

Interview with Claire Fontaine

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Claire Fontaine is a Paris-based collective artist named after a common brand of French stationary. Her work takes the form of sculptures, videos, paintings, and various other material found in everyday culture. She usurps the history of conceptualism, using it as a platform from which she presents her works and ideas, which are a response against political and social oppression. Calling herself a "readymade artist," she sees artists' identities as exchangeable as the products they make, and works on the transformation of subjectivity by pushing the boundaries of authorship and collectivity. She has written numerous texts that focus on art's limitations and desire to address the problem of political impotency within society.

Chen Tamir: I first came to your work through your writings. I'd like to start by asking you about your texts. You've said before that language is an arena reserved for reciprocal understanding. Who are you writing for?

Claire Fontaine: For everybody who can understand. Generally people write to imaginary friends who they miss in real life.

CT: How are the texts you write foils or contexts for the art you make? You've said that you use a visual language, "an aesthetics of expropriationism." What does that mean?

CF: Writing a text or making a visual work are very different activities. The texts don't function as a context; they are texts, they express things that cannot be expressed by other medias in the same way. The term of "expropriationism" has been used in order to fight against the idea of appropriationism understood as the action of taking pre-existing references and adding them to your body of work. Expropriationism refers to the idea that we live dispossessed of the world and of the meaning of things and that we can borrow signs and objects in order to compose something that makes sense, which brings us back to something we experience. So we expropriate a form from a context to render it into another one charged with another sense. If you wish, you can call this a contemporary form of the *détournement*, except the data bank we can access today is incomparable to the one of the 60's and 70's.

CT: People in the art world don't really know what to do with your art, and art like it. It's labeled "political" and "anarchist," which in turn makes it sexy and attractive. And it's ok to have your

works in the mix, in the market, because it's 2009 and we know now that there is no outside to capitalism. Is that a good enough excuse? Do you feel like you "sell out" when you participate in the economic arena of art? Do the works become mere revolutionary action figures?

CF: People never seem to be disorientated when facing our art; we are included in museum exhibitions and we show in independent and commercial contexts. We are contemporary artists in 2009; the curators that work with us perfectly understand our work. For people who need labels, we are afraid they must have a hard time in the contemporary art field, where everything is constantly in discussion including the status of the artwork as a valid notion in itself.

We don't need any excuse for what we do, we don't even understand the question – we pursue our research with different medias, we investigate unresolved problems, we give a lot of talks, a lot of interviews, a lot of exhibition walk-throughs. I would like to know why we should feel guilty and of what? Should we eat dry bread and sleep in the streets in order to prove that the ideas we have can't be ideas of whatever people? We are sorry but we are like anybody else.

If one thinks that an artwork is a political action, then one is mad: an artwork is an artwork, it has political meaning, it has power, it isn't an action. Actions take place elsewhere, and they keep doing so. As Deleuze says in his conference *Sur l'acte de création* (1987), an act of creation is not always an act of resistance and an act of resistance is not always creative, but these two activities are linked.

CT: You've said that "communism is a redistribution of poverty more than of wealth; it is a specific relationship to the chronic insufficiency that exists with us all, toward our body, our childhood, the immediate urgency of our desires." Elsewhere you write "We consider that any revolutionary movement is a movement towards more pleasure and not just a desperate gesture for getting rid of pain, oppression, or poverty." How do you envision revolution? And what role does art play in it? Does the election of Barack Obama represent a revolutionary moment? If so, what does it change?

CF: We are not prophets and we don't envisage any revolution. Revolutions always belong to the people that make them, and at the moment there doesn't seem to be a possibility for this type of event in Europe nor in the U.S.

Obama is a politician; he is there to govern, to make use of institutional violence, and to make all the compromises the president of the biggest country in the world must make during the most serious crisis in centuries.

The change has taken place on a symbolic level. Obama is of mixed race, this is lucky because this simple detail gets on the nerves of many idiots and upsets all sorts of racists and right wing people. In the end we will find that skin colour wasn't important, that no one chose the colour of his skin, that a black person can be good or bad – it is the level zero of intelligence. We live in post-colonial countries that choose not to find the words and the images to explain the race and the sex wars, and choose not to teach children a thorough history of the problems of race, class, and sex, which entirely structure our everyday life. The colour of the president isn't an interesting topic in the end: Elites have all colours and they are still elites. We cannot see a very big change besides this; the margin isn't wide enough to transform the country from an institutional position. But these impressions come from Europe and we are very far from the understandable relief and joy of the Americans.

-Chen Tamir