



"Claire Fontaine: Working Together," installation view, 2011, Metro Pictures, New York



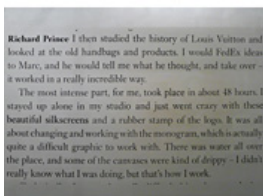
"Claire Fontaine: Working Together," installation view, 2011, Metro Pictures, New York



Claire Fontaine
The Assistants (video still)
2011
Metro Pictures, New York



"Claire Fontaine: Working Together," installation view with *Redemptions*, 2011, Metro Pictures, New York



Claire Fontaine
I didn't really know what I was doing but that's how I work
2011

Claire Fontaine THE DANGER OF LIAISON by Emily Nathan

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Everybody wants to know who is behind the Paris-based "collective artist" Claire Fontaine, a pseudonym taken from a brand of ubiquitous French notebooks. But soft-spoken James and fiery Fulvia, who met while teaching at an art school in Paris and now work together under that singular female moniker, won't give live interviews (in case their words are misconstrued), decline to have their photograph taken and refuse to tell anyone anything about themselves.

"We're not seeking some Bansky-esque 'halo of anonymity,'" Fulvia asserts, "and it's not about mystery." No -- Claire Fontaine remains an artist without a face all because of libelous journalists, who seem to seek out biographical info only to manipulate and distort it. *Zut alors!*

If this campaign against mere art writers sounds absurd -- or paranoid -- it is followed immediately by the claim that the real reason for keeping Fontaine opaque is to preserve the *integrity* of the art, which the two artists say should be considered without reference to their personal lives. Taken in the context of their current exhibition "Working Together," on view at Chelsea's Metro Pictures through Dec. 10, 2011, that insistence might suggest that they aim to champion all those people in the art business with "secret identities" -- the hordes of anonymous artists' assistants who labor behind the scenes and get no recognition for their toils.

In *The Assistants*, a two-channel video with two 20-minute parts, British poet Douglas Park faces the camera and reads aloud from *The Assistants*, Giorgio Agamben's eponymous treatise exploring Walter Benjamin's idea that the role of the assistant in society is as "the representative of the forgotten." In fairy tales, in history and in real life, the text suggests, the assistant is little more than set dressing, with no lines and no credit, part of the seamless background against which

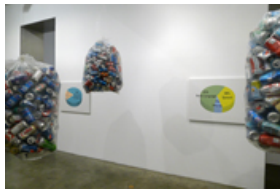
Courtesy of the Artist and Metro Pictures



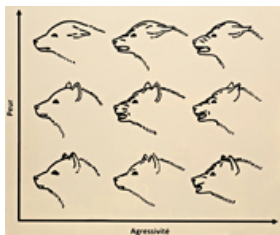
"Claire Fontaine: Working Together," installation view with a painting from the series *Joke Paintings (Richard and Marc)*, 2011, Metro Pictures, New York



Claire Fontaine
Communicating non-verbally
2011
Courtesy of the Artist and Metro Pictures



"Claire Fontaine: Working Together," installation view, 2011, Metro Pictures, New York



Claire Fontaine
Aggressivité/Peur (clair)
2011
Courtesy of the Artist and Metro Pictures



Claire Fontaine
Situations (video still)
2011
Metro Pictures, New York

the main action plays out.

As a perennial assistant, Claire Fontaine can be expected to obsess over works by successful artists (that she presumably has worked for), and this theme is given a run for its money in *Redemptions*, a suite of eight clear plastic garbage bags filled with empty soda cans, hanging from the ceiling in the back gallery. Religious art begins with the notion of "redemption" and Pop art begins with **Andy Warhol's** cans, but these bags -- bags of garbage, actually -- belong to the poorest of the poor, recyclers who have so little that they scavenge for cans at five cents apiece.

Fontaine purchased the bags directly from the people who collected them, and then hung them in the gallery like readymades. In addition to being provocatively decorative in the way of avant-garde art, the works are a peculiarly charged example of the way that the art system can infuse something of little or no worth with value -- they're now priced at \$17,000 per bag -- and, according to Fontaine, are evidence of the artist's great power to redeem.

The show also includes text paintings that clearly refer to similar works by Richard Prince and Christopher Wool. The *Joke Paintings (Richard and Marc)*, which measure 4.5 x 6.5 feet, bear printed excerpts from an embarrassing conversation between Prince and designer Marc Jacobs, published in *Harper's Bazaar* on the occasion of Prince's 2008 contribution to Louis Vuitton's ad campaign.

It's easy to imagine that the two artists behind Claire Fontaine are critical of the "disquieting complicity between fashion and art," as the press release has it, revealed by the dialogue, and that they intend to point out that the audience for both is the same, fetishistic and market-dominated. But they hedge their bets, taking a postmodernist relish in committing the surfaces of their canvases to perspectives that they do not endorse.

Other paintings are derived from pie charts and instructional diagrams for "Maximizing Performance" and "Communicating non-verbally" that might be found in a sociology textbook. The intent here is to evoke the social mechanics of everyday life -- such as the rules of proper behavior in an office, for instance, a site of forced collaboration in a market system. The paintings, then, can be read as tools potentially used to exploit or instrumentalize labor, an interpretation that becomes increasingly surreal in the context of suspended bags of recyclable aluminum waste.

Indeed, "working together" requires letting down one's guard and allowing others into one's personal space. Another *Scientific American*-style chart-painting, *Aggressivité/Peur (clair)*, graphs the dynamic between fear and aggression -- which Fontaine maintains are the two dominant passions of collaboration -- via a painted rendition of a drawing by Austrian zoologist Konrad Lorenz. In it, we see a crudely illustrated dog baring its teeth in anger and flattening its ears in submission as both sensations increase along x- and y-axes, a classic illustration of "animal instinct."

Which leads to the exhibition's second video, the 30-minute-long *Situations*, an entertaining presentation of a series of lessons on self-defense given by normal-looking young man in a t-shirt and jeans. Bar fights, self-defense, knife attacks -- it's a dream compendium of street-fighting tricks, the sort of thing that appeals to adolescents and that is unlikely to be of immediate use to most gallery goers.

Is the social contract so easily frayed? Are we all ready to attack at the slightest sign of threat? Is society just a collection of scavengers lulled to sleep by droning ideological tracts? Such is the