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Seeing Double



Sturtevant in front of her work *Warhol Flowers* (1990) at the Museum of Modern Art in Frankfurt/Main 23 September 2004. Photo credit: Thomas Lohnes/AFP/Getty Images

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Sturtevant “was the first postmodern artist, before the fact—and also the last,” says Peter Eleey, the chief curator of MoMA PS1, who organized the retrospective “[Sturtevant: Double Trouble](#)” at the Museum of Modern Art in 2014-15. A late-bloomer whose market recognition came only after her death at 90 years old in 2014, Sturtevant’s art practice was defined by challenging convention.

Ohio-born Elaine Sturtevant (she preferred to be known by her married last name) only started making art in earnest in 1964 as a 40-year old divorcée with two young children. She began “repeating” (her term) the works of her contemporaries, starting with the *Flag* paintings of her friend Jasper Johns.

Most of her peers embraced her work: when a Johns *Flag* went missing from Robert Rauschenberg’s 1955 combine *Short Circuit*, Rauschenberg suggested (with Johns’ express approval) that Sturtevant’s facsimile replace it. Andy Warhol actively encouraged Sturtevant, gifting her some of his *Flowers* silkscreens so that her “repetitions” could be as accurate as possible. “Andy loved her because he thought it was the greatest compliment to be copied,” says Eric Shiner, formerly director of the Andy Warhol Museum and now senior vice-president of Sotheby’s global fine arts division. “It made perfect sense to him, as the ultimate appropriation artist himself.”



Installation view of the exhibition *Sturtevant*, Bianchini Gallery, New York (1965) © Estate Sturtevant, Paris

Sturtevant had her first solo exhibition at New York’s Bianchini Gallery in 1965. Her silkscreened *Warhol Flowers* lined the walls from floor to ceiling, while a white plaster sculpture of a man in the style of George Segal appeared to haul a clothing rack filled with other “repetitions”, among them facsimiles of works by Johns, Frank Stella and Claes Oldenburg.

Reviews were mixed: Sturtevant was accused of providing “the most pathetic advertisement of an artist’s apartness from herself that I have seen”, in [Artforum](#), while other critics dismissed her work as flippant. “In many ways her career attracted the critical disdain that Pop more generally suffered,” Eleey says. “By camouflaging herself within the work of other artists she made it difficult for people to recognize her work for what it was. But she was doing something radical for that time.”

We couldn't sell anything

Apart from a small group of visionary collectors such as [Virginia Dwan](#), Sturtevant's work failed to catch on. Bruce Hainley, author of the 2013 monograph *Under the Sign of [sic]: Sturtevant's Volte-Face*, says there was a certain consensus in the New York art world as to what constituted an "important" gallery: "Especially in America, her work at various points in her career often appeared either on her own initiative or in proximity to galleries that some people considered dubious, and so the chain reaction that normally occurs – from gallery representation, to institutional support, to private collector interest – didn't happen for her."



Sturtevant, *Muybridge Plate #97 Woman Walking* (1967), black and white photographs on paper © Estate Sturtevant, Paris. Courtesy Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, London • Paris • Salzburg

Sturtevant abruptly withdrew from the art world in 1974, one year after her first museum show at the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse. She did not reemerge until 1985 when she resumed repeating works of her peers—a new generation of artists such as Félix González-Torres, Robert Gober, Keith Haring and Anselm Kiefer.

At first I was irritated and confused by her work

Sturtevant then found gallery representation with Austrian gallerist [Thaddaeus Ropac](#). "At first I was irritated and confused

by her work, but I was also fascinated,” he says. “I kept making visits to see her and learn more, and eventually included her in a group exhibition in my Salzburg gallery in 1988.” Two years later he included her work in a group show at his new Paris gallery alongside work by Jeff Koons, Haim Steinbach and Peter Halley. The following year, he dedicated the Paris gallery’s first one-person show to her *Warhol Flowers* but, “We couldn’t sell anything,” he says.

Europe catches on

European institutions finally began buying her work in the early 1990s, but American museums lagged behind. The notion of American exceptionalism did not allow much room for the “unoriginality” of artists specializing in appropriation.

A transformative moment for Sturtevant’s market occurred in 2004—40 years after she first repeated Johns’ *Flag*. The Museum für Moderne Kunst in Frankfurt emptied the building of its permanent collection, [devoting the entire space to Sturtevant’s work](#), and published an extensive exhibition catalogue as well as her catalogue raisonné. “After this, the market really turned and private collectors finally started to believe in the work,” Ropac says.

After 2005, there were almost constant exhibitions of her work

The buyers were still primarily European. The French luxury goods magnate François Pinault, who established his own museum at the [Palazzo Grassi](#) in Venice in 2005, began to collect her work in depth and she was represented in many more museums, Ropac says. “After 2005, there were almost constant exhibitions of her work.” European recognition continued apace: In 2011, she was awarded the Golden Lion for lifetime achievement at the [Venice Biennale](#).

Yet the American market remained unmoved. Sturtevant was featured in the [2006 Whitney Biennial](#), showing her full-gallery installation *Duchamp 1200 Coal Bags*, which recreated many of the French artist’s best-known works such as *Fountain* (1917) and *L.H.O.O.Q* (1919), an irreverent portrait of the Mona Lisa. Sturtevant hoped the museum would acquire the piece, even offering to gift it to them. “Ultimately they didn’t go for it and it’s something I believe they regret deeply today,” says Ropac. (Donna De Salvo, senior curator and deputy director for international initiatives at the Whitney, says: “We are major admirers of Sturtevant’s work and are delighted to have her represented in the Whitney’s collection. We would love to have more of her work but, to the best of my knowledge, we were never offered *Duchamp 1200 Coal Bags* as a gift, and we were, unfortunately, not able to acquire it.”)

An American moment

Finally, in late 2014, MoMA gave Sturtevant the first ever US survey of her 50-year career—and the only institutional presentation of her work in America since the 1973 Everson show. Sturtevant worked on the exhibition preparations but died in May 2014, so never got to experience the show in its entirety.

Some critics were still unconvinced. [Peter Schjeldahl wrote in *The New Yorker*](#) that the MoMA presentation was “a curatorial tour de force. That’s lucky, because the works would be hard put to sustain interest otherwise.” Yet support for Sturtevant within US museums is growing. MoMA acquired the artist’s *Study for Various Beuys Actions* (c1971) as a gift from Virginia Dwan. According to Eleey, “other gifts are pending and there continues to be a discussion of how best to represent her in the collection”.

Market highs



Sturtevant, *Warhol Diptych* (1973), became the auction record when it sold for \$5.09m in May 2015. “Her works after Warhol are by far the most sought-after,” says Thaddaeus Ropac. Private collection © Christie’s Images/Bridgeman Images

After the MoMA show, the market “changed overnight”, says Ropac. “All of a sudden we were bombarded with demands.” Auction prices reflected the newfound enthusiasm: two works by Sturtevant were included in the November 2014 evening sales and three further works in the day sales, all finding prices above estimate. The highlight was *Lichtenstein, Frighten Girl* (1966), which sold for \$3.4m against its presale estimates of \$600,000 to \$800,000. The same painting had sold at Phillips three years previously for \$710,500—the auction record for Sturtevant until November 2014. The current record was set in May 2015, when *Warhol Diptych* (1973) sold for \$5.1m.

We were very happy to sell, thinking that the enthusiasm might wane. But it didn’t

Ropac recalls this period as one of feverish demand: “At the beginning we were very happy to sell, thinking that the enthusiasm might wane. But it didn’t, so we have had to be much more careful with our inventory,” he says. “Now we’re not as interested in selling her works, except to great American museums and private collections. That’s a priority for us because it’s how we envision growing her market.”

Yet, the rush of interest fell short last November when the earliest existing painting in Sturtevant’s career, a 1964 *Johns Flag*, estimated between \$3m to \$4m, failed to sell. Ropac blames this on punchy estimates. “Her market is strong, but the prices are completely different from what was being asked for *Johns Flag*. When it didn’t sell, it took a bit of air out of the market. We’re not unhappy about this,” he says.

What comes next?

Ropac, who now represents the artist’s estate together with Gavin Brown’s Enterprise in New York is opening an exhibition focused on Sturtevant’s collage works and sculptures after Beuys and Duchamp at his Paris gallery this month (“[Undeniable Allusion](#)”, 22 April – 17 June). It will be the first time her collages and photographs of collages from the 1960s and 1970s have been shown together and Ropac hopes that it will go on to be presented in a larger format at a museum. He says the gallery is also working with the estate to make an addendum to the 2004 catalogue raisonné, *The Brutal Truth*.

This will presumably introduce fans of Sturtevant to her later video works, which she focused on almost exclusively after 2000. A lot of Sturtevant’s early thinking was tied to the media landscape and in particular to television, and always had a political bent, and these video works “feel more relevant than ever in the current political landscape”, says Eleey.

Many collectors find these works to be Sturtevant's most radical and compelling, which is interesting since these are, of course, "original" works—which may very well add to their appeal. Perhaps we will never be able to fully relinquish our dependency on the idea of innovative genius or the purity of authorship.