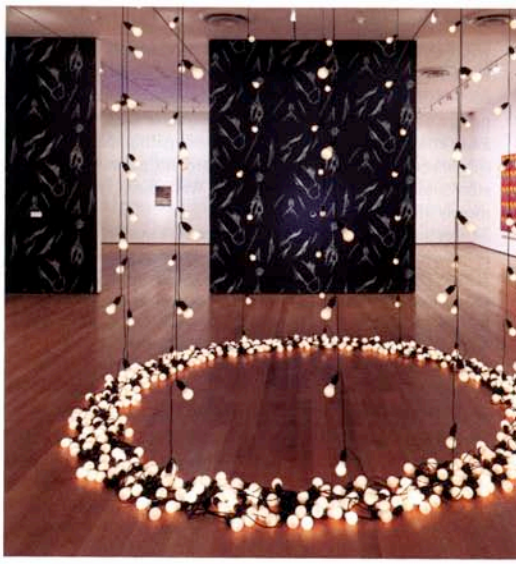
From left: **Sturtevant, *Beuys La rivoluzione siamo noi* (Beuys We Are the Revolution), 1988,** silk screen on paper, 37⅝ × 20⅛". **View of "Sturtevant: Double Trouble," 2014–15.** From left: *Finite Infinite*, 2010; *Johns Target with Four Faces (study)*, 1986; *Warhol Cow Paper*, 1996. **View of "Sturtevant: Double Trouble," 2014–15.** Foreground: *Gonzalez-Torres Untitled (America)*, 2004. Wall: *Gober Genital Wallpaper and Gober Drain*, 1994/1995.



Sturtevant

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK

Beau Rutland

WHAT BECOMES A LEGEND MOST? For years, the artwork, actions, and life of Sturtevant operated like a trade secret, quietly scrambling preconceived notions of the origin of appropriation. Having been one of the first postwar artists to create paintings and sculptures that other artists had already created, she now appears to be the matriarch of a postmodern brand of screwing around with Serious Things. Like the recently revived work of pseudonymous artist Vern Blosum, Sturtevant's "deliberate imitations" (as described by Lil Picard in a 1965 review) have increasingly been adopted by those seeking convenient examples of self-reflexivity that predate its twenty-first-century champions. Less than a year after her death at the age of eighty-nine, "Sturtevant: Double Trouble"—the artist's first US museum survey, mounted at the Museum of Modern Art, New York—punctures the long-standing mythology enshrouding her practice with a fine-toothed comb. Complementing the frisson of the artist's legacy is Bruce Hainley's brilliant and timely *Under the Sign of [Sic]* (2014), a jaw-dropping study of Sturtevant's practice in which no exegetical expense is spared.

Beginning in 1964, Sturtevant started making "other people's work," to quote gallerist Virginia Dwan. By the time Sturtevant made their art again, the mostly male creators were already rather successful in terms of the market, the institution, and the media. She had a solo debut at the Bianchini Gallery the next year, which prompted one critic to decry Sturtevant as "the first artist in history to have held a one-man show that included everybody but herself." The Bianchini exhibition featured walls covered in *Warhol Flowers*—the artist famously plucked a silk screen from the Factory with Andy's consent—and artworks seemingly by Jasper Johns, Jim Dine, Robert Rauschenberg, James Rosenquist, George Segal, Claes Oldenburg, and Öyvind Fahlström. The "making again" of such works demanded skills acquired over months of trial and error in the studio, prompting Warhol's legendary response as to how he produced his work: "I don't know. Ask Elaine." Such effort suggests that the decision to put doubles of supposedly singular artworks into the world was a choice not made inside a vacuum: "I didn't wake up one morning and say, 'oh, wow, lets [*sic*] do that!'" Yet when Sturtevant's doubles surfaced, the system started to hiccup: She claimed Oldenburg wanted to "kill" her; teenagers from a local school attacked her during the installation of her 1967 *The Store of Claes Oldenburg*; and amnesia seemed to strike most of her peers when her name was mentioned—all that one writer could recently recall of Sturtevant, apart from an anecdote about her breasts, was that she was "someone you were inclined to think of as a mild nuisance."

"Sturtevant: Double Trouble" is a rare cultural occasion. After all this anticipation, it's easy to feel let down by the materiality of her work when confronting it in person for the first time. It's as if Sturtevant essentially dares us to be disappointed. The easy response is—and always has been—to view the work as a pale imitation of something else, ignoring the name (a surname provided to Elaine Francis Horan by a marriage that ended in divorce) proudly displayed on all of Sturtevant's works and exhibitions. In this way, her art is like a decoy—drawing in prey unaware of impending ambush.

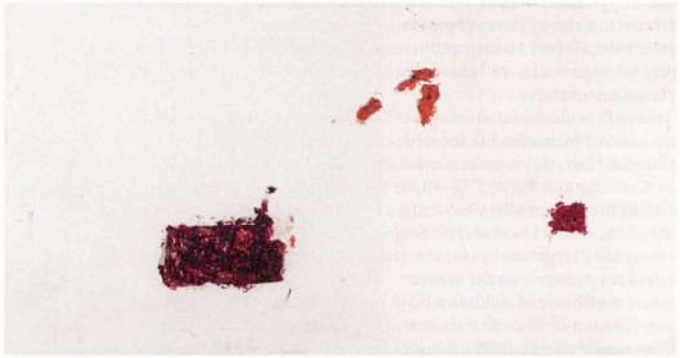
Sturtevant once said that "definition is limitation"; this reasonable maxim may also explain why she famously made a laundry list of what her work is not. In most things Sturtevant, there is an undercurrent of refusal, spurred on by decades of critics and viewers misreading her works as direct copies, replicas, parodies, remakes, or fakes. Approved (or rather, tolerated) terms include: *versions of other artworks*, *repetitions*, or, in the case of a painting such as *Warhol Flowers*, 1964–65, a "Warhol."

Organized by Peter Eleey, curator and associate director of exhibitions and programs at MoMA PS1, the exhibition is a focused meditation on the artist's vociferous output, framing Sturtevant as an artist "who adopted style as her medium" to lasso her unruly endeavors. The first two works one encounters, *Beuys La rivoluzione siamo noi* (Beuys We Are the Revolution), 1988, a silk screen of Sturtevant dressed as Joseph Beuys *en militaire*, and the spry yet elegiac video *Finite Infinite*, 2010, set the tone for the exhibition's oscillation between confrontational zeal and a more wistful and open-ended rumination. Bounding down the long entrance hall, the eager black Lab in *Finite Infinite* challenges the viewer in a race ad infinitum, finishing abruptly at *Johns Target with Four Faces (study)*, a 1986 version of the work Johns made in 1955. It's difficult to imagine a more appropriate opening salvo, drawing us into a space composed of competition, competence, and repetition—though of and for what, exactly?

Entering the main exhibition gallery, one sees *Study for Lichtenstein's Happy Tears*, 1967–68, brimming with aura and the resonance of a well-known Roy Lichtenstein, and nothing more or less. But this is an exception within Sturtevant's oeuvre. At the more complex end of the spectrum are works that seem to be simply bad copies, but on closer inspection are revealed to be not really repetitions at all. *Untitled (Johns)*, 1990, for instance, a barely-there transfer drawing of Johns's characteristic hatch marks, takes no one particular Johns as its inspiration, instead fusing two iconic gestures, enmeshing something recognizably Johnsian with an action of transference that is characteristically Rauschenbergian.

Yet the originality of a Sturtevant is wrapped up in otherness—weirdness, even. A cutout photograph of

From left: **Sturtevant, *Ethelred II*, 1961,** oil and paint tube on canvas, 20⅛ × 39⅛". **View of "Sturtevant: Double Trouble," 2014–15,** Painting and Sculpture Gallery 5. Center: Sturtevant, *The Dark Threat of Absence Fragmented and Sliced*, 2003. Background, from left: Francis Picabia, *I See Again in Memory My Dear Udnie*, ca. 1914; Marcel Duchamp, *Monte Carlo Bond (No. 12)*, 1924; Marcel Duchamp, *3 Standard Stoppages*, 1913–14. **Sturtevant, *Duchamp Relâche*, 1967,** framed photograph, 8¾ × 8⅛".



Johns's own face peers out of *Johns Flag Above White Ground*, 1967–68; *Duchamp Nu descendant un escalier*, 1968, a filmic version of Duchamp's famous pre-readymade painting starring Sturtevant and Deborah Hay, puts Sturtevant in the figurative roles of Pygmalion and Galatea all at once; and *Haring Untitled*, 1987, appears related to Haring's murals in name alone. One may note her off-kilter Warhol palette or her too-thin application of Johnsian encaustic, yet "wrongness" here registers as a shortcut through iconography rather than as plain iconoclasm. Sturtevant notably said, "I do not wish to add another idea of beauty to those that exist already," though one could argue that she did exactly that by re-presenting

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and reenacting compositions and constructs that we once thought we knew. Like an endlessly volatile cycle of feedback, the information encoded in Sturtevant's practice generates profound instability. Her "hand" does not simply address and challenge the previous referent (as, say, Sherrie Levine's appropriation of Walker Evans might be said to do—the binary of Levine-challenging-Evans always there). By contrast, Sturtevant so fully *replaces* the work of Johns or Duchamp or whomever it is she is appropriating that her work ushers us into unknown contingencies, rather than settling into a stable form of critique.

Inside the initial gallery, one finds a generative pairing: Duchamp and Beuys. While Sturtevant and Sturtevants abound here, including Duchamp- and Beuys-inspired performances as well as "Beuys" sculptures and a grouping of *Duchamp Fresh Widows*, 1992/2012, other bodies also cycle through the gallery. In *Duchamp Relâche*, 1967, a nude Sturtevant holds an invisible apple, sans fig leaf, alongside a faux-bearded Rauschenberg posing as Adam, a role assumed by Duchamp in the Man Ray original. Her related *Picabia's Ballet Relâche*, 1967, even lured Duchamp and his wife Teeny, curious as to whether Sturtevant would go through with the work's promised cancellation (like Picabia, she did).

The final two galleries appear less reliant on juxtaposition and are seemingly indifferent to a group-show aesthetic. *Gonzalez-Torres Untitled (America)*, 2004, acts as a centralized glowing scrim through which one can see recent video works, "Keith Harings," and Robert Gober wallpaper with its attendant drain—a (cross-promotional?) double of the work on view in Gober's retrospective one floor below. Sturtevant's early work is exemplified by *Ethelred II*, 1961, a large white painting adorned with a brutally flayed readymade tube of paint, the contents of which are (neatly) strewn across the canvas. Like a bleak recapitulation of Duchamp's *Tu m'*, 1918, and its echoing paint chips, Sturtevant employed the language of then-fashionable painting to illustrate the entire medium as a readymade, the work a stunningly recursive enfolding of Duchampian critique and formal investigation.

There is a sense of urgency and agency in Eleey's elegant installation after decades of Sturtevant and her artwork being neglected, disdained, and dismissed. Very few institutions have acquired her work, and even MOMA has been slow to collect. Rightfully, "Double Trouble," with its smart sight lines and pithy pairings (*Oldenburg Store Object, Slip* teasing *Duchamp Coin de chasteté*, both 1967, with an upskirt shot), makes the case for Sturtevant as an artist whose oeuvre is in need of a room of its own. Yet I can't fight the feeling that the exhibition denies the pleasure of getting one's hands just a little dirty.

Many of the most intriguing aspects of Sturtevant's operations have only survived in the form of ephemera. To give a full picture of Sturtevant's operations, as Hainley's and Eleey's texts do so fluidly, correspondence, ephemera, and documentation are needed—thereby cluttering a more auratic approach and possibly going against the artist's wishes. Such strictures seem punitive for a career that left so much disruption in its wake: Reference to certain missing works might have helped this introduction serve as a more fully formed vision of Sturtevant's art. For instance, the recently discovered *Study for Rainer Three Seascapes*, 1967, a revelation, is one of the only three "female" works by the artist (surviving physically through Peter Moore's contact sheet of performance views, first published in these pages, and described in the catalogue). By featuring Sturtevant's body with its attendant force and fragility, such a work—not simply a reperformance but also undeniably self-expressive—brings her oeuvre out of imperviousness and into the world inhabited by the rest of us.

Yet said world was successfully inhabited and disrupted by artworks that, luckily, do exist in a presentable state. The exhibition seeps out of its own spaces and into the museum's collection galleries, specifically Gallery 5, which is dedicated to Dada. In the spirit of the anarchically minded movement, "Double Trouble" engages and visibly startles visitors who are otherwise in the midst of a leisurely gambol through modernism's well-trodden vistas. The perpetrator, *The Dark Threat of Absence Fragmented and Sliced*, 2003, consists of a series of low-lying monitors featuring "original" and pilfered footage, including a bloody Paul McCarthy–inspired performance and a Madonna concert. Less brazenly, Sturtevant's small-scale Duchamp drawings mingle with works from the historic Katherine S. Dreier Bequest. While the gesture is perhaps less extreme than if, say, the curators had replaced Johns's *Target with Four Faces* with Sturtevant's, placing any unfamiliar artist within these sanctified galleries causes a rift, echoing those authored by Sturtevant fifty years prior. To position Sturtevant among such anachronistic and noncompliant company is fitting; certainly the artist wasn't of her time. It seems unlikely that she is of ours, either. □

"Sturtevant: Double Trouble" is on view through February 22 at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. It travels to the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, Mar. 21–July 27.

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