

METRO PICTURES

Patrick Gantert, "My Perogative: 'Working Together' in Two Parts," **WowHuh.com**, November 21, 2011

WOW HUH

Claire Fontaine's current show at Metro Pictures, *Working Together*, is a dynamic collection of pieces that are both subversive and subjugated in the same instant. This duality creates a kind of vibration that courses through the exhibition wherein the viewer constantly feels that the work is evading them, making itself impossible to pin down. Essentially, it is performing beyond its abilities, coursing ever faster and reasserting itself by playing both possible sides of its role. Played against the show's capitalist critiques, it could be said that Claire Fontaine are actively mocking themselves, generating critiques of capitalist hyper performance while simultaneously mimicking that structure in their own production. It is that grinding meta cognition that allows the show to be critically stretched beyond itself. Overall, *Working Together*, utilizing a methodology of hyper performance and conceptual ambiguity, works to underscore a latent tendency for that same performance in viewers and cultural participants.

1. SHOW ME

It is best to begin this analysis with one piece in particular from *Working Together*, a small painting, "Chart for Non-Verbal Communication!". The title would suggest that the content of the painting is derived from a largely pedagogical source, possibly a speech textbook. Some arbitrary study conducted to determine how we communicate when we aren't communicating. The work sets the tone that indeed, at least parts of this show are about evaluative models. This small painting is a linchpin in understanding the exhibition as a whole, the breakdown of non verbal communication, whether accurate or not, points toward human performance in the day to day, whether in a time of leisure, business, or otherwise. It speaks to something that can be and is a portion of our ability to progress as a culture, namely forms of presentation and a cultivated external image that we ultimately perform for others.



Claire Fontaine's *Working Together*, installation view, 2011

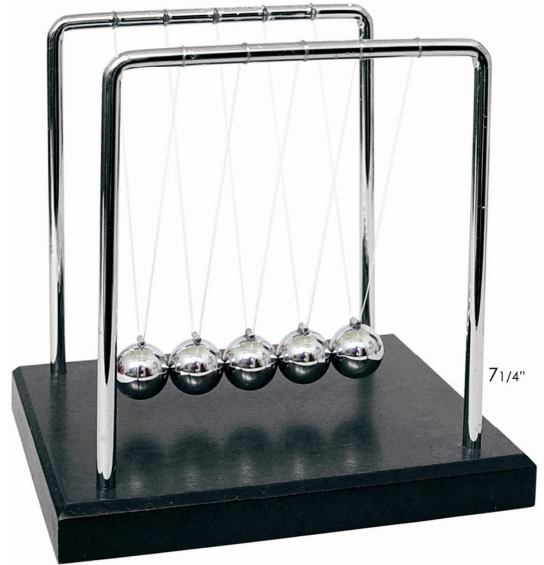
That said, *Working Together* can be read in a linear fashion with each work setting the tone for the next as one progress. The first room, with a brightly lit neon reading "Past, Present, Future! welcomes you to the show. The neon message coats everything with the notion that there is consistency here and the ideas in the show are timeless and, while being a snapshot of a specific time, they underscore something that is a cultural (dare I say very American) constant, namely a feeling of insufficiency as a result of constant pressure for better performance. This leads directly to one of the most overt works in the show, a Newton's Cradle (better called by its nickname, Executive Ball Clicker (1) that is doctored to experience perpetual motion, a constant back and forth. The device has been largely abstracted from its original purpose as an educational tool for Physics. Instead, it now exists as a memorial to a much more institutionalized, bureaucratic motion, one action triggered by another through transfers of energy (communication) that, at least in this context, goes on forever. Its asinine synchronicity is infuriating when read in light of current events, namely the #occupywallstreet protests that have sprung up nationwide (and worldwide in solidarity) protesting economic disparity in the United States. We find ourselves mentally located in the executive office staring into bastardized physics, anxiously oblivious.

As you move into the larger space, the show expands and takes on a slightly more verbose tone. There is scaffolding slung with Christmas lights and can filled bags hanging from the ceiling, a small sculpture of a bathroom shoe shine apparatus (imagine jet setting through an airport or polishing up pre-shine apparatus (imagine jet setting through an airport or polishing up pre-merger meeting) and paintings that, purposefully, appear to be Richard Prince Joke paintings. Walking into this space feels like being trapped in some surreal inverted New York landscape, as if where the bags hover is a surface of water, they are floating like buoys and where we exist becomes subsurface, a kind of conceptual underbelly. This room is where Claire Fontaine truly pushes into the aforementioned subversion and subjugation duality. The paintings here are snippets of a conversation between designer Marc Jacobs and Richard prince regarding their collaborative efforts for Louis Vuitton. The scaffolding forces you into the space with these painting's, imagine exactly the scaffolding placed on any NY sidewalk during construction that creates a kind of wind tunnel for pedestrians. Everyone trapped in this space at the show becomes part of Claire Fontaine's Jacobs Prince capitalist echo chamber, their neo-liberal quips bouncing back and forth between canvases, interchangeable forever and ever. Quite literally, these are their communications and records of performance. Somewhat sadly, Prince is found in one painting to be discussing the idea of subversion in relation to the project. Isolated from the larger context, his statements are laughable with his suggestion of subversion, they only succeed in turning the critical lens toward himself. The amazing part about all of these paintings though is, again, Claire Fontaine's knack for smartly postured forms of meta cognition. It is as if they are finding a mirror in Prince, a sellout trying to subvert his sellout position, essentially capitalizing on institutionalized insubordination. They use the dialogues to demonstrate that "yes, we realize our position here, we are fully aware of what we are doing, we understand that you may find this to be contradictory, we accept that and in turn present you with this work, we are taking the conceptual high ground." And within that lies their most salient point, that identifying your weaknesses, assessing them, evaluating them, and then performing them back can be an adequate and aggressive form of subversion. Essentially, for better or for worse, if considered enough, one has an innate ability to utilize failure as success.

Though Claire Fontaine uses their work brilliantly to expose this, they do not fall victim to the tendency in a negative sense. Rather, they become passive documentarians, showing us a communicative tactic that courses through our everyday, that desire to perform our inabilities in the face of the largely capitalist demand for more perfect productions.

2. I THINK I CAN

In his essay *Exhaustion and Exuberance: Ways to Defy the Pressure to Perform*, Jan Verwoert makes an interesting point in regard to performative resistance: "It is a way of always giving too much of what is not presently requested. It is a way of giving what you do not have to others who may not want it. It is a way of transcending your capacities by embracing your incapacities and therefore a way to interrupt the brute assertiveness of the I Can through the performance of an I Can't in the key of the I Can. It is a way of insisting that, even if we can't get it now, we can get it, in some other way at some other point in time." (2)



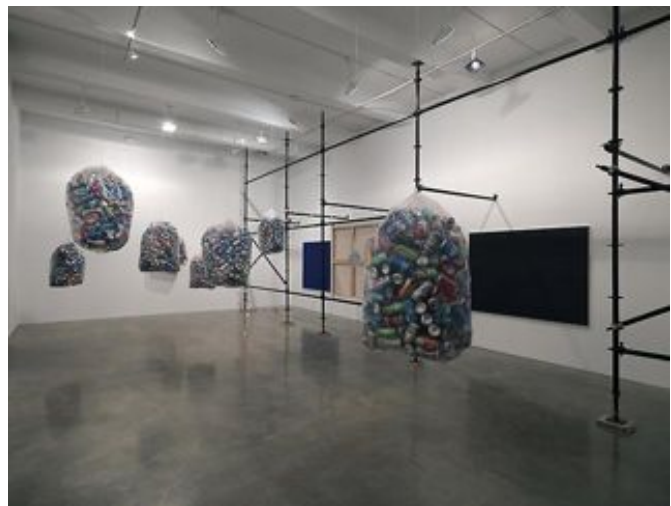
Newton's Cradle aka Executive Ball Clicker

In the context of Verwoert's essay, he is analyzing possible forms of resistance in the face of capitalist demands for ever faster and more perfect performances. However, his words here, and indeed the entire essay, have multiple applications. The above selection suggests a self conscious decision to perform for a chosen purpose (resistance in the essay), to actively engage the fact that one is incapable and convert that I Can't to an I Can, an incredibly self conscious and anxious prospect. One feels an obligation to understand or synthesize what one culturally interacts with, much like Verwoert's suggestion of a pressure to perform, and we feel burdened by the thought of failing at this endeavor (it is a largely cited reason why people do not like contemporary art, "it makes me feel dumb!"). Clearly, the notion of not "getting it! when looking at contemporary work is ultimately frustrating to the casual observer, despite the ridiculous thought that there is ever really "something! that is mandatory for one to "get!. That said, it could be theorized that

Verwoert's thoughts are converted to a form of non-verbal resistance in viewership. What that means exactly is that words and speech can act as buffers against an external assumption that one does not understand or is not properly engaging.

Imagined in the context of *Working Together*, Verwoert's words provide a theoretical underpinning for what the show accomplishes. Claire Fontaine performs an I Can't in the key of an I Can. What is most significant though is that this idea is then transposed onto the participants in the show, the viewers. Take the title *Working Together* as an example, it can have multiple meanings denoting collective action, the Jacobs/Prince collaboration, a self aware nod to Claire Fontaine's collective presence, or suggest the idea that we are working together to figure something out, to evaluate. And therein lies the most useful interpretation, figuring something out, that maybe this show is about, or can be about, exposing our tendencies as cultural participants. Namely, that we often take a similar route to Claire Fontaine, the conceptual high ground, through applications of both verbal and non-verbal communicative strategies. The following example happened at a lecture from the famed New York Times art critic Roberta Smith at a college that shall go unnamed. The lecture was a decidedly small affair, occurring in a room of around 100 graduate art students (MA and MFA candidates, I was one of few outsiders). As if Ms. Smith was preaching gospel, there was a constant flurry of note-taking with an even more feverish scrawling when she would drop a classic nose to the grindstone bomb. Most notably when questioned about how to succeed in art making: "...Be humble and do your work" (tres "Art & Fear!"). As I glanced over, my periphery picked up the eager beaver sitting next to me writing something down in his Moleskine notebook, no doubt recording Roberta's words. My momentary gaze was instantly met with a vitriolic "do you want to read it?!". Full disclosure yeah, I kind of did want to read it but that isn't the point. His attack was not because he was upset with me for looking at his notebook, quite the opposite. His attack (the I Can't) was to sustain my attention with the words "do you want to read it" (the I Can) actually translating to "yeah, you should fucking read this and why aren't you taking notes? Roberta Smith is a relevant critic and by writing this down I am communicating that I understand, or at least want to understand, her overall message and consequently have a small record that I can refer to during the question and answer session when I will ask an over-complicated question to fully assert my critical prowess over fellow listeners". This was all confirmed twenty minutes later. That example is not intended to shine a positive or negative light on his behavior, on the contrary, I am rather ambivalent about it. Rather, it illustrates the ideas teased out from *Working Together* employed, whether conscious or not, in the context of the participant. Taking the high ground to evade critique while simultaneously leveling critique.

Maybe fittingly, it is best to end the essay with one of the last pieces in *Working Together*, a video of two men, one teacher and one student performing self-defense techniques on one another. Mainly, the video depicts the teacher, who has some form of speech impediment (a hair lip?), awkwardly performing sad, action-hero type takedowns on the schlubby pupil. As I sat watching the video with a fellow visitor, I wasn't sure whether to feel shitty or laugh out loud (I did both). The video is ridiculous, the moves are ludicrous, and I couldn't help but wonder "what's the fucking point?!". The demonstration came out to nothing and, as a viewer, I certainly wasn't retaining anything so really, why? Therein lies the brilliance, the video is depicting exactly my experience in that Roberta Smith lecture, exactly my experience at so many show openings, exactly my experience thinking about the art market, exactly my experience experiencing this show performing a critique of itself. Futile forms of self-defense or, more accurately, slow motion ineffective forms of self-defense. But the ineffective part is the beauty (the I Can't) and the self-defense part is the bullshit (the key of I Can).



Claire Fontaine's *Working Together*, installation view, 2011

In the end, the most striking portion of *Working Together* is its conceptual reach. Very few shows have forms that are so mutable as to form to their surrounding contexts. In addition to everything written here, *Working Together* bolsters

and reflects the tumult of our current global societal uprisings and protests. In its constant reminders of capitalist failures, the show liberates its viewers, allowing the contents to be sublimated as one sees fit, functioning as catalysts for new forms of agency that revel in their perceived failures.



Claire Fontaine's Working Together, installation view, 2011

1. Wikipedia. Newton's Cradle.
2. Jan Verwoert. Exhaustion and Exuberance: Ways to Defy the Pressure to Perform. (Center for Advanced Visual Studies MIT).