

Oct. 12 – Dec. 22, 2012:  
**Carelessness Causes Fire**  
Claire Fontaine

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**Audain Gallery**

SFU WOODWARD'S

# Artist Talk: Oct. 11, 6pm

## Opening: Oct. 11, 8pm

### Screenings

Films selected by Claire Fontaine:

October 03

*East of Paradise* by L. Kowalski

October 10

*Sobibor* by C. Lanzmann

October 17

*To See if I'm Smiling* by T. Yarom

October 24

*Devil in the Flesh* by M. Bellocchio

October 31

*La Chinoise* by J. L. Godard

November 19

*The Weather Underground* by S. Green and B. Siegel and *Sean* by R. Arlyck

### Lecture and Screening

Claire Fontaine

*Human Strike Within Moving Images*

November 24, 7pm

The Djavad Mowafaghian Cinema

The Audain Gallery serves as a vital aspect of the Visual Art program at Simon Fraser University's School for the Contemporary Arts. The gallery's mission is to advance the aesthetic and discursive production and presentation of contemporary visual art through a responsive program of exhibitions and to support engaged pedagogy.

The gallery encourages conceptual and experimental projects that explore the dialogue between the social and the cultural in contemporary artistic practices.

The *Audain Visual Artists in Residence Program* and student exhibitions are central to the gallery's programming.

The Audain Gallery is curated by Sabine Bitter, working with gallery assistant Brady Cranfield.

*Carelessness Causes Fire* is realized with the support of the Consulat général de France in Vancouver, and presented in partnership with the Institutions by Artists conference, which runs from October 12 to 14, 2012, at Simon Fraser University at Goldcorp Centre for the Arts.

For more information, please contact

## Carelessness Causes Fire

Claire Fontaine

Formed in 2004, the collective artist Claire Fontaine actively rethinks the field of arts, cultural production, and their institutions. In her work, the potential of critique and reflection is aimed at the state in relation to individual lives, access to education, and the conditions of labour, as well as at the ways of living that have recently produced social upheavals across the globe in various intensities. Within these conditions, her work reflects upon the possibilities of subject formation in neoliberalism—or as she says, it focuses on “the crisis of singularity and political impotency in contemporary society.” Against this crisis, her work investigates the notion of the “human strike,” which “attacks the economic, affective, sexual, and emotional positions within which subjects are imprisoned.”<sup>1</sup>

As part of her participation in the Audain Visual Artists in Residence Program, Claire Fontaine will work with graduate students by leading a seminar and screening a series of films in order to elaborate the potential of the human strike.

The exhibition *Carelessness Causes Fire*—its title taken from a security warning under an office chair and which alludes to “the metaphorical fire of the uprising as it invaded streets and buildings”—gathers new and old works that engage with the political and psychological reverberations of the Arab Spring on the western perception of reality. Claire Fontaine's first solo exhibition in Canada, *Carelessness Causes Fire* resonates with these positions: that her use of “all media including theory is a political choice,” that she refuses any “hierarchy that sees visual expressions as being inferior to theory,” and that writing is one of her “strategies of de-subjectivisation.”<sup>2</sup>

– Sabine Bitter

1. Claire Fontaine, *Human Strike Has Already Begun*, 2009.

2. “Interview Macht Arbeit: An Interview with Claire Fontaine and Stefanie Kleefeld.” *Texte zur Kunst* 73 (March 2009): 157-162.

# LETTER TO A.

Claire Fontaine, 2008

Paris, 22/3/2008

Dear A.,

I've promised myself so many times to start writing this, and every time, I get interrupted by something. But then, it's the very thing that interrupts me that makes this letter necessary. That's why I ask you to excuse me for this text, full of ruptures and intrusions, and offering little in the way of solutions.

I'm still blocked, this time intellectually, faced with the same obstacle that holds us back with regard to action: What we need are structures to channel our forces, instead of dispersing them. But creating these structures demands a sort of energy that our everyday, disorganized struggles drain us of.

We urgently need an outside, even just a small one, that we could get a grip on while we try to raise ourselves up, together and each for oneself. It's this outside that we address, that we evoke.

As in a spiritualist séance, we study the insurrections of the past in order to bring them closer to our vocabulary and to our bodies—even if, in reality, they remain distant to our eyes and hearts.

To write this text, which speaks of the relations between art

and struggle, I would have needed a foreign language within language, an acrobat's language that would materialize the possibility of walking the tightrope, of fighting. But instead, all I have are tatters of worn-out words to patch up the problems.

For example, the problem of no longer being able to think of crossing the bridge that links art with life (if such a bridge ever existed) without falling foul of the law.

And that of not being able to admit this state of affairs without falling into cowardice or depression.

When we used to name the enemy (capitalism, imperialism, patriarchy, or globalization), we could invent a reassuring binary alterity for ourselves.

We participated so as not to participate. (In struggles and not in work, in militant dynamics and not in class society.) We wished to be other so that what we detested would become external to us.

Desubjectivation was a process of logical and performative distancing: If we weren't able to change the aspects of reality that hurt us the

most, we would transform ourselves into something non-assimilable, overstepping moralisms and revealing the political dimension of illegality.

We became outlaws, junkies, prostitutes, perverts, violent cases—and inevitably thieves, because private property and the affects that conserve it are the justification of all oppression. Prison was a necessary step because it was always imposed, and because, in a certain way, it was also part of our separation from the realms of the mediocre twentieth-century world of salaried 'comfort'.

But a problem arose in the course of this becoming:

The way in which we mixed with the excluded-others—those who had not politically chosen their exclusion, but who endured and suffered it, because they had been deprived of even the initial choice of positioning themselves. The way in which this played out left much to be desired.

Or, more exactly, it's not just that it left much to be desired; it was truly unbearable for us, just as it was for them.

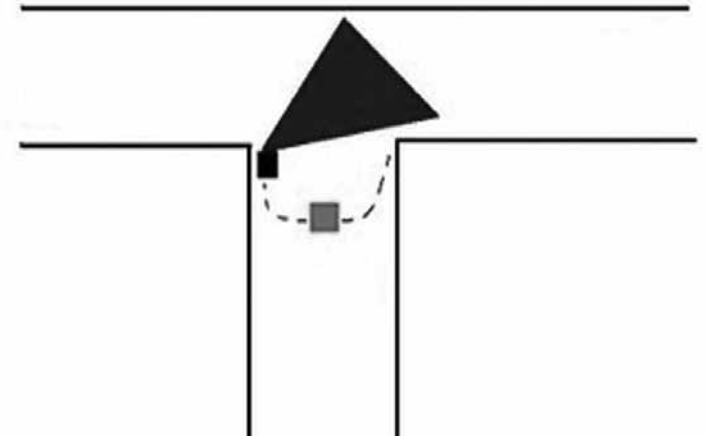
Totally insufficient.

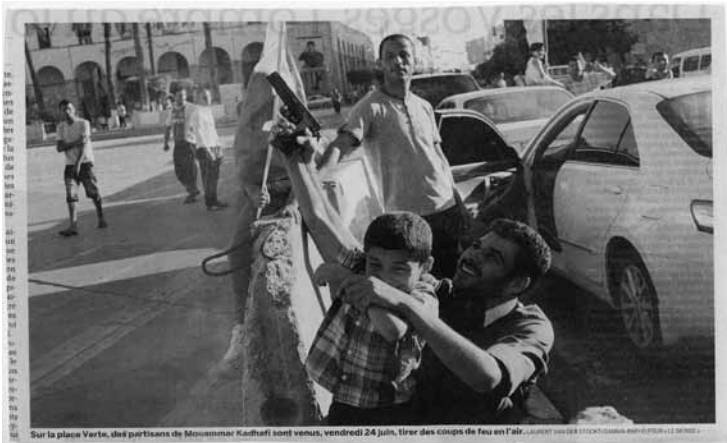
For the excluded-others con-

tinued to feel themselves to be the others of someone, and even if they were quite right to place this burden on us, it always remained their duty to carry the weight of what separated us; that, rather than being the motor of revolt, became a kinetic factor of deceleration. Those who suffer are less productive, even on the level of social subversion—thus spoke the movements, psychiatry and the professors. Amen.

We reached the limit of our capacities, of our freewill, fed on dogmas that were ultimately secretly democratic. The limit of not being able to change ourselves without a social upheaval that would break through this poison of judgment and measurement, this sickness of idiotic and brutal comparison, this police of the soul.

To refuse the obligatory participation in revolutionary processes was a given from the seventies onward. However, the permanent delaying of satisfaction, in a world that already provided so few opportunities for pleasure, ended up transforming 'militants' into ascetic figures, incapable of contaminating anyone.





Sur la place Verte, des partisans de Moussammar Kadhafi sont venus, vendredi 24 juin, tirer des coups de feu en l'air.

The choice of the margin as a site from which one would be able to dispense engagement ended up becoming a duty symmetrical to the one we refused, and perhaps even more insidious. Sometimes the only reaction that assured us of the political nature of our gestures was repression.

It was as if society was plasticized—not only was it impossible to infiltrate, but it changed us more than we could change it.

Those who refuse the armed struggle begin already defeated by the military standoff with society.

Those who accept the armed struggle accept being alone in their combat, since they know that not only do their comrades dislike armed factions, but they are horrified by them.

And then, once we dragged ourselves out of the swollen torrent of movements, we became isolated presences, prisoners of castaway identities, an episode to be forgotten. And if we took no pleasure in remaining in the space that we had chosen, it had to be the fault of one or another of us, never that of the enemy who chased us into airless social tunnels and

condemned us to endogamy.

Survivors of an unrecorded accident, veterans of an imaginary Vietnam, full of stories that no-one is interested in, and oppressed by the necessity of accommodating ourselves to the present in order to destroy it better, in forced cohabitation.

(Excuse me for all these metaphors, and for all those that I can't help but use—I know that to use metaphors is to admit to an insufficiency of language, by telling stories where it is logics that are really called for. To use metaphors is to be short of concrete examples and ill at ease with history. Perhaps it's also a mere bourgeois prudishness, an inability to say things as they are—not always literary, not always linguistic.)

The conclusion we were forced to make is that privileges cannot be annulled simply by renouncing them. Separation subsists, and remains linked to this very choosing of renunciation, a noble choice that is given to few and which, in virtue of its nobility, is reversible. Those who are privileged and who expose themselves to the dangers of opposing society,



to living in its interstices, build up capital during this experiment in withdrawal, and can return, fitter and stronger, into the social space from which they set out.

This fact, rather than reinforcing the credo of class determinism (e.g.: a bourgeois can never struggle as sincerely as a proletarian) leads, on the contrary, to a dangerous vacillation.

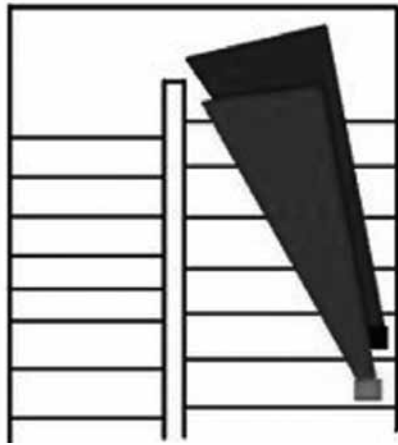
Because if it is true that in desubjectivating on the margins, in the absence of revolutionary processes, one succeeds in changing neither oneself nor society, it is also true that the joy and the privileges one can enjoy in a world that remains capitalist are pleasures founded upon the subjection and the plunder of others—social and separating pleasures. Savage pleasures, in the final analysis, for all that they claim to be refined.

The margin of struggles, with all its faults, remains a better space than the rest, a source of creativity, a form of luxury, an a posteriori lost Eldorado for those who have come back home, but who can no longer make the reverse path without being rejected. But the problem is that, if the goal is to slough off the bourgeois in

ourselves (the petit-bourgeois, to be more precise), this can't be achieved by miming its contrary, by miming the gestures of social self-destruction. It can't be done if we still think of the petit bourgeoisie as an audience of distracted spectators to be converted or scandalized.

In 1968, a cycle of struggles was completed, and with it was closed once again a spectrum of possible subjectivizations that had not only become sales pitches for perfumes, clothes, etc., but that had left us, from the point of view of human and not only social ideals, in a situation analogous to the one that saw abstraction emerge in the landscape of art history.

The prescriptive character of any revolutionary theory—note that I avoid citing anything in particular, so as to remain in tune with the poverty I describe—would henceforth resonate pathetically, unrealizably, because it would always lag behind a myriad of other immediately effective prescriptions, imposed upon subjectivity by commercial suggestion. What corporations produce, above all, are already-possible worlds, and instructions for making pleasant use



of them.

The idea of a politics of means without an end, which could have as its aim the rehabilitation of humans and the disqualification of the political machines that assimilate and digest life, has remained a promised dawn. Perhaps because a politics that proposes the terrain of pure immanence so as to raise itself up conceals the fact that this terrain is already colonized by a ceaselessly renewed commodity system that occupies all the space upon which one might lay one's hands; that continually scans the possible that could serve as our lever, leaving it bristling with fetishisms, freighted with false desires.

Economic and social unrest no longer reside in this outside; for now, it is no longer an energetic zone that might give rise to struggles that would change the inhabitants of the planet and make it possible for the planet, in turn, to be changed. To know this brings us pain, but supplies us with no force.

And neither pain nor sorrow can any longer be tools for world-making. In liberal democracies, as in totalitarian regimes before them, we

have exited the lyrical and even the tragic register, we have gone beyond expressionism—we are in the stage of economic abstraction. Each image of extermination is, for the power—and will soon be for us, too—as figurative as a monochrome.

Realism has always been a matter of translation, of a coded construction; but today, to believe in reality, we perhaps need images and words liberated from the present, because the present is formed entirely of commodities, and of the affects that derive from them.

Still other problems block and paralyze me, and these ones are even more dangerous because they concern the relation between subversion and knowledge. If it is easy to criticize the concept of accumulative and mnemonic culture that informs the good old bourgeoisie and its schools, it is, on the contrary, difficult to understand why radical political movements can no longer confidently draw from the data bank of the avant-gardes' precious but fragmentary achievements. The avant-gardes (re-qui-scant in pace), with their current procession of glass-cased museifica-



tion, have been, for forty years (and perhaps more) nothing more than a synonym for a sophisticated surplus-value.

I remember the great distrust with which the autonomists regarded the post-punks in the nineties: 'all good bourgeois' sons,' they said—as if defunctionalized revolt, set loose from activism and affixed to an existential space, was an intolerable luxury. As if the refusal of work always had to be converted into forms of productive struggle, of subversion and socialization; as if to work to create the conditions of revolution was a linear and progressive activity, just like having a job, but deployed in the opposite direction...

In fact, the letter of the avant-garde remains a dead letter; it remains an undesirable luxury, because its use-value is unknown. Because the only paradigm we know of for the transmission of knowledge is that of the university, with its closed system of power and compromise, and above all its tacit agreement never to make effective use of the knowledge that is transmitted, created, and accumulated.

Great barricades placed between art and life, between the act of knowing and that of living; cathedrals erected to the glory of mental masturbation, those universities still cut off from the market, and which would offer exile, at least for a few years, to young people seeking to research, preserving them from commodity hell, no longer welcome any conflict within their productive walls, and take the truncheon to the youth who poses too many questions.

After 1968, the universities could be seen for what they were: vectors of humiliation and social reproduction, police cells for the desire for political engagement, tombs for militant intellectuals.

From a certain point onward, transmission, discussion, and study thus ceased to be reinvigorating, non-commercial moments of socialization. If the latter have survived in the faculties, they maintain a negligible exchange value there, and have lost all use value.

Knowledge exists, stone dead between the pages, but there is no-one to animate it or to allow it to join with bodies and to transform them.

In saying all this, we fall once

more down the backstairs of history and return to the starting point. It is from this point that I write, or try to write, to you.

At a given moment, in the eighties, I remember that the notion of culture was lost. Not that we lost the meaning of it, but we forgot what to do with it. That is to say, we forgot that we don't produce culture, that we don't assimilate it, each closed up in our contemplative fortress, but that it happens only through sustaining social relations compatible with the political truths that animate that same culture. Cultures only exist in the plural, and they are activated not so much by studying as by having children, by having friends, by cultivating loves that render us capable of understanding and acting. It is our everyday reciprocal behaviors that no longer allow us to spend an afternoon reading Lenin or Foucault and to make this something really and immediately subversive. Culture is the permanent critique of the concept of 'patrimony,' so why do affiliation, the State, taxation, always come up whenever we talk about it? It's not a revolver any more, it's a nuclear arsenal that's pointed at us this time.

You'll answer that we live in violent times. And that violence lowers the level of debate because it usurps speech, and brings bodies back to the forefront, with their fragility and their insufficiency; that it reminds us how and to what extent we are governed. But it also reminds us that abstraction must disguise neither the urgency of needs nor the abjectness of racism, of machismo, of the continual offense to childhood that is perpetu-

ated every day against all of us.

Abstraction should allow us to think further ahead; taking on the full weight of our insufficiencies, with no shame, it must struggle against the force of gravity and prevent us from falling. Perhaps this is already happening in contemporary art – like inexperienced jugglers throwing their torches according to a logic of survival, but without any choreographic rigor, we just try not to burn ourselves. But art is not a refuge, it is not a position, it is not an attitude, it's only a profession. That's something we should remember—and when we say 'artists' we should say it like we say 'doctors' or 'builders'.

One of my friends once said to me: The problem is not repression, the problem is fear. The problem is not that of being dealt a blow—because once you've been hit, you are stronger and more able to bear it. The problem is that of living one's whole life avoiding blows, trying to flee, but often receiving them even so—and thus losing not only one's health but also one's dignity.

– Claire



## List of works:

*Studies for Tactical Entry* are a series of digital paintings that faithfully transcribe representations of the so-called "cones of action" of firearms held by two armed people as they traverse various corridors and stairways. Although the geometrical figures on the canvases appear very similar to the visual language of Suprematist painting, in reality, however, they are schematic representations used by the armed forces to display dangerous movements in interior spaces.

*Visions of the World (Green Square, June the 24th 2012)* is part of a series of light-box works and posters entitled *Visions of the World*. Each work in the series portrays a different aspect of the present that the artist "doesn't understand": visual and conceptual blind spots whose obscurity is investigated by the process of blowing the images up and studying them as if on a luminous table. These works use the visual language and staging of advertising but applied to disquieting pictures, which, for example, are appropriated from the news media. Taken on June 24, 2012, at a gathering of Gaddafi partisans manifesting their political alliance by shooting into the air in Tripoli's Green Square, this image shows a man holding the hand of his young son on the trigger of a revolver, in a gesture of irresponsibility and virile brutality.

*Situations* is a video projection that paraphrases an instructional "street fighting" DVD and invites the spectator to reproduce the same gestures being presented. The actors in the video constantly interrupt themselves, as if employing a Brechtian strategy, to comment on the movements that they are showing. At the same time, because they redistribute their knowledge indiscriminately through an explicitly pedagogical process, they make their gestures reproducible by anyone – as much by friends as potential enemies. The actors thus realize Brecht's program to make gestures "quotable." The actors are filmed in a white cube, a condition of spatial and temporal abstraction that immerses us in the timeless history of the body, which is always inevitably connected with the politics of the present.

*Brand*, as its title makes overt, is a facsimile branding iron, such as used to mark cattle. The work ironically evokes the artist's signature as a potential act of violence. Able to be imposed equally on pre-existing objects, images, and

beings, the use value of the work as a sculpture is reinvented: it puts Claire Fontaine's initials in a direct relationship with the flesh of living bodies.

## Biography:

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 "ready-made 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 the political impotence and the crisis of singularity that seem to define contemporary art today. But if the artist herself is the subjective equivalent of a urinal or a Brillo box – as displaced, deprived of its use value, and exchangeable as the products she makes – there is always the possibility of what she calls the "human strike." Claire Fontaine uses her freshness and youth to make herself a whatever-singularity and an existential terrorist in search of subjective emancipation. She grows up among the ruins of the notion of authorship, experimenting with collective protocols of production, détournements, and the production of various devices for the sharing of intellectual and private property.

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