

# METRO PICTURES

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## Nine Reasons Why the Avant-Garde Shouldn't Give Up Hal Foster

1.

Do you ever wonder what Claire Fontaine looks like? Although her status as a "ready-made artist" might caution us against such curiosity, I imagine her along the lines of the little girl in *The Avant-Garde Doesn't Give Up* (1962), a flea-market picture revised by Asger Jorn. With a jump rope still in her hands yet dressed in her Sunday best (for confirmation or some other fraught moment of forced induction into adult society), this strange creature is at once young and old beyond her years. How she holds the rope is also odd, mixing poise and provocation, as do her bold gaze and her tight hair. Could the rope be a garotte? In a reprise of *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919), the Duchamp tweaking of the Mona Lisa, Jorn adds a goatee on the girl, and scrawls the title on the blackboard behind her as if it were a slogan in her own hand: *l'avant-garde se rend pas*. These touches of *détournement* do not give the girl a hot ass (as Duchamp thought of his revised Mona Lisa) so much as they render the viewer an uneasy target.<sup>1</sup>

2.

The avant-garde doesn't give up? On the one hand, according to Claire Fontaine, if it hasn't already, it should now. "The macho dream of the avant-garde is thankfully over," she remarked in 2009; "the role models that once accompanied it have also been dismissed," she wrote in 2005.<sup>2</sup> Just as the readymade underscored the commodity-status of the work of art one hundred years ago, so the ready-made artist cautions against the spectacle-status of the figure of the artist today. On the other hand, Claire Fontaine finds many of her resources in the historical archive of this same avant-garde. "We go through the toolbox," she has commented,

echoing Deleuze on theory as a toolkit, "and we use what is needed, what works."<sup>3</sup> In this respect Claire Fontaine suggests a contemporary version of the critical re-reading practiced by vanguard artists and theorists in the 1960s and 1970s, such as the return to Constructivist principles in Minimalist art, or the return to Marx, Freud, Nietzsche, and Benjamin in Althusser, Lacan, Foucault and Deleuze, and Agamben respectively. Along with Duchampian readymades and Situationist *détournements*, Claire Fontaine touches on estrangement in Brecht, the dialectical image in Benjamin, and appropriation from Pop through the Pictures artists and beyond. Through these allusions she hopes to recover some of the radicality of each strategy for the present—to recover it from the layers of (mis)interpretation that often obscure its insight and dampen its force. "One must sometimes go backwards to find it again," she remarked in 2009.<sup>4</sup> This is one way to understand her name, too, at least as regards Duchamp: not only an homage to a ready-made brand of French notebooks and stationary (that is, of blank sheets to be taken up and inscribed), "Claire Fontaine" is also a move to clarify *The Fountain*, to reset the terms of the readymade tradition for current conditions—and to wrest it away from its abuse as a luxury object or mass logo (as in Koons or Murakami) or as an inflated prop in a nihilistic or adolescent acting-out (as in Hirst or Cattelan). "This action is more a restitution," Claire Fontaine has said, "in the sense that it is the reclamation of the right to the use of the culture."<sup>5</sup>

3.

In 1921 Duchamp adopted an alter ego, Rose Selavy, and split into two, sexually and ethnically (Rose was Jewish as well as female). In 2004 the creators of



Asger Jorn  
*L'avant-garde se rend pas*, 1962  
 Öl auf Leinwand | Oil on canvas,  
 73 × 60 cm  
 Sammlung | Collection  
 Pierre & Micky Alechinsky



Marcel Duchamp  
*L.H.O.O.Q.*, 1919  
 Readymade: Postkarte mit einer Reproduktion von Leonardo da Vincis Mona Lisa und Übermalung | Readymade: postcard featuring a reproduction of the Mona Lisa by Leonardo da Vinci with overpainting  
 Musée national d'Art moderne,  
 Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris

Claire Fontaine did the reverse—they passed from two artists to one—yet this transformation was also not simple. “Claire Fontaine is a groupuscule made of groupuscules,” she has stated, “because each one of us is one and several at the same time.”<sup>6</sup> This is another echo, here of Deleuze and Guattari from the opening of *Mille Plateaux* (1980): “The two of us wrote *Anti-Oedipus* together. Since each of us was several, there was already quite a crowd.”<sup>7</sup> As a ready-made artist, then, Claire Fontaine exists somewhere between the split Rose and the multiple D&Gs, yet it is her doubleness that is key. If the readymade is ambiguous in its implication—it proposes that, even as art *qua* commodity is given over to exchange value, its use value might be reclaimed in part (as one might still deploy a shovel or a bottle rack)—so too is the ready-made artist double in its import. On the one hand, as Claire Fontaine comments, the artist today is often “a product and a brand,” with given functions that conform to the expectations of the culture industry (in some accounts the artist is the very exemplar of the creative type essential to “the new spirit of capitalism” at large).<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, Claire Fontaine strives to turn the “empty center” of her ready-made status to advantage: rather than the old idea of art as a site of heroic individuation, art might become “a space for the defunctionalization of subjectivities,” of a refusal of the scripted roles that alienate us all, of a “human strike” against “the economic, affective, sexual and emotional positions in which subjects are imprisoned.”<sup>9</sup>

#### 4.

We used to talk about “Marx after Derrida,” that is, to parse how deconstruction alters the terms of Marxist critique. In a similar way Claire Fontaine asks us



to consider "Duchamp after Agamben" (the Italian philosopher is her other great touchstone), that is, to ponder how the readymade might be understood as "a form of bareness and whateverness," two key concepts in Agamben.<sup>10</sup> Born in 2004, Claire Fontaine has grown up "during the time of totalitarian democracies," a period when the condition of "bare life" (which Agamben defines as life that is accursed, at the mercy of all) has become more common, as has the category of "whatever singularity" (defined by Agamben as a form of mass subjecthood "freed" of specific properties).<sup>11</sup> More normal now, too, is "the state of exception," whereby the rule of law is suspended so that the status quo of power can be maintained. Obviously, this regime, in which "the camp" threatens to be "the new biopolitical *nomos* of the planet," is a dire one, but we are not helpless before it, and for her part Claire Fontaine suggests at least two responses.<sup>12</sup> One is to side with those forced into the position of bare life, to insist, as she does in a series of neon signs in different languages, not only that "foreigners are everywhere" but also that "we ourselves are foreigners," and so must not become "victims of our own idea of security."<sup>13</sup> So, too, one can exploit the doubleness of our whatever singularity, for, if we are indeed rendered anonymous in mass society, so might we also be rendered collective by the same process. "The spectacle retains something like a positive possibility that can be used against it," Agamben writes; "this is the good that humanity must learn how to wrest from commodities in their decline."<sup>14</sup>

5.

Claire Fontaine is fascinated by literary characters that anticipate our bareness and whateverness, creatures



VALIE EXPORT

*Aktionshose: Genitalpanik*, 1969

Schwarz-Weiß-Fotografie | Black and white photograph

© VALIE EXPORT, Foto | photo: Peter Hassmann, Courtesy Charim Galerie Wien



Man Ray

*Rose Sélavy*, 1921

Silbergelatineabzug | Silverprint,

12 × 7,6 cm

Philadelphia Museum of Art



Marcel Duchamp  
*Fountain*, 1917/1964  
 Readymade: *Urinoir* (eine von Duchamp autorisierte Replik aus dem Jahr 1964. Das Original von 1917 ist verschollen) | (A Duchamp-authorized replica dating from 1964 of the lost original from 1917)  
 Musée national d'Art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris



Bruce Nauman  
*Self-Portrait as a Fountain*, 1966–1967  
 gedruckt | printed in 1970  
 Fotoserie, Tintenstrahldruck | Photograph suite, chromogenic print,  
 49,5 × 59,1 cm  
 Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

that are somehow “in limbo,” as Agamben says, but that prove to be caustic to the status quo because they are “astray” in this way.<sup>15</sup> One such figure is Bartleby the Scrivener who simply declines to perform: “I prefer not to,” Melville has him repeat. Others include “the underground man” of Dostoyevsky and the barely-above-ground people of Robert Walser, “the man without qualities” of Robert Musil and the disquieted person of Fernando Pessoa. Yet most resistant of all these characters is Odradek, the uncanny figure in Kafka who upsets all oppositions of animate and inanimate, human and inhuman, created and ready-made—all categories of personhood as we know it. “The coming being is whatever being,” Agamben writes; “such-and-such being is reclaimed from its having this or that property.”<sup>16</sup> Along with Agamben, Claire Fontaine sees potential in these wrecked figures—above all, the recovery of life as potential, the potential at least for refusal and perhaps for change.

6.

Claire Fontaine is interested not only in double agents (such as the ready-made artist) but also in dialectical reversals. For Marx, of course, Communism could only emerge on the other side of capitalism: for the former to be born, the latter had to be passed through. In some of her work Claire Fontaine imagines rhetorical shortcuts to this epochal transformation, as in her series of *Passe-partouts* (2004–), her clusters of skeleton keys, picks, saws, and other tricks of the burglary trade designed to turn the apartment locks of different cities into gateways of free passage. If property is theft, the *Passe-partouts* suggest, then theft is the sharing of resources; to expropriate is to reclaim what was once



taken from the commons in the first place ("I only steal to redistribute," Claire Fontaine has insisted).<sup>17</sup> The concept of the commons is also important to her practice; like Warhol, she might well prefer the term "Commonist" to the term "Pop."<sup>18</sup> Apart from physical necessities of life (clean air, water, and food), there are social manifestations of the commons; a not-so-obvious instance is "common sense," which Gramsci once defined as "the folklore of philosophy," a mix in equal parts of superstition to be exposed and truth to be extracted.<sup>19</sup> This is how Claire Fontaine views this "general intellect" too, dialectically and strategically, as a repertoire to question and to use at once. Like other predecessors she detourns, such as Bruce Nauman and Ed Ruscha, Claire Fontaine sees language, especially the found lingo of sayings and slogans, as a "space of sharing": as no one possesses this language, anyone can partake of it.<sup>20</sup> "This is the realm of the *commonplace*," Jean-Paul Sartre wrote in 1957. "And this fine word has several meanings; it refers, doubtless, to the most hackneyed of thoughts, but these thoughts had become the meeting-place of the community. Everyone finds himself in them and finds the others too. The commonplace is everyone's and it belongs to me; it belongs in me to everyone and it is the presence of everyone in me. It is, in essence, *generality*."<sup>21</sup> Claire Fontaine makes a medium of this commonplace, especially in her neon pieces à la Nauman that involve statements from across the political spectrum, as well as in her smoke pieces also à la Nauman that "send out signals like distress flares."<sup>22</sup> An extreme instance of such an SOS is a recent performance in which maps of the "P.I.G.S.," the financially distressed and rhetorically disparaged Portugal, Ireland, Greece, and Spain, were burned into the wall.

7.

Capitalism not only privatizes space and degrades language; it also, as Claire Fontaine sloganizes in another neon sign, "kills love." "Love, real love," she added in a 2008 interview, "can only be communist."<sup>23</sup> As it is, however, "our emotional environment is poor and dangerous. Artistic work can't change it, but it can transcribe it."<sup>24</sup> This is another task Claire Fontaine takes up: not only "to create images for a mutiny to come," but also "to reproduce the affective ambience of a malaise."<sup>25</sup> Thus she has produced some paintings based on on-line advertisements for pills for chronic depression and penile dysfunction, and other paintings that chart the capitalist channeling of basic instincts such as fear and aggressivity. This suggests a further arena of the contemporary commons—affect—which can be defined as a feeling that is not quite our own but interpellates us nonetheless. Indeed, Claire Fontaine speaks of affect today as colonized by "global government," and asks: "What is a body or a facial expression at the time of biometrical surveillance and television dictatorship?"<sup>26</sup> As an effective medium of contemporary ideology, affect must be engaged, and Claire Fontaine rises to this challenge too: "Art deals with desires and poses the question of pleasure in an impertinent way."<sup>27</sup>

8.

Another term for "malaise" might be "metaphysical wasteland." It is a place Claire Fontaine does not shun; on the contrary. "Words are in charge of bringing the spectator to the metaphysical wasteland," she has written of her more enigmatic signs and titles, "located between metaphors and metonymies."<sup>28</sup> This dense

statement is worth parsing. Metonymy is a movement of displacement whereby an attribute stands in for a person or a thing (e.g., "suits" for "business men"), whereas metaphor is a movement of condensation whereby a figure symbolizes a person or a thing (e.g., "a rose" for "my love"). Famously, Freud saw both operations at work in the making of a dream; Roman Jakobson suggested that prose favors metonymy, while poetry privileges metaphor, and Lacan associated desire with the former and the symptom with the latter. As I see it, Claire Fontaine produces much of her work through metonymic displacements, and much of her meaning through metaphorical condensations. As Jakobson demonstrated, the crossing of the two can produce an aphasic confusion, a "metaphysical wasteland," where sense no longer quite holds: this is often the Claire Fontaine-effect (in which, in Lacanian terms, the logic of desire is crossed with that of the symptom). In this light consider *Change* (2006), a set of American quarters soldered and slotted with box cutters, so that each coin becomes a switchblade. As the title puns, the quarter is utterly changed by this little metonymy; in fact it becomes a rather large metaphor. For, on one side of the revised coin, George Washington now appears as if topped with a Phrygian cap—the founding father returned as revolutionary; while, on the other side of the coin, the blade now doubles the wing of the eagle—the emblem of the state as the scythe of death. Not just an assisted readymade, this is an activated one, produced through a slight change. "The cabalistic idea that a real transformation will consist in a small displacement," Claire Fontaine has commented, "is very important in what we try to do."<sup>29</sup>

9.

Small displacements. The curved blade in *Change* is a kind of cedilla, a "transformative grapheme" in French that turns a hard K sound into a cutting S sound.<sup>30</sup> The goatees in Duchamp and Jorn are such cedillas too; so is the work of Claire Fontaine *in toto*, at least to the extent that she updates the readymade as a transformative sign (she calls herself an *enseigniste*). Other small displacements include her attempts to revive Brechtian estrangement as a moment of doubt and to retool *détournement* as a form of critique. One example of both is her turning of the passive bricks of Carl Andre into active brickbats wrapped with book covers; another instance is her proposal to redo the "spill pieces" of Felix Gonzalez-Torres with Prozac and Viagra substituted for his candy; yet another case is her version of the "joke paintings" of Richard Prince in which his own words become the *blague*. Yet, finally, her key displacement is to rethink appropriation as expropriation. "We live dispossessed of the world," Claire Fontaine has remarked. "Like any other artist I try to extract what is still alive in the mass of the objects and the meanings killed by capitalism."<sup>31</sup>



- 1 Another image for Claire Fontaine might be the photo on the invitation to one of her first shows, in Berlin in January 2005; it shows a young woman in a black bikini on a beach carrying a rifle and laughing. Here the intertext is a famous performance-photo of Valie Export in leather cradling a gun with her crotch exposed.
- 2 "'In Life There is No Purity, Only Struggle': An Interview with Claire Fontaine by Bart van der Heide," in *Metropolis M* 1 (February/March 2009). More, there is "the possibility of seeing the entire aesthetic field as a data bank of potential uprisings" ("Foreigners Everywhere" [2005]). Texts cited here can be found on the Claire Fontaine website.
- 3 Claire Fontaine, "The Glue and the Wedge," in *Circa* 124 (Summer 2008).
- 4 "'Acts of Freedom': Claire Fontaine Interviewed by Niels van Tomme," in *Art Papers* (September 2009).
- 5 "'In Life There is No Purity, Only Struggle': An Interview with Claire Fontaine by Bart van der Heide." Claire Fontaine adds this note: "When we named Claire we were very interested in the pictures and drawings by Nauman titled *Portrait of the Artist as a Fountain*; we found there a germ of the idea of the artist as an objectified entity, the artist as a ready-made" (personal communication).
- 6 Claire Fontaine, "Statement pour l'exposition à la Meerrettich Galerie" (December 2004).
- 7 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 3.
- 8 "'Interview Macht Arbeit': An Interview with Claire Fontaine by Stephanie Kleefeld," in *Texte zur Kunst* 73 (March 2009); see Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, (London and New York: Verso, 2005).
- 9 "Claire Fontaine Interviewed by John Kelsey" (2006); Claire Fontaine, "Ready-Made Artist and Human Strike: A Few Clarifications" (2005).
- 10 Claire Fontaine, "Readymade: Genealogy of a Concept," in *Flash Art* (January/February, 2010).
- 11 Claire Fontaine, "Statement pour l'exposition à la Meerrettich Galerie." On "bare life" see Giorgio Agamben, *Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), and on "whatever singularity" see Agamben, *The Coming Community*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).
- 12 Agamben, *Means without End: Notes on Politics*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 45.
- 13 Claire Fontaine, "Notes on the State of Exception" (2005).
- 14 Agamben, *The Coming Community*, pp. 80, 50.
- 15 Ibid., p. 6.
- 16 Ibid., p. 1.
- 17 "Claire Fontaine Interviewed by John Kelsey" (2006).
- 18 Warhol was another avatar of whatever singularity, as Claire Fontaine acknowledges in her *détournements* of his Marilyn and Mao silkscreens with the text "One is no one" stenciled over them.
- 19 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, (New York: International Publishers, 1971), p. 326.
- 20 Claire Fontaine, "The Glue and the Wedge," in *Circa* 124 (Summer 2008).
- 21 Jean-Paul Sartre, introduction to Nathalie Sarraute, *Portrait d'un Inconnu* (1957), reprinted in *Portraits*, (London: Seagull Books, 2009), pp. 5-6. Sartre continues: "To appropriate [the commonplace] requires an act: an act by which I strip away my particularity in order to adhere to the general, to become generality. Not in any case *similar* to everyone, but, to be precise, the *incarnation* of everyone. By this eminently social adherence, I identify myself with *all* others in the indistinctness of the universal" (6). This reading of the common has to do less with Kant (who in *The Critique of Judgment* discusses "common sense" in the sense both of *Gemeinsinn*, which supports the supposed universality of judgments of taste, and of *sensus communis*, which governs the understanding) than with Marx, who, in a passing reference in the *Grundrisse*, speaks of "the general intellect" (or "general social knowledge") as "a direct force of production" in its own right (*Grundrisse*, [New York: Vintage Books, 1973], p. 706). Recently Paolo Virno has developed this notion as follows: "The contemporary multitude is fundamentally based upon the presumption of a One which is more, not less, universal than the State: public intellect, language, 'common places'" (*A Grammar of the Multitude* [Los Angeles: Semiotexte, 2004], p. 43). Virno acknowledges that contemporary aspects of this public intellect might be unsavory (he mentions opportunism and cynicism in particular), but insists that it is a key resource in leftist politics. As Claire Fontaine suggests in a smoke piece, "The Educated Consumer is Our Best Customer."
- 22 "Claire Fontaine Interviewed by Dessislava DiMova" (2008).
- 23 Anthony Huberman, "Claire Fontaine," in *Bomb* 105 (Fall 2008).
- 24 Claire Fontaine, "Notes on the State of Exception."

- 25 Claire Fontaine, "Notes on the State of Exception"; "Foreigners Everywhere" (2005).
  - 26 Claire Fontaine, "Nous sommes tous des singularités quelconque" (2006); "'Interview Macht Arbeit': An Interview with Claire Fontaine by Stephanie Kleefeld," in *Texte zur Kunst* 73 (March 2009).
  - 27 "Grève Humaine (interrompue): Fulvia Carnevale and John Kelsey in Conversation," in *MAY Magazine* 3 (Spring 2010); Anthony Huberman, "Claire Fontaine," in *Bomb* 105 (Fall 2008).
  - 28 Claire Fontaine, "Readymade: Genealogy of a Concept," in *Flash Art* (January/February, 2010).
  - 29 "Grève Humaine (interrompue): Fulvia Carnevale and John Kelsey in Conversation," in *MAY Magazine* 3 (Spring 2010). Again Claire Fontaine comes to this notion via Agamben.
  - 30 I owe this term to Natalie Herren, who used it in a lecture on *La Cédille qui sourit*, a small store staged by the Fluxus artists George Brecht and Robert Filliou in a fishing village in the south of France from 1965 to 1968. Claire Fontaine also looks back on Fluxus.
  - 31 "Interview with Claire Fontaine by Chen Tamir," in *C Magazine* 10 (Spring 2009). Also see Tom McDonough, "Expropriating Expropriation," in *Claire Fontaine: Economies*, exh. cat. (Miami: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2010).
- 25 Claire Fontaine, „Notes on the State of Exception“; „Foreigners Everywhere“ (2005).
  - 26 Claire Fontaine, „Nous sommes tous des singularités quelconque“ (2006); „Interview Macht Arbeit: Ein Interview mit Claire Fontaine von Stephanie Kleefeld“, in: *Texte zur Kunst* 73 (März 2009).
  - 27 „Grève Humaine (interrompue): Fulvia Carnevale and John Kelsey in Conversation“, in: *MAY Magazine* 3 (Frühjahr 2010); Anthony Huberman, „Claire Fontaine“, in: *Bomb* 105 (Herbst 2008).
  - 28 Claire Fontaine, „Readymade: Genealogy of a Concept“, in: *Flash Art* (Januar/Februar 2010).
  - 29 „Grève Humaine (interrompue): Fulvia Carnevale and John Kelsey in Conversation“, in: *MAY Magazine* 3 (Frühjahr 2010). Auch zu diesem Begriff ist Claire Fontaine über Agamben gekommen.
  - 30 Diesen Ausdruck habe ich Natalie Herren zu verdanken, die ihn in ihrer Vorlesung über *La Cédille qui sourit*, einen kleinen, von den Fluxus-Künstlern George Brecht und Robert Filliou zwischen 1965 und 1968 in einem kleinen südfranzösischen Fischerdorf betriebenen Laden, verwendet hat. Claire Fontaine macht auch Anleihen bei Fluxus.
  - 31 „Interview with Claire Fontaine by Chen Tamir“, in: *C Magazine* 10 (Frühjahr 2009). Siehe auch Tom McDonough, „Expropriating Expropriation“, in: *Claire Fontaine: Economies*, Ausstellungskatalog Museum of Contemporary Art, Miami 2010.