

## CLAIRE FONTAINE

# The Pretender

Is this stuff serious comment on the role of art in society, or something as empty and vacuous as a blank page?

words CHRIS MOONEY

**FOUR-YEAR-OLD ARTIST CLAIRE FONTAINE IS BUSY** with a jumble of upcoming and imminent commitments: curating the first European show of Argentinian art-activist collective Etcétera at the Galerie Frank Elbaz in Paris; installing an *in situ* work at Witte de With in Rotterdam; participating in group shows in Kassel, Frankfurt, Rovereto and Berne; planning autumn and winter solo shows at the Hayward Gallery in London and Chantal Crousel in Paris; and remodelling a newly purchased home in the trendy Paris suburb of Montreuil.

Still, a sit-down with the precocious neo-conceptualist is arranged, in a bar in the Belleville area of Paris, near the studio where she has been squatting while the house is renovated.

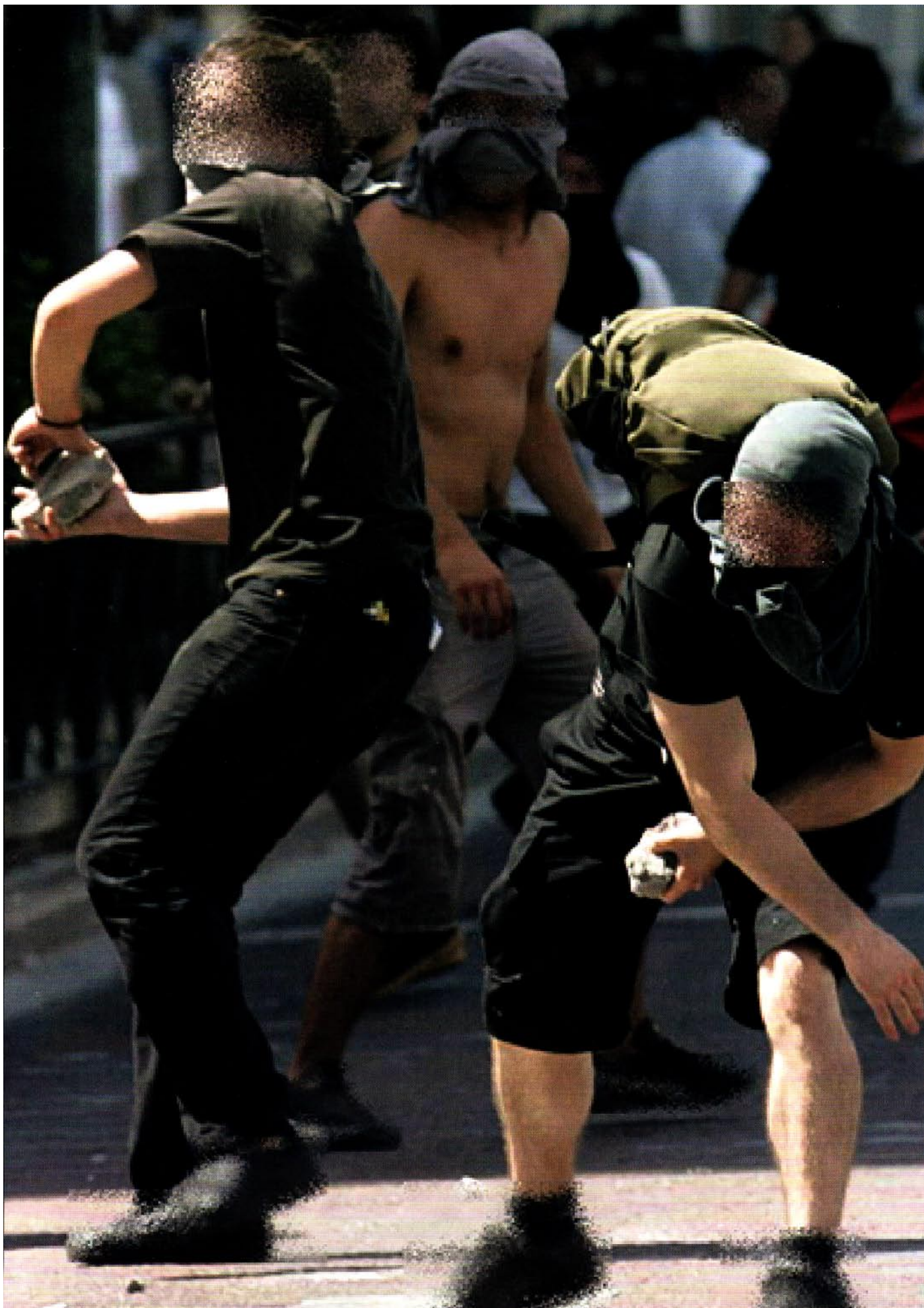
In preparation for the interview, we scan her online images: photos, paintings and neon signs for the most part, some videos. A multidisciplinary in the truest sense, her works, irreducible composites of images, objects and texts, spill out beyond the confines of art into the larger cultural moment. Many are clever conceptual art objects in the conventional sense: *In God They Trust* (2005) is a 25-cent coin converted into a boxcutter – a two-bit spin on capital in the age of terror. *Visions of the World (Greece, Summer, 2006)* (2006) is an appropriated press photograph of three rock-throwing rioters. To protect them from reprisal, or perhaps as a sign-skewering allusion to crime videos and semi-censored TV porn, their faces are obscured in a pixelated blur, as are the brand names on their shoes and jeans.

Other works seem to operate contextually, in some sort of ironic transvaluation of values: Situationist-like forms of pseudo post-Althusserian agitprop, often wry and witty, repositioned as commodities offered for sale as objects of delectation. *Capitalism Is Not Working* (2007) is a good example: four screenprint paintings, each with the words of the title stencilled over a Warholian image of Mao Zedong. The piece, exhibited earlier this year in a commercial

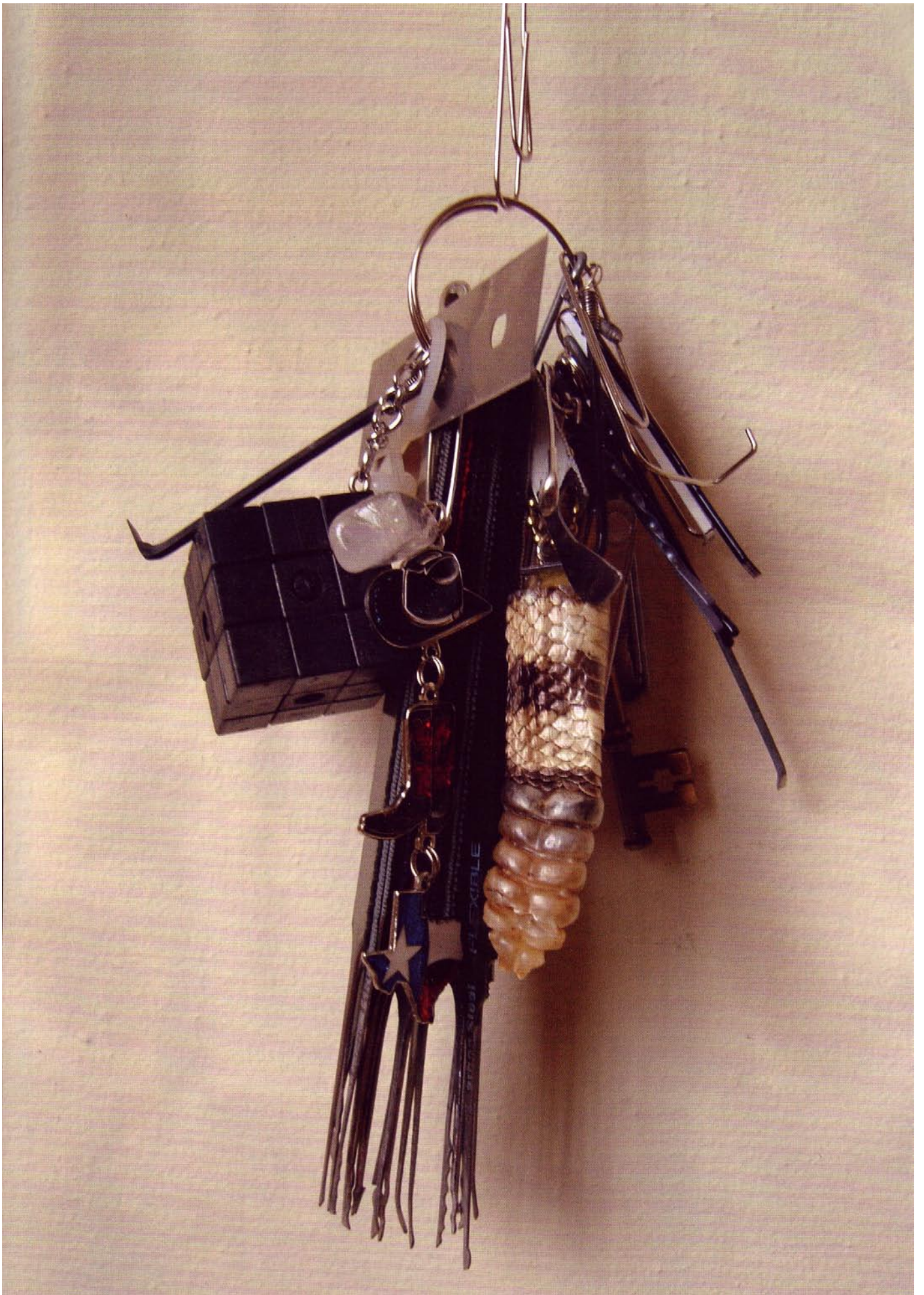
gallery in Mexico City, was accompanied by an artist's statement that included this sentence: 'The moral of the story told by Claire Fontaine in this exhibition is that at the heart of the most arrogant commercial prosperity a shameful poverty proliferates, and that in the midst of Third World deprivation priceless wealth multiplies.' As is often the case with a Claire Fontaine work, it is difficult to know how to read this – at sociopolitical face value or as a knowing nod towards the recuperative powers and 'priceless wealth' of the art market, its ability to commodify everything, including the artist's critiques of its commodifying powers.

The aestheticising logic at work in other works is even harder to find: *Naked Life* (2005), for example, which consists of the two words of the title stencilled in black on a white wall, references the 'biopolitics' of Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben – the exclusionary, disempowered 'naked life' of bare bodies, as opposed to the inclusionary 'political life' of qualified citizens. And *Requiem for Jean Charles de Menezes: Notes on the State of Exception* (2005), another nod to Agamben (his 'states of exception' are 9/11-like 'crisis' periods during which governments claim the authority to reduce civic beings to bare bodies by stripping away rights and liberties). A 'text pile/window announcement with statement, A5 double-sided photocopies, free copyright', *Requiem* pays bristling homage to the 'naked life' death of de Menezes, the Brazilian national mistaken for a terrorist bomber and shot seven times in the head by Metropolitan Police in the London Underground on 22 July 2005.

Here politics is again displaced into art, but the message is not contaminated in the same manner: it remains a naked request to awaken, to act, and perhaps a suggestion or reminder that we don't or can't act, that we are all bare-arsed and asleep.



Chris Mooney, *The Pretender*, in *Art Review*, issue 22, may 2008, pp. 64 - 68  
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*Property as theft,  
theft as property and  
all of it art for art-as-  
activism's sake:  
"I only steal to distribute",  
Claire Fontaine says*



We download the PDF version of *Requiem*, then pore over the many other texts on the website. Claire Fontaine is as much a writer as anything else, and arguably the most self-documented artist since Robert Smithson. We then skim, Google and Wikipedia the philosophers whose texts underpin her words and images: Agamben, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, Walter Benjamin, Michel Foucault, Jacques Rancière, Slavoj Žižek.

Finally, heads spinning, we enter the bar at the designated hour. Claire Fontaine's better half is sipping mint tea and reading a newspaper, shaking her head at a headline about declining French consumer buying power.

"Just raise the damn salaries!" she says.

Her other half, we learn, is running late, ensnared in a snafu involving one of her Paris art dealers, the mistitling of a just-sold artwork and a certificate of authenticity.

A certificate of authenticity. This gives pause.

That such a legitimising Claire Fontaine document exists – an official attestation of genuineness, authorship and ownership – is potential grist for a Claire Fontaine artwork.

That such a lead-in to a mainstream art magazine feature on Claire Fontaine exists – an overdetermined clutter of reductive, fuzzy-minded, tea-drinking, home-owning 'human interest' – is potential grist for a Claire Fontaine headshake of despair.

(In an interview in another mainstream art mag, she asked: "Can one properly receive a reflection on these themes inscribed in a space that is half-filled with ads for galleries and half-filled with articles that serve to sell what is being shown in the galleries?")

Authenticity and authorship are politically charged words in Claire Fontaine's idiolect. Roland Barthes's pronouncement on the death of the author, Foucault's vectorising power/knowledge grids and 'technologies of the self' and Agamben's 'whatever multiplicities' dance on the surfaces and shimmer in the depths of her theory-laden art. Authenticity and inauthenticity, loaded terms in contemporary thought since at least Martin Heidegger, and in contemporary art since at least Marcel Duchamp, is a material element of her work, as ephemeral as the *Educated Consumer Is Our Best Customer* smoke drawing she signed with a disposable lighter on the ceiling of a room

in the Tate Modern for last year's *Irresistible Force* group show; and as palpable as her appropriated signs, videos, sculptures and paintings.

Not appropriated – 'expropriated'. A Guy Debord film, for example, *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* (1952) or *La Société du spectacle* (1973) pirate-downloaded to play on a customised iPod or PlayStation. *La Société du spectacle*, the book, turned into a brickbat and tossed onto a commercial gallery floor. The keys to her dealer's galleries in New York and Paris, hung on hooks like fishing lures. Sets of *Passe-Partout* lockpicks and hacksaw blades, sold with instructional lockpicking videos.

The *Passe-Partouts* are radical-chic bangles, eye candy with a transgressive edge – they even made the pages of *American Vogue*. "Collector bait", she calls them. Property as theft, theft as property and all of it art for art-as-activism's sake. "I only steal to distribute", she says.

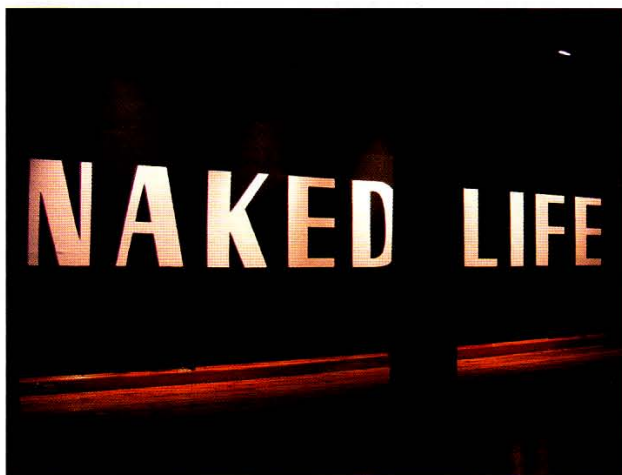
At some level, then, Claire Fontaine sees herself as a Robin Hood of the contemporary art scene. A culture-jamming trickster and radicalising figure of aesthetic stealth and conscientious objection. A biopolitical activist engaged in a war of liberation against the disciplinary institutions that subjugate our bodies and control our minds. True to her self, true to her art, true to her ethics. But not true.

For no percentage of Claire Fontaine – never mind a 'better' or worse half – is actually, objectively, physically present in this bar in Belleville. The woman sitting across from me is one of Claire Fontaine's 'assistants', a thirtysomething Italian philosophy professor named Fulvia Carnevale. Her other assistant, when he finally arrives, is a British expat artist named James Thornhill.

Right-hand man and Girl Friday, each a *whatever* multitude of identities, swarming hordes of predicates around coalescing beings and becoming: Italian, woman, philosopher, British, man, artist. Art collective. Collector bait. Hot property.

A self-described 'faction among factions', Claire Fontaine, like her New York network of friends communally hosted in the fictional artist and art dealer Reena Spaulings (whose gallery represents her in the US), is not a person but a strategic position, a way to dodge the pigeonholes of identity and the potholes of power. And make art.

Admittedly, she is an 'impostor' – more fiction than faction.



Who she is and what she makes coexist in an impenetrably complex layering of fabrication, in both senses of the word. Like Duchamp, her 'creativity' is what he called 'a little game between "I" and "me"'; except, unlike Duchamp, she does not make readymades, she is one – 'nothing but the *nth* ready-made artist', as she says in one of her texts, 'the *nth* meaning-transmitter in the general buzz'.

The readymade is the court painting of our day, state-sanctioned and -subsidised, long ago sanitised of any transgressive power. A readymade artist, however, just might contain disruptive potential. The subjectivised equivalent of one of Duchamp's umpteen bottle racks or snow shovels, Claire Fontaine's manufactured identity consciously represents the disenchantment of the avant-garde and its capitulation to consumer spectacle. The cutting edge no longer cuts, her existence tells us; it cashes in, as loss leader – the subversive piece in the gallery front room – or unique selling point.

In the face of this uncontainable contamination, her deceptions and conceits offer incongruous resistance to capital and empire – a refusal to accept or comply that is precisely that, accepting and compliant. Her migration from activism, her 'displaced struggle', is a withdrawal from the political into the aesthetics, into a poetics of politics. Yet it is also a nose thumb at power from within its 'interstices'. Whether this is cynical or not is up to the spectator – or more to the point, the consumer: by critiquing and subverting what she calls the 'becoming-merchandise of art', and in the process becoming art merchandise herself, she draws attention to the reciprocal parasitism of art and market, cancelling and preserving both in an ironic sublation of conflicting values. Excuse the dialectics, but they appear unavoidable: 'like any other proletariat', says Claire Fontaine, she is unqualified, exhausted of meaning, a palimpsest to be written on and written off, 'expropriated from the use of life', reduced to naked life; yet also a *passpartout* – able to illicitly open doors and sneak into places where she doesn't belong. That she has named herself after a French stationery brand is appropriate. Claire Fontaine is a blank page: empty, yet full of promise.

Claire Fontaine, 10 May – 8 June, Witte de With, Rotterdam; *Etcétera*, curated by Claire Fontaine, to 17 May, Galerie Frank Elbaz, Paris. See listings for further details

WORKS  
(IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

*Visions of the World, (Greece, Summer, 2006)*, 2006  
light panel and Duratran, 28 x 22 cm

*Passe-Partout (San Antonio)*, 2007  
hacksaw blades, Leatherman Micro, allen keys, paperclips, safety pin and keyrings,  
dimensions variable

*Capitalism Is Not Working*, 2007  
laserprint on paper, graphite, gouache and aluminium foil,  
93 x 90 cm (unframed), Photo: Marc Dornage

*The True Artist (spiral version)*, 2004  
smoke on ceiling, dimensions variable.  
Courtesy the artist and Reena Spaulings Fine Art, New York

*In God They Trust*, 2005  
25-cent coin, steel boxcutter blade, solder and rivet, dimensions variable.  
Courtesy the artist, Reena Spaulings Fine Art, New York, and T293, Naples

*Naked Life*, 2005  
painted text, dimensions variable

*All images*  
(unless otherwise credited)  
Courtesy the artist, Air de Paris and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris