

# Elaine Sturtevant: queen of copycats

Since the 1960s, Elaine Sturtevant has been meticulously remaking works by everyone from Andy Warhol to Jasper Johns. Why do they rarely mind? And what's a sex doll army doing in her new show?

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Monday 1 July 2013 18.21 BST

A crowd of naked people watch as you walk past the Serpentine Gallery. They ogle you through the windows, boggle-eyed and open-mouthed. They're inflatable sex dolls, all but two of them male, with cartoonish printed chest hair and blank bulges between their legs. According to Elaine Sturtevant, you can't get female ones any more. Her two are scrunched down and wilting, leaking silently beside the pumped-up men. You do wonder who, aside from Sturtevant, buys these things and what squeaky, weightless pleasures are to be had with them. Please do not write in.

Now in her 80s, Sturtevant has been dealing with simulacra throughout her career. Most famously, or infamously, she has been remaking the works of other artists since the 1960s. She has copied Andy Warhol's flowers and Marilyns, and even his "unwatchable" eight-hour black-and-white film of the Empire State Building. She has remade works by Marcel Duchamp, Joseph Beuys, Jasper Johns and a host of other artists, mostly male.

Her meticulous versions are neither forgeries nor fakes. Nor are they homages, the Paris-based American artist insists, much less parodies. Although Sturtevant never asks permission, Warhol did give her his silk screens, so she could redo his flowers. When asked what his work meant, he is said to have quipped: "Ask Elaine Sturtevant." Warhol himself derived his flower images from images he found in *Modern Photography* magazine. Nothing comes from nothing.

She has replicated Frank Stella's early stripe paintings, and adopted the role of Paul McCarthy's mad abstract expressionist in his 1995 video performance *Painter*. In the latter, Sturtevant's version is near indistinguishable from the original. She becomes McCarthy's *Painter*, just as McCarthy himself became a grotesque and scatological version of Willem de Kooning in his hilarious video. Clips from Sturtevant's remake play on multi-screen videos in this Serpentine show, called *Leaps, Jumps and Bumps*. On a loop, a phallic rubber finger, drooling pigment, is shown dipping in and out of a can of paint, to the endless mantra: "Sex and death, sex and death, sex and death ..."

Elsewhere, still images of the artist dressed as Joseph Beuys sweep around the gallery walls; the projector is on a turntable. The work references Beuys's 1974 film in which the German artist, dressed as John Dillinger, re-enacts the death of the mobster, shot as he left a Chicago cinema in 1934. So Sturtevant redoes Beuys redoing Dillinger. In another video, filling a long wall, a dog is running. It bounds across the wall, from one end to another, and keeps doing it all day long.

But the first thing you see inside the Serpentine is a remake of the late Félix González-Torres's *Untitled (America)*, in which lightbulbs dangling from the ceiling form a glowing nest on the floor. The Cuban-born American died from Aids in 1996, and it was a Sturtevant version of this work that appeared in his Serpentine retrospective in 2000. I doubt he would have minded. I also imagine Duchamp would have laughed at Sturtevant's six identical versions of his 1920 miniature set of French windows, even though they are signed and copyrighted by Duchamp's fictive alter ego, Rose Sélavy. Others, such as the New York dealer Leo Castelli, have been less sanguine. Castelli apparently bought several Sturtevant versions of work by artists he represented - and destroyed them.

All reality is now virtual reality, says Sturtevant. We are hollowed-out husks of what once we were. She thinks the planet now is very empty, which I guess is where the sex dolls come in. As well as videos of works by her, there are shots of owls, sportsmen, 1930s cartoon sex symbol Betty Boop - and even Liberace's shoes. There's Butt-Head's ugly mouth, from the Beavis and Butt-Head cartoon, and here's Sturtevant's own mouth, seen through a slit in a piece of sacking. In *Trilogy of Transgression*, Minnie Mouse waves on one screen, while tiny crucifixes threaded on a piece of string are pulled, gently, from an inflatable anus on another. How did they get there?

Sturtevant's most recent work is less about repeating other people's art, or even her own, than it is about the constant repetitiousness of experience in the post-internet age. If Sturtevant hadn't done what she did, someone else would have. Someone, somewhere, is doubtless repeating Sturtevant now. The cycle is endless.

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