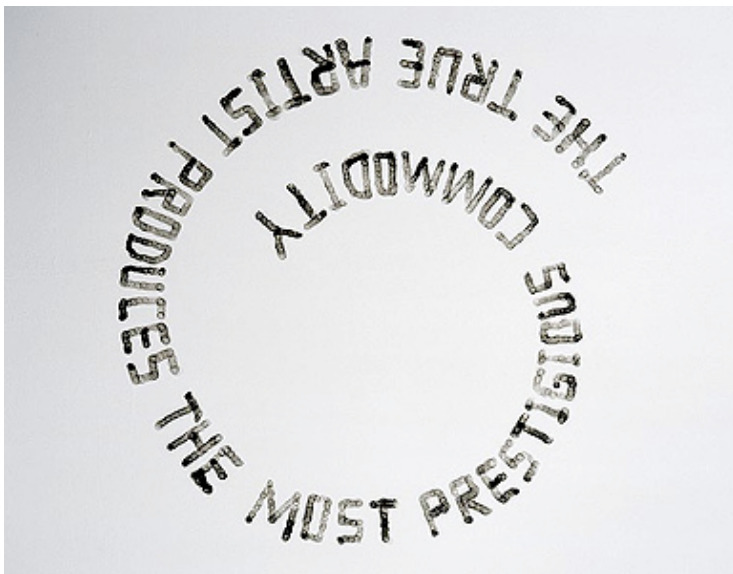


In Life There is No Purity, Only Struggle An Interview with Claire Fontaine

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Claire Fontaine is a Paris-based collective artist, founded in 2004. After lifting her name from a popular brand of school notebooks, Claire Fontaine declared herself a 'readymade artist' and began to elaborate a version of neo-conceptual art that often looks like other people's work. Working in neon, video, sculpture, painting and text, her practice can be described as an ongoing interrogation of contemporary art today.



Claire Fontaine, The True Artist, 2004, Smoke on ceiling, 1500 x 1400mm, dimensions and format variable.

Bart van der Heide:

How did Claire Fontaine get started?

Claire Fontaine:

'We started in mid 2004 with a dialogue; public space was shrinking and we needed to find a space between people. Somehow we started to communicate via artworks, mostly on paper since we couldn't make very much at the beginning; we created an immaterial space of freedom. Then Joseph Strau generously invited us to show in the Meerretich Gallery, a beautiful project space that he was then running in Berlin. This was in January 2005 and we made our first solo exhibition there.'

Bart van der Heide:

What was the first work Claire Fontaine ever made?

Claire Fontaine:

'The very first work was *Ibis redibis non morieris in bello*; it was in the summer of 2004, and the work was made on paper. It was shown for the first time at Reena Spaulings Fine Art in New York for our second solo exhibition in the gallery, Footnotes on the state of exception in January 2007. And it was presented for a second time at the Lyon Biennial, later that same year. It is a large circular neon sign, strongly quoting the idiom of Bruce Nauman, that lights up in a sequence forming the sentences "you will go to war – you will come back – you will not die – you will go to war – you will not come back – you will die". This is the English translation of the ambiguous prophecy of the Sybil from Cuma: '*ibis redibis non morieris in bello*' that can be read in two ways, according to where the reader places the comma. A part of this work, which we call the compensator, is not based on language. It consists of a line of light bulbs suspended from the ceiling, with each bulb connected to a word, so that all together they reproduce the rhythm of the neon sign but without the verbal meaning attached to it, something like an indecipherable Morse code. We were interested in this idea that the neon can "feed" another light and that they share the same flux of electricity, the same pulsations but in different locations. *Ibis redibis non morieris in bello* is obviously a work that deals with the nightmare of war through its resemblance to a clock or a roulette wheel; it is a cyclic device that displays the absurdity of a political vicious circle.'

Bart van der Heide:

You just finished an exhibition at Maison Descartes in Amsterdam (11 December – 15 January) and seem to be generally quite in demand. Can you tell us about your development from starting as a group three years ago, to becoming the French representative of contemporary art production?

Claire Fontaine:

'I think it's absurd to say that we are the French representative of anything. We have a lot of exposure at this moment and we produce works, but our positive reception is never assured. Our productivity comes from the joy of doing things together and from the lack of possibility of expressing these affects, feelings and questions in other ways. There are enormously well known contemporary French artists out there; we are still very small in comparison. We feel like we have just started.'

Bart van der Heide:

What would be the ideal context of your work?

Claire Fontaine:

'There is no ideal context. Our work functions within the limits and the contradictions of its time. We are not very fond of the concept of the autonomy of art – the way we work is very linked to places, events, sensations that have a history and several layers of complexity, at the point that it would be inexact to define some of our works as site-specific. Potentially they all are, in some ways, because if they are good they respond to the context, to the public, they are not a dead something in some immutable place. For example, we just made a very site-specific project entitled, *Is*

freedom therapeutic? in the worst context that one can imagine: at the “Art Positions” containers at Art Basel Miami Beach. Together with T293 Gallery from Naples, we questioned the proximity between the art market and psychopathology. Our gallerists were instructed to build a large blue horse, Marco Cavallo, as a monument to the one that the patients of Basaglia Hospital in Trieste built in 1973 when the mental asylums were abolished in the whole of Italy. There was nothing for sale in the booth; people seem to have been receptive to all this, including the final destruction of the horse, that was the last dismissal of fetishism. The aim was to question commercial transactions within an art fair: if the criteria for establishing madness are based on the apparent disproportion between the meaning attributed to some things by a person compared to the average opinion of the “society”, then what about buying contemporary art? How many people would find that “normal”? We also had a number of posters hanging in our stand saying things such as “Is there any possible freedom from the market and its unreasonable rules?” and “What is a shared reality in a world where people’s experiences are entirely conditioned by their level of income?”

Bart van der Heide:

The work STRIKE (K. font V.I.) (2005) consists of unadorned strip lighting awarded a new function. Is such appropriation and hence estrangement exemplary for your aesthetic practice?

Claire Fontaine:

‘STRIKE is a work composed of fluorescent strip lights. We have created with this common system of lighting normally employed in disciplinary spaces, such as schools, factories and hospitals, a font called K. in homage to Kafka. STRIKE is just one of a series of signs composed with the same typeface. Its literal meaning doesn’t aim to obliterate any actual struggle, now that striking as a form of resistance has become quite rare. What is good about it is that it stays off during exhibition opening hours and is on evenings and during the night. Many viewers tend to think the sign is broken. For us STRIKE also questioned interactive art and what is called relational aesthetics.’

Bart van der Heide:

STRIKE seems closely related to your belief that the process of ‘becoming a stranger’ can serve as an aesthetic method, or is a condition for a revolutionary acts. Could you expand on this?

Claire Fontaine:

‘The process of “becoming a stranger” is for us translated as a “human strike”. A “human strike” takes place when professional or general strikes have become impossible. It is an affective reaction that attempts to change radically the dynamics of which we are prisoners or with which we seem forced to collaborate. There is a beautiful list of authors that worked on the potentiality of this process, interpreted as a practice of freedom and not a progressive action of liberation. For example in *Three Guineas*, Virginia Woolf recommended that women remain indifferent to their brothers’ desire for war and violence. This is an interesting form of human strike – stopping the flux of natural affects that attaches us to our political enemies. This is at the same time an ethical and an aesthetic act: it changes the perception of the world and the world itself.’

Bart van der Heide:

How do your ideas about 'human strike' relate to what you have termed the 'ready-made artist'?

Claire Fontaine:

'The practice of the strike, as we approach it, is somehow connected with the crisis of authorship – but these don't coincide completely. The way we started to approach this idea of the ready-made artist was not moralistic, nor prescriptive. We were trying to describe our practice, a possible practice for others, that implicates the recycling, the repetition of historical forms but filled with contemporary content. This action is more a restitution, in the sense that it is the reclamation of the right to the use of culture. This must always happen through a profanation that takes the masterpiece out of the museum and makes it part of a problem.'

Bart van der Heide:

What would be your response to someone who would judge your work as not political enough?

Claire Fontaine:

'People who need to call themselves professional revolutionaries are an existential disaster and a political poison. There is no such thing as a militant super-ego that can go around telling people "you are lazy" or "you are not passionate enough about your work/your child/your lover" or "you don't fight hard enough": this is bullshit! The struggles belong to those who fight them anywhere, and not to those who have the words or the images to express their content more precisely or more beautifully. The macho dream of the avant-garde is thankfully over; now we deal with other urgencies that don't allow us to look good in scandals and group pictures and to terrorize bourgeois people at the theatre. In any case, I don't consider that we are parasiting or capitalizing on the living struggles, or that we aestheticize them cynically. We genuinely hope that the ideas and problems that obsess us and that we work on will interest more and more people in the way they interest us, or I could say: oppress us. Our work is not exemplary; we are not showing the way to the proletariat nor exploiting them, we are thinking aloud and also through objects, texts, etc. If this ever came to be considered illegitimate and had to be justified, then we would really be going backwards, towards the worst.'

Bart van der Heide:

The work *Passe-Partout* features a set of lock picks, hacksaw blades and a small flashlight hung on an "I Love Paris" key-chain, and is sometimes accompanied by the lock-picking demonstration in the video *Instructions for the sharing of private property*. Much of your work plays with deliberate exchangeability. Does *Passe-Partout* reference this practice, by commenting on the accessibility of authorship and the free exchange of value?

Claire Fontaine:

'There are several aspects that we are interested in and that all relate to the questioning of a certain state of things, a certain distribution of means and knowledge, power and money. Private property is one of the issues that seem to be impossible to criticize. We all need it and we are all prisoners of it. Besides *Passe-Partout*, which is an invitation to the collector to break into forbidden spaces and, by way of the title, a comment on our relationship to towns and places, we also have developed

other works around forcing locks. For example, there is a series of moulded keys of gallery spaces that we make by using a FBI key duplication kit. Once they are bought, they give the collector the possibility to enter the gallery and steal whatever is there. This sculpture disturbs the normality of the commercial transaction and forces people to deal with their fears. Up until now, the München Kunstverein has been the only museum to accept playing the game, all the others refused. Instructions for the sharing of private property is a different type of work because it is somehow an erotic video; the game between these anonymous hands and the lock that resists penetration is very interesting. But it is also a video that questions the pedagogical temptations in contemporary art by using the language of do-it-yourself in order to push the spectator towards committing a crime.'

Bart van der Heide:

This principle of exchangeability also seems discernible in the fact that your work stylistically resembles or refers to countless other artworks currently circulating on the market. How does this interest relate to a more recent work like *Equivalent* (2007), which echoes Carl Andre's similarly titled work from 1966? Your piece comprises eight sculptures each made up of 120 firebricks all wrapped in reproductions of covers from the book series *Folio*.

Claire Fontaine:

'*Equivalent* was born out of many different problems. One was the question of the mass distribution of culture: books have become economically affordable but they remain more and more inaccessible to people who do not have the tools to comprehend their contents or simply don't have any time or space in their lives to read. Another was the fascination for minimalism – this amazing ambiguity of the mute object, in this case bricks and their possibility to express anything. By appropriating and changing them, we questioned the composition of the covers, where the reproduction of an artwork is associated with a title and an author in a sort of mysterious way. The books have all become equivalents because they have been made into bricks, reduced to pure surface. Their spine has been enlarged to the size of a brick, so they now all have the same weight and the same thickness and they are all defunctionalized.'

Bart van der Heide:

Looking back at a collective such as Bernadette Corporation, it is striking to see how fast their work became adopted by a specific type of show. Their artistic practice was contextualized in group exhibitions that aspired to be activist and multidisciplinary. In retrospect, this context has little to do with the content of their work, and more with the specific practice of freelance curators with global ambitions.

Claire Fontaine:

'I disagree with this analysis of their neutralization. Bernadette Corporation is still one of the most dysfunctional and fascinatingly contradictory artists that we know. If their work is used in order to put forward a "political sensibility", or a "political content", this happens because of the desperate need for simplification and the frequent lack of rigour that can be found in some areas of contemporary curatorial practice. Freelance curators often deal with an absurdly busy schedule,

they must slow down. I don't see any impatience for museumification on the part of Bernadette Corporation, nor any docile behaviour towards art career devices; they don't make gallery shows as far as I know. That said, I don't fear what in the sixties and the seventies was called cooptation. Market, institutions, fairs, events, collectors, dealers have now melted into a continuous fabric where we all have to trace our trajectories. More generally, there is no purity in contemporary life, just struggle.'