

## Claire Fontaine interviewed by John Kelsey

JK: Claire Fontaine describes itself as a fiction and as a ready-made artist. What does it mean, from the perspective of subjectivity, to say that a contemporary artist has become something like a urinal or a Brillo box?

CF: Claire Fontaine doesn't especially describe herself as a fiction; she is not meant to be a female character with a face, specific characteristics, or moods. She is a fiction in the way any proper name is a fiction. You use the strategy of the pseudonym yourself, and on two fronts, even, with Bernadette Corporation and Reena Spaulings. These two names designate two spheres of collective activity that do not necessarily conform to the formats imposed by the notions "artists' collective" or the "gallery", etc.

Giving a name to a collective practice, signing certain things Claire Fontaine instead of the Ramones, Luther Blisset, or the Red Brigades, is very real: we do this is to make it explicit that our works and actions come from here, from us. We are locatable and accessible, not invisible or mysterious. Somehow, using the name Claire Fontaine is more precise than signing the names of the people implicated in the work because what we produce is quantitatively and qualitatively different than the sum of our individual practices. For us, the creative process is primarily a form of participation and it involves quite a few gregarious components; it's the result of a lot of compromise and questioning, and that reinforces the work. That's also why we always talk about Claire Fontaine's "assistants". Claire Fontaine is composed only of assistants, its management is an empty center.

Next, there is this fact of being a ready-made artist...well, this doesn't just concern Claire Fontaine, underlying this we say we are all ready-made artists, just as in France in '68 they said "we are all German Jews". Wanting to be an artist today comes down to putting yourself in a strange situation, like that of some object that is suddenly declared a work of art. The subjectivization of contemporary beings is submitted to all forms of monitoring and formatting (this is not meant as a catastrophic statement). Old forms of containment are still disintegrating but they continue to act upon us (work, family, fatherland, prison, psychiatric hospital...). And, on top of that, for the past 30 years we've been carrying the entire weight of targeted and socializing merchandise (with new communication technologies at the forefront), the effects of the crisis of institutions (neo-illiteracy, everything falling under the auspices of psychiatry, zero tolerance, poverty). In short, the aborted promises of the 1970s liberated nothing. But all sorts of existential and social disasters have developed, and all of them within a relational space that was already too limited in '68 and has only shrunk since. That makes for an awful lot of standardization of subjectivities. At this point, the art world finds itself populated by more or less political refugees coming from all kinds of other professional realms and, of course, by people who always wanted to be artists too. But, at the moment, there's still no place to cultivate one's own exception. Fear has eaten away at the soul of whatever it was that used to make western cities attractive. They've become shopping centers where everything has a price and fewer and fewer things are left to chance. Anything that adventure subtracts from private property has the lifeblood sucked out of it by misery and need: squats, collectives or occupied houses, all of these experiences have become painfully difficult and harshly repressed. It's hard to keep laboratories of subjectivity open in these conditions because people always come together in normed contexts.

Who hasn't overheard this discussion: where do we go? Berlin? Barcelona? New York? Istanbul? The desire to belong to an alterity expresses itself, to flee, to no longer be socially controlled and economically abandoned at the same time, here. One of the serious problem artists face is that the world that was supposed to shelter them has been devoured, and even

the melancholy that streams from that fact is no longer a source of inspiration. Listening to Debord whining about destroyed Paris and vanished hoodlums can get on anyone's nerves nowadays. The artist is henceforth subject to the same conditioning and the same working rhythms as all the other producers, the poverty in experience included.

JK: Given that you're a collective practice, an artist populated by more than one, does the division of labor in what you produce become an aspect of the work itself? Because it seems to me that your work has tended to hide its own realization and any productive relation from which it could flow or it could depend upon.

CF: The division of labor is *the* fundamental problematic of our work. Claire Fontaine grew out of the impossibility of accepting the division between intellectual and manual work; the art world is the best adapted for fleeing this sort of hierarchy. Other sets of problems arise afterwards because it is no longer possible for anyone to be self-sufficient (unless this coincides with insularity), and so there's the subcontracting of certain parts of the works, monetary relations. These are the terrifying dramas of capitalism and they are simultaneously present in the form and the content of what we make. Unresolved questions function as the motor and carburant of our artistic productions: we say all the time that if we could get down to changing this state of things we wouldn't make art. But I think your question refers to an old discussion we had where you upheld that the content of an artistic work does not determine its political position, and that its strategic choices comprise its effectiveness and its coherence. I am not sure that the attempt to extract contradictions through a position of purity is very fruitful. Claire Fontaine doesn't believe in exemplarity and the political and social relationships that flow from it. Even if it weaves political alliances and friendships, without which it couldn't go on, all the time.

Claiming that Claire Fontaine is a ready-made artist among others means, for example, that it will never say "you're in the shit, we're right". What would be the point? Do you really want to be joined by people you scorn? Do you want to convert people to your political or artistic position because of their admiration for you? Because they secretly feel inferior and wish they were like you? Claire Fontaine seeks to produce horizontal relationships, which has become very difficult, for example, within militant spaces, but these are always, of course, relationships in a confined space. The class division of society has become even more strict, it's idiotic to think that you can undo it with good intentions or that you can extract yourself from it. It already takes a considerable effort to constantly present it as a problem, and a certain modesty with regard to what we produce and the situations in which we produce. We're not hiding very much, perhaps the conservative aspect of the work, the fact that we attempt to preserve the social and material conditions that allow us to work and we work for that. It's the vicious circle that only a revolution can break.

JK: Certain texts by Claire Fontaine contain theorizations on strategies such as the "human strike" and the aggressive silences Italian feminists assumed during the seventies. How does non-production function in your work? Where exactly does it not function?

CF: It functions like an omnipresent horizon one never reaches. Let me explain: the concept of "human strike", as well as the feminists' aggressive silences, were born out of militant contexts, in which some mobilize in order to block total mobilization. The human strike is meant to reveal the way in which the temporality of struggles is conditioned and colonized by the official temporality, and also with regard to affects, behaviors, daily existence, in short. Unfortunately, interruption and non-production are not always options: the human strike is a singular or mass form of behavior meant to break a harmful and politically reactionary

dynamic; it changes according to circumstances. Most often this translates into zealous action, even if punctually. Silent persistence, opposition to those who claim to love us and act with our best interests in mind is already difficult and exhausting enough. Refusal is very important, vital, but after refusal it's constructive action that poses new problems. Because, for example, in the seventies, once the feminists succeeded in explaining to mixed-gender militant groups that their public words were empty, incoherent, bureaucratic, or whatever, the groups disbanded. And now it's often said that "the feminists screwed up the revolutionary dynamic," when this had been the result of a repressive wave of police action that was disproportionate to the forces of the movement. The human strike is not a solution; it is an additional problem, for those who practice it and for those who are subjected to it. But it's a displacement of the problem. In hypnosis, for example, one of the therapeutic options is to displace the patient's symptom through orders given during sleep. The symptom then appears in an unusual situation and moment, and it suddenly seems incongruous to the sick person. Most often, their first reflex is therefore one of not succumbing to this untimely symptom, of controlling it, and through that, they discover a new capacity, a strength they didn't think they had.

JK: How can we interrupt anything in the contemporary art world today? Art circulates at a growing rate of speed, perfectly synchronized with the movement of capital and information.

CF: The contemporary art world is several different worlds at once, all of which are concealed in the large stomach and intestine of Capital. Without even criticizing the criteria that one has to fulfill and the Caudine Forks one has to traverse in order to take part in the visible surface of this world, we can say, more basically, that everything that circulates in this society depends on economic flux. So, how could art be an exception? There is, however, a strange connection between libidinal and monetary economy in the art world, which goes beyond the simple question of fetishism and it's quite fascinating. There are surely things that could be done with that, with this specific state of desire.

If flattery and provocation were the two pillars of the avant-gardes of the last century, two ways of relating two old forms of power, we've now entered into a period in which one has to interfere with the concerns of those who govern and who are governed. Through all that, art doesn't interrupt anything, it only expresses things that would otherwise be drowned out or simplified, it saves phenomena from the digestion and expulsion of the signifying field. Everything that appears as professionally connoted doesn't interrupt anything at all, and that's clear since the defeat of the workers' movement. The interruptions will come from elsewhere, and, for us, making art is a way of staying awake until those moments occur. We will accompany them wherever they manifest themselves; producing them is not our ambition nor our power.

JK: What's the intention behind the sentence *We are all bad consumers*, painted on Warhol's Marilyns? A lot of contemporary art doesn't only situate itself within the field of consumption but, in reality, proposes art as a unique style of consumption in itself. The ready-made, Pop art, appropriation: these are so many practical lessons for the consumers that we all are, striking examples of brilliant, perverse, or simply good-value shopping techniques...

CF: The diptych *We are all ready made artists* and *We are all bad consumers*, which uses Marilyn as a support, is an example of the problems polysemy raises. At the beginning, we were thinking about the slogan "We are all German Jews", and what it meant in '68. That during the war we were all in danger, potential victims? That we are all in solidarity with

those who were exterminated and their loved-ones? In fact, I think it was a gesture of desubjectivisation. In our case, desubjectivisation can henceforth only occur in a very controlled space, in a veritable slice of the market. At present, consumption is no longer an activity in itself, it coincides with the unfolding of our lives, it is not a choice or a pleasure. It is also a practice that interfaces with production in a sadly complementary and less and less dialectical manner. From the moment that consumption became an unavoidable aspect of the construction of our life forms, we lost the hope the avant-gardes had of using art as a means of liberating life. Once production is discredited, degraded, and delocalized, one can no longer moralize about anything concerning consumption. There's no pride left in being a worker or someone who contributes to the general productivity, because we are first and foremost consumers who, by the way, can never obtain what they want (good enough or healthy enough products). I mean, it's clear how the art world situates itself in relationship to this problem. Fetishism is the avowed motor of any transaction (including those with added intellectual value). Remixing as a paradigm of productive activity?... now, that's pathetically banal. Everyone says that production takes place through assembly and the transformation of pre-existing fragments. That's always been the case, but now we all have virtually free access to almost all forms of history and geography; creation has turned into an increasingly vulgar, idiotic, and a less and less magical activity. That's one of the disenchanting effects of capitalism, what else can I say? It's not up to us. These are also fair impressions of course, but they don't stop collectors or challenge the art market in any way. So, appropriation... if such a thing exists it's not what I am up to. Instead, I'm trying to practice expropriation, to create a sharing, an accessibility, a political reinvestment of what I am producing. I annex nothing of myself as a subject. I only steal to redistribute.

JK: People say that the most remarkable artists today are those who invent other ways of manipulating and formatting information. But sometimes it's hard to distinguish the pirates from the "creative types"; maybe they are the same people. *We are all symbol managers...*

CF: It's hard not to have sympathy for pirates, bandits or thieves, these are romantic figures who've molded our desires for freedom since childhood... Creative types, on the contrary, are very shrewd and productive, calculating, much less sexy. Because if you are not shrewd and organized from the outset, the system rapidly changes you or spits you out even before it has had a chance to swallow you, and afterward, as we all know, you no longer create anything. So, no, these are not and never the same people. As far as information goes, I already consider it a by-product, pre-mashed gibberish that can also be found in bits with independent media, but as Walter Benjamin said, information is often accompanied by barbarism. Manipulating this shit can help to make works recognizable and reassuring or even produce some pedagogical effect, but I don't think it's interesting.

JK: How did Claire begin? As a feeling, an idea, a plan? What immediate conditions are you responding to?

CF: Claire started by chance, there wasn't any strategy or career plan. Absolutely none at all! The initial conditions were a feeling of powerlessness, an incapacity to resist the things that affect us. Our main feeling at the time was one of political impotency, of the impossibility of deploying practices of freedom in our professional and personal situation. Claire came to us as a space of immediacy, where we stopped pondering the pros and cons, where we stopped saying: "but yes...and so...and then," etc. We created a field of formal intervention, a shared language, simple needs to satisfy, no goal outside of the continuation of the practice that gives us strength and pleasure—an immaterial space of communism, in sum. It sounds very

inoffensive, but in fact it's a form of displaced struggle: it's not easy to designate the enemy because that's also part of who we are, due to our complicity in the system that produces us as subjects. It's a kind of a guerilla in the field of subjectivisation. A practice that is meant to help us change ourselves.

JK: Claire Fontaine's practice seems to revolve around the word "foreigner"... could you say something about this concept, if indeed it is one, and how it informs (infects) your activities and tactics?

CF: The series of neon signs "Foreigners everywhere" in several different languages, for example, 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.

As for the strangeness that we can all feel when faced with a world that is entirely fabricated and governed by senseless logics, that can certainly be a driving force in the struggle. The idea of the human strike borrows a lot from Bertolt Brecht—from what he described as a process of "estrangement" within the power relationships that constitute who we are—in order to produce events in this interval in the normal flow of things.

I don't think there is anything coquettish about our use of different languages. It stems from the fact that we were born elsewhere and left for no particular reason, except perhaps the fact of no longer being at home. The contradictions, power relations, and violence that one's own language buries or blunts become manifest when you use a language that isn't your own. The struggle with meaning then gives form to what Deleuze and Guattari claimed to find in Kafka: the "foreign language within language". Basically, this is what artists are trying to speak. The promise of community rests solely in this impropriety.

JK: Did you produce any art today?

CF: No, *I would prefer not to.*