analyzing and interpreting any visual material as a cultural symptom and sign of our times, building a memory that allows us to understand our present and its ever changing relationship to the past. This nameless science aims to destroy the very hierarchies that make the present at the same time illegible and consumable and create a living, non-accumulative memory, a *mnemosyne*.

In order to begin an honest archaeology of ourselves, we certainly need this nameless science, whose paradigmatic approach would make the power of canons useless. This memory, not organized as a patrimonial accumulation but governed

by varying intensities, won't need the pyramidal structure of classification that Western culture has placed over every domain of knowledge. Classifying might become a joyous necessity for intensifying life, understanding contemporary art could cease to be a suspicious journey made for aesthetically selective purposes. There is, in the visual space, a promise of freedom that no other field of culture as a separate space contains.

The nature of contemporary art's relationships with different cultures and its own present isn't normative, isn't predetermined, and isn't controllable by artists themselves; rather, it is revealing of much more than its own system of values and standards of excellence and is the closest expression to a concrete manifestation of freedom (at the same time conscious and unconscious, political and disengaged, personal and collective, just like every decisive experience in life). The role of the critic and that of the artist could be complementary and not hierarchically separate; understanding life could be a joint effort carried out with different methods that could converge in this communal nameless science that no longer needs canons. Visual intelligence should never give up.

Note

- 1 Jonathan Lethem, "The Ecstasy of Influence: A Plagiarism," in: *Harper's Magazine*, February 2007.