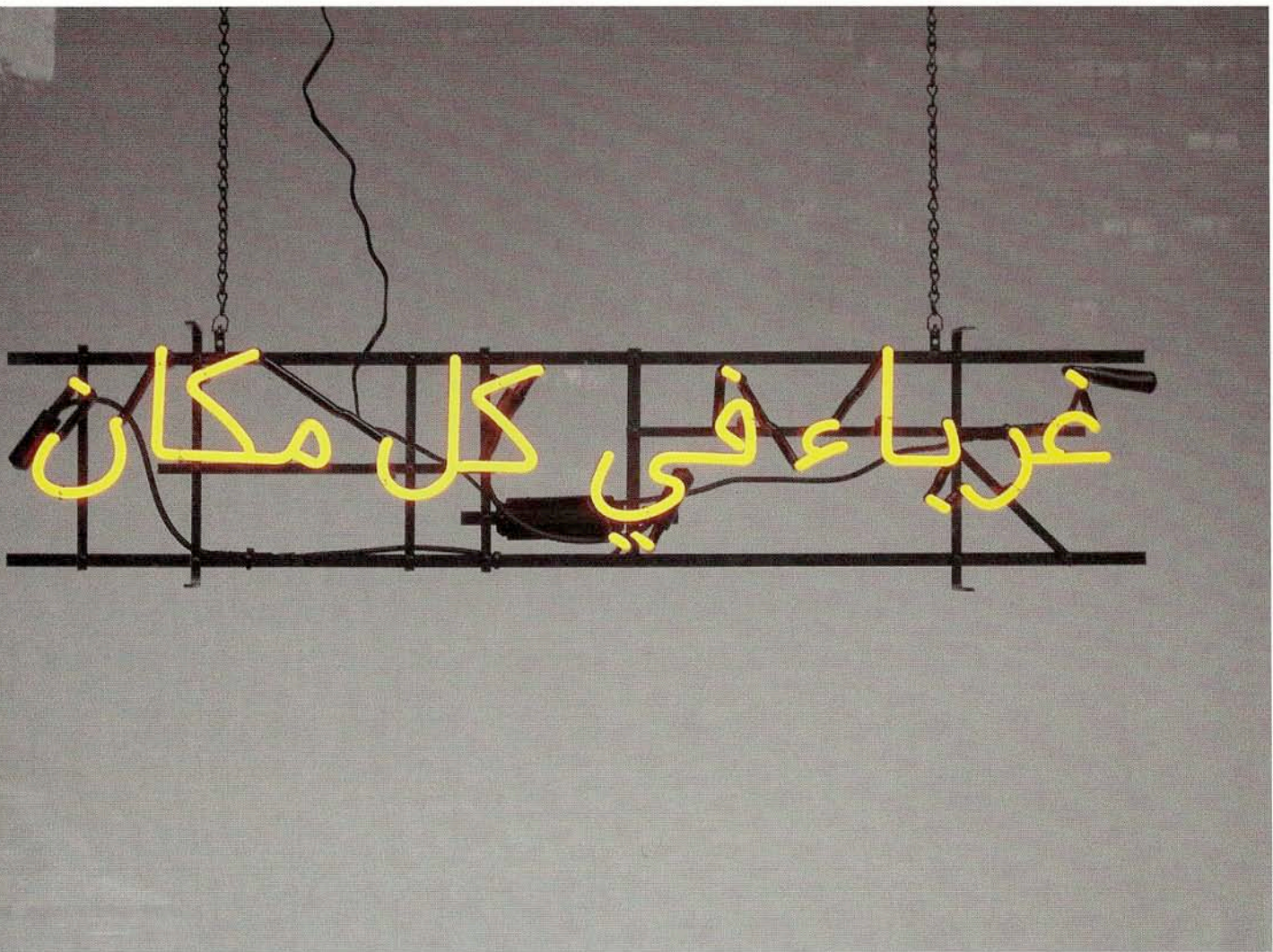




Acts of
Freedom:

*Claire
Fontaine*

in conversation
with Niels Van Tomme



Founded in Paris in 2004, Claire Fontaine took its name from Clairefontaine, the French notebook maker, playfully turning the well-known brand into a personal name by altering its spelling. Rejecting notions of authorship and originality, “she,” as Claire Fontaine’s members refer to their invented artist, borrows from a wide range of avant-garde practices, bringing together signs, symbols, images, and objects in a collective *détournement*. On her website, Claire Fontaine states that her practice interrogates “the political impotence and the crisis of singularity that define contemporary art.”¹ Producing various apparatuses for the sharing of intellectual and private property, Claire Fontaine should be seen as an “existential terrorist” rather than a traditional artist. On the eve of two major upcoming solo exhibitions—at the Aspen Art Museum in Aspen, CO, and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Miami—Niels Van Tomme talks with the collective to discuss art, politics, and its controversial oeuvre.

Niels Van Tomme: Claire Fontaine is a ready-made artist who borrows her name from a famous French brand of notebooks. The people responsible for her artistic outcome are unknown. The artworks produced under her name lack originality and show no apparent individual skills. What kind of artistic position does Claire Fontaine take?

Claire Fontaine: The members of Claire Fontaine are not unknown; they do not voluntarily entertain some sort of mystery: we give talks and are pretty visible. The artistic position of Claire Fontaine—whatever that means—appears in all of her works. An artist’s position is always expressed by his or her work, the way he or she does it, the effect it produces, and so on. This is obvious. The idea that a contemporary artist’s work has to demonstrate “apparent individual skills” was already old-fashioned in the 1950s, as Duchamp had pulverized this cliché in 1917. It would be embarrassing to come back on this fact.

INSIDE FRONT COVER + OPPOSITE: Claire Fontaine, installation view of *STRIKE (K font V.I)*, 2005, featured in *Grey Flags* at CAPC, Bordeaux, France, white and red fluorescent tubes, steel wall mounted or free-standing frame, movement detector, and circuit-breaker, approx. 6.5 x 1.7 x 0.4 m [courtesy of the artist; collection Frac Aquitaine] / ABOVE: *Foreigners Everywhere (Arabic)*, 2005, window or wall-mounted yellow neon, fittings, cabling, and transformers, approx. 100 x 18 x 4.5 cm [courtesy of the artist and Reena Spaulings Fine Art, New York]

NVT: One of your early works, *STRIKE (K font V.I)*, 2005, is a neon sign of the word "STRIKE," which can be related to a refusal to perform duties, be they political, societal or artistic. What is to be gained from such a radical stop in the chain of production?

CF: What is to be gained? What a question!!! Freedom.

NVT: Freedom is an empty concept, a ready-made concept so to speak, available to the most diverse and oppositional ideologies, to be used and abused. To which notion of freedom are you referring?

CF: Freedom from discipline, freedom from work, freedom to use your time and your body without having to calculate the economical loss that your actions could cause. Freedom to experiment with your feelings, sexuality, and desires, without complying with a repressive order dictated solely by financial profit. We are not referring to the concept of freedom that guides free trade, which is a product of liberalism: we know the kind of major problems that accompany this idea. We can't even evaluate the extent of the impoverishment of everyday life, human relationships, public space, and children's and old people's lives caused by the last forty years of capitalism, not to speak of the destruction of the ecosystem.

NVT: Claire Fontaine appropriates elements from historical moments of radical protest and civil disobedience, mostly from the 1960s and 1970s, and often attaches them to the language of minimalist artworks of the same period. Why exactly are you interested in this period, from both societal and artistic points of view?

CF: The 1960s and 1970s were years when subjectivity became a ground for experimentation; this had major political, aesthetic, and ethical consequences. Today, we live in conservative and impoverished times; the stakes of forty and fifty years ago are still contemporary, but the language with which to approach these problems has been expropriated and forgotten. One must sometimes go backwards to find it again.

NVT: By contrast, political philosophers Hardt and Negri claim that we need to abandon such historical ideas of opposition, couched in the collective struggles of the old Left. They developed their concept of the multitude as a potential and inherent resistance to postmodern power structures, pointing to the possibility of collective resistance and action against it. Why revisit the past if new possibilities are available today?





CF: Revisiting doesn't mean repeating. Hardt and Negri are pure products of the 1970s themselves, as thinkers and subjects. It's obvious that today, one must conceptualize struggle in a different way. It's also inevitable since the apparatus of repression has changed radically. Many actions that were then classified as harmless behaviors are now categorized as criminal or terrorist. As for the multitude's new potentialities: we all have to believe in them. This is obvious to even the most idiotic trader stuck in the putrid marsh of the stock exchange. But *Empire* isn't such a rigorous book when it comes to thinking about new life forms.² Anyway, it isn't our bible.

NVT: *Equivalent VIII*, 2007, is made of bricks wrapped in book covers of the radical political literature of the past.

It references the bricks thrown by the 1968 Paris protesters. Can you explain the relationship between the bricks and the texts? What kind of ideas does this work propagate?

CF: We have reproduced the entire installation of Carl Andre's equivalents from 1966, not only *Equivalent VIII*. The covers don't all belong to the "radical political literature of the past." They are chosen from the Folio collection—French pocket books. Many of the publications are in fact contemporary. We were interested in the layout of this collection, which associates reproductions of artworks—mostly of modern and contemporary art—with unrelated titles. We then created this puzzle: reproductions of covers interacting with each other on visual and

OPPOSITE: installation view of *Foreigners Everywhere (Serbian)*, 2007, at Kalemegdan Castle and Military Museum, Belgrade, as part of *Places of Negotiation, Belef 07*, Belgrade Summer Festival, window or wall-mounted neon, fittings, cabling, and transformers, approx. 400 x 40 x 4.5 cm [courtesy of the artist] / ABOVE: *Equivalent VIII*, 2007, 120 firebricks and folded Epson durabrite prints, firebricks: 179 x 110 x 63 mm; overall: 1100 x 1074 x 126 mm, ed. 1 + 1AP [courtesy of the artist and Reena Spaulings Fine Art, New York]

textual levels. This mass of information is in stark contrast with Andre's minimalist and mute gesture. In addition, the title *Equivalent* has been further displaced, adding another layer of meaning: in order for these book cover reproductions to fit the bricks, we had to modify their spines. They now all conform to the thickness of the bricks, regardless of the book's original size. The bricks refer to Andre rather than May '68, and they eventually evoke the pretense of the democratization of culture and its failure: everybody can afford to buy a Folio book, but most people don't have the time or the intellectual resources to read it. The book then becomes an object like any other. Its packaging talks to us from a shop window or a shelf where it is displayed for sale, just like any other product.

NVT: Much of your work addresses the figure of the foreigner, most notably in the multilingual series of neon signs *Foreigners Everywhere*, 2005. What is your position towards foreigners? How does this concept inform your work?

CF: The foreigner can be—and often is if we look closely at the arsenal of Western immigration laws—the intruder, the unwelcomed. Kafka pictures this state of things magnificently in his novel *The Castle*, 1922.

The foreigner can also reveal reality: the way things are, bare and brutal. Brecht talks about *Verfremdung* as a process that allows people to see a world that is imperceptible from their usual point of view. This new perspective can cause violent reactions: in 2005 we exhibited a neon sign in the window of Reena Spaulings Fine Art in New York. It read "Foreigners Everywhere" in Arabic. Some residents of the gallery's Jewish neighborhood became extremely hostile and paranoid towards the artwork. In order to avoid any misunderstanding, we were forced to tape a piece of paper to the window, bearing the English translation of the neon sign's text.

NVT: This brings up the issue of so-called international art, that is, the idea that everything is translatable everywhere. As this example clearly shows, certain ideas activate other meanings in different contexts. Are you aware of these differences? Do you think it's important to take them into account?

CF: Yes, of course we are aware of this. We often speak about the violence of translation. Not everything is translatable in every language. We even experienced vandalism during the 2007 Istanbul Biennial. We had pasted two posters on a shop window. They bore a quote from Walter Benjamin in both





English and Turkish: "Whoever fights for the class of the exploited is an immigrant in his own country." The window was broken overnight and the work was never replaced. So, even in the context of international biennials and contemporary art's generalized colonization of all sorts of places, there is resistance and reaction. Some shows are more than a smooth and meaningless carpet facilitating the artwork's transit from the white cube to the collector's house. The work meets people and people meet the work. Like most contemporary artists, we deal with very site-specific issues and try to travel to the places where our work is exhibited. Seeing the artwork in different places is always a unique experience; it is often a surprise.

NVT: With no original or meaningful symbolic space at our disposal, can we still be hopeful about the future of art and society?

CF: Oh, we are not so pessimistic! There is much space to express ideas and a lot of possibilities, but one must accept the consequences of one's gestures. Why not be hopeful?

NVT: How did Claire Fontaine start? To which conditions did it respond? What is it aiming for?

CF: Claire Fontaine started in 2004 out of discussions on political impotence. It wasn't a response to a particular condition. It was an act of freedom. It aims to preserve this freedom and to share it as widely as possible.

NVT: Will it be a lasting project or is it a temporary formation?

CF: Nothing is permanent but as Spinoza says, life attempts to last and fights for doing so.

NOTES

1. <http://www.clairefontaine.ws/bio.html>, accessed October 7, 2009.
2. Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, *Empire*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001.

Niels Van Tomme is a curator, researcher, art critic, and frequent contributor to ART PAPERS. The Director of Arts and Media at Provisions Library in Washington, DC, he lives in New York and Washington. His independently curated exhibitions have been shown internationally.

OPPOSITE: *Change*, 2006, twenty-five cent coins, steel box-cutter blades, solder and rivets, ed. 1 + AP [courtesy of the artist and Galerie Neu, Berlin] / ABOVE: still from *126419*, 2008, video projection, HD video, color, sound, 7:49 minutes [courtesy of the artist, Dvir Gallery, Tel Aviv, and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris]