STURTEVANT

DOUBLE TROUBLE

“Having a bit of information, or a name, may stop our curiosity about what we are looking at.”

“This kind of art has to be worked out at the beginning; it has to start from the molding power of the thought as a sculptural means.”

“I’d prefer to remain a mystery; I never like to give my background and, anyway, I make it all different all the time I’m asked.”

“They are recorded patterns of thought. Duplication is impossible without a camera. Repetition, without a camera (or machine) is not repetition.”

“I wanted to put painting once again at the service of the mind.”

“Repeat the same thing long enough and it becomes taste.”

STURTEVANT

DOUBLE TROUBLE

Peter Eleey
MoMA

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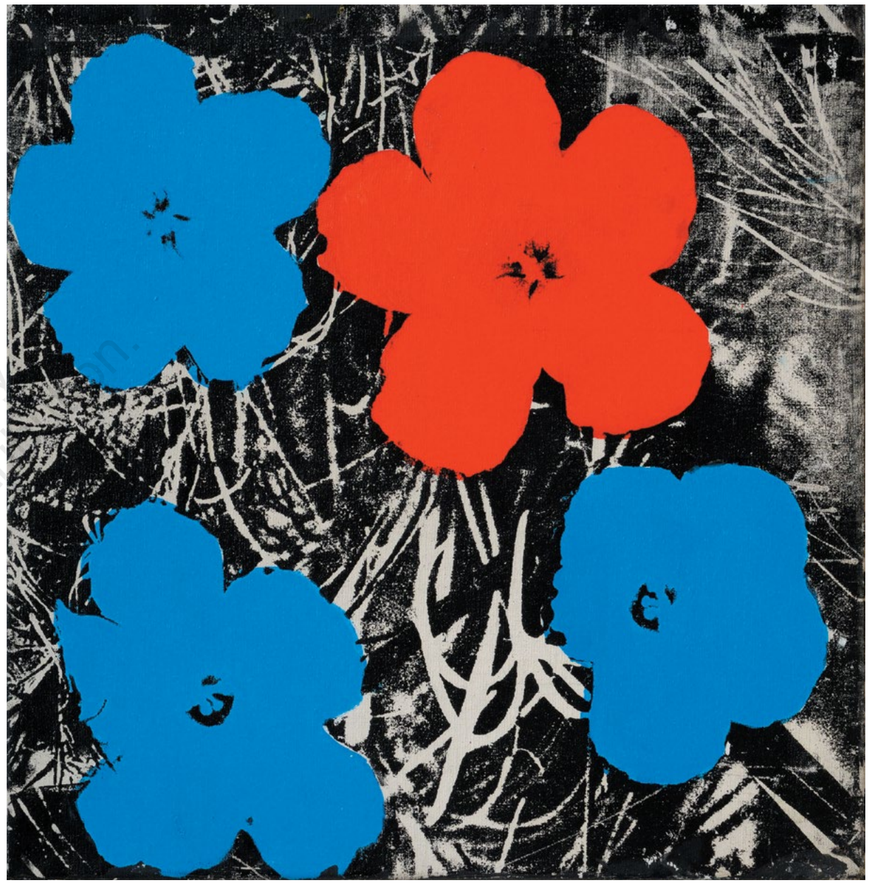

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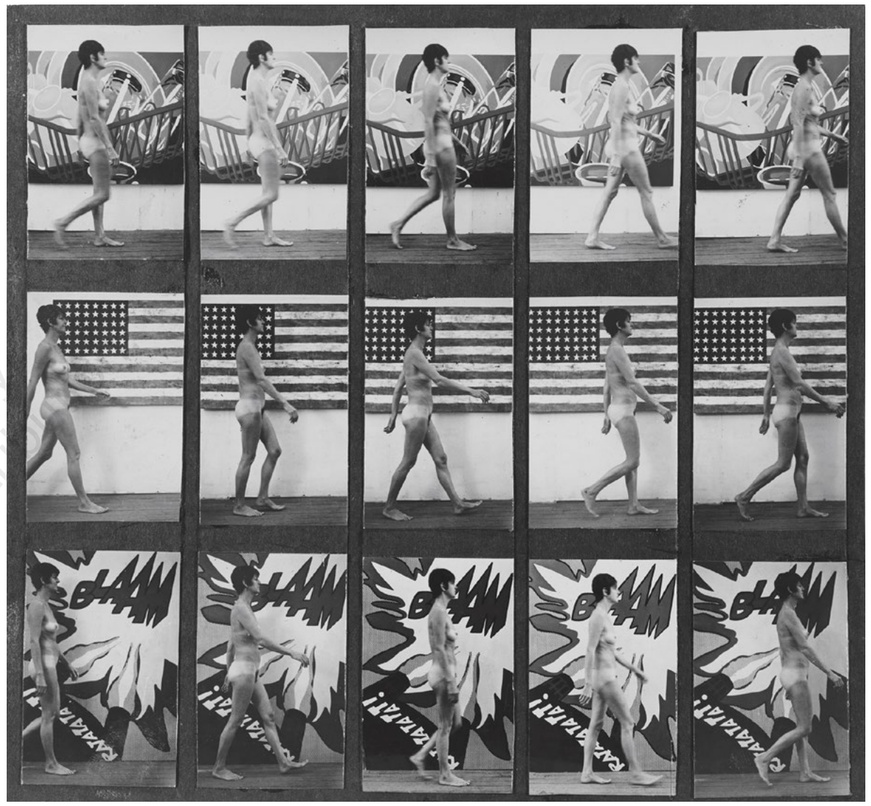

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DANGEROUS CONCEALMENT
The Art of Sturtevant

Peter Eleey

This clever thing has avoided society's mold.
She's cast herself in her very own.
Other look-alikes share with her the anti-sea.
She's perfect.
— Marcel Broodthaers, "The Mussel," 1963–64

"I feel all right," President Lyndon Johnson said from his hospital bed on October 8, 1965, after surgeons had removed his gall bladder. "I feel some discomfort, but I think I'm in good shape." On that fall day, as the president recuperated from the same procedure that would kill Andy Warhol two decades later, the U.S. stock market surged to a record high. The success of the president's operation spurred trading, the *New York Herald Tribune* reported the following day, supercharging an economic outlook already aroused by "improved earnings, the Viet Nam war escalation, and improved merger prospects."[1]

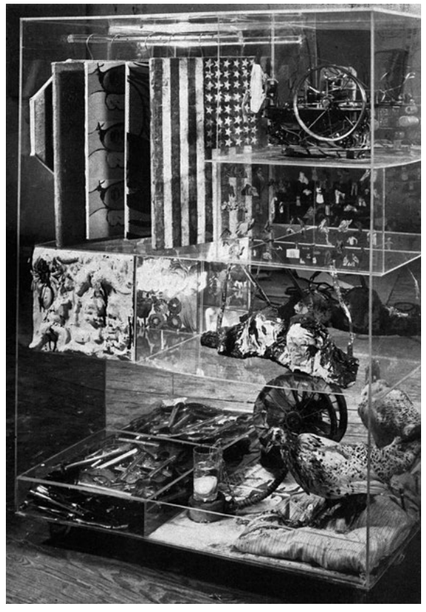
The artist Elaine Sturtevant clipped and saved the financial page from that *Herald Tribune*. The year before, she had begun doing versions of other artists' art, and some of them required newsprint. One of the first was a sculp-metal and collage Jasper Johns *Flag* on canvas, twelve by nineteen inches, that probably looked a lot like one that Johns himself had made in 1960 and given to Robert Rauschenberg.[2] And with a twenty-two-inch silkscreen that Warhol had allowed her to have, she had also made versions of his Flowers paintings.[3]

The previous Saturday, October 2, Sturtevant's first solo show had opened, and there she had put Warhol's screen to good use. At Bianchini Gallery, on 57th Street in New York, she lined the walls with her Warhol Flowers from floor to ceiling (fig. 1). In front of that décor, she installed a white sculpture of a man, much resembling a work by George Segal. The figure was pulling a garment rack laden with the season's fashions, some already slightly out of style: suspended from the rack were what looked like works by Johns, Arman, Claes Oldenburg, and Frank Stella, along with what appear in a photograph to be at least one James Rosenquist and perhaps also a Roy Lichtenstein. Except that these were all works made by Sturtevant, things that one writer termed "Ready-to-wear Art"—hanged men, as it were, on wheels.[4]

Reviews summarized the other works and artists referenced in the show: "first-rate" Robert Rauschenberg drawings and "stuffed birds"; Niki de Saint Phalle; Robert Morris; a wall of "good" Lichtensteins; and a Jim Dine "necktie."[5] Some of these works are visible in a photograph of an open, standing Plexiglas box, the compartments of which additionally appear to contain a small machine suggestive of a construction by Jean Tinguely in the top right section, beside which hang more racked paintings, including another *Johns Flag* (fig. 2).[6] Beneath the probable Tinguely are suspended many small elements that look like doll clothing. Sturtevant likely derived these from Swedish artist Öyvind Fahlström's *The Planetarium* (1963), a two-panel work that features a group of small silhouetted figures in various poses; the viewer can ostensibly "dress them up" with moveable magnetic clothes that Fahlström cut to approximate the positions of the corresponding figures beneath. (Notably, a small rack with hangers is drawn along the bottom of Fahlström's work, on which the clothes can be lined up when not in use.) In the vitrine at Bianchini, Sturtevant recuperated only the garments, which also feature in the drawing that she made for the exhibition's announcement (fig. 3).[7]

The "Fahlström" clothes and the vitrine, along with *7th Avenue Garment Rack with Warhol Flowers* (1965), together establish many of the central themes and mechanisms that persist throughout Sturtevant's œuvre. Appearing in the same gallery where *The American Supermarket* exhibition of Pop foodstuffs and consumer goods had taken place a year earlier, Sturtevant's vitrine has a clear relationship to commercial presentation.[8] Deploying retail-display techniques familiar from supermarkets and department stores, she re-grounds Pop in the commercial world from which it derives. She does this by applying Pop's appropriative image methodology to her repetitions of individual works—what Lil Picard, in a review of the show, calls "Pop à la Pop"—and also by arranging them together in her installations of the *Garment*

1 Installation view of *Sturtevant*, Bianchini Gallery, New York, 1965, with *7th Avenue Garment Rack with Warhol Flowers* (1965)



2 Installation view of *Sturtevant*, Bianchini Gallery, New York, 1965 (work since destroyed)

3 Sturtevant. Announcement poster for *Sturtevant* at Bianchini Gallery, New York. 1965
Offset printing on paper, 15 ¼ × 19 ¼" (38.5 × 49 cm)

Rack and the vitrine.[9] Importantly, the *Garment Rack* is in action, en route to or from the factory or the showroom. And the man pulling it along? The figure is a cast Sturtevant made from the body of dancer Steve Paxton, following the method used by Segal with his figures—draping the living model in plaster-soaked gauze—but without reference to any specific Segal sculpture. Her version of the Fahlström clothes derives from a particular painting, but in the vitrine Sturtevant has omitted the drawn figures to which each garment corresponds.

With Sturtevant's Segal—in the words of one critic, "white and ghostly looking"—as well as her Fahlström clothes, we are offered shrouds of absent bodies.[10] The fact that Sturtevant's Warhol Flowers were the backdrop for these corporeal ghosts reinforces the elegiac and necrophilic undercurrents that run beneath her art. Warhol had first shown his Flowers paintings the year before, and Sturtevant started making hers with his screens soon thereafter. Coming on the heels of his 1962–63 Death and Disaster series, her Flowers, like Warhol's, remained inflected by death—like decorations for a wake—and sex, haunted by a hollowness that Warhol embraced. "If you want to know all about Andy Warhol," he explained, "just look at the surface of my paintings and films and me, and there I am." He was, in other words, a shroud for himself. "There is nothing behind it."[11]

At least one thing *was* behind his Flowers, though, and that was Patricia Caulfield, whose photograph of hibiscus blooms, published in the June 1964 issue of *Modern Photography*, was the source for Warhol's screenprint. In Sturtevant's hands, Warhol's image draws greater attention to the limits, edges, and qualities of his authorship, already stressed by the appropriated and delegated aspects of his screenprint paintings' manufacture. Oddly, Sturtevant's screen-play exposes essential aspects of Warhol's craft and insistent vacancy, even while pointing back further to the woman whose image had passed from her own camera, through Kodak's advertising agency, to a magazine, and then to a high-contrast crop at Warhol's Factory, before moving to his screen maker, and finally on to Sturtevant. In her telling, Warhol once responded to questions about his artistic method by saying: "I don't know. Ask Elaine."[12] Starting in the same year that Susan Sontag wrote of seeing "everything in quotation marks" and of "Being-as-Playing-a-Role," Sturtevant's Warhol Flowers beg a question that is central to all her work: where is *she* in all this?[13]

Questions around Sturtevant's visibility troubled her debut. She recalled that the initial reaction to her work "wasn't generally hostile, but that's because it was not taken seriously. People thought I was joshing, or saying that anyone could do it."[14] Some reviewers saw the Bianchini show as "pure fun," and took her work to be "imitations" or literal copies, "parod[ies . . .] in which the Pop school is copied exactly."[15] But the *New York Times* critic jabbed that Sturtevant "must be the first artist in history to have held a one-man show that included everybody but herself."[16] A similar theme of self-abnegation appeared in other critical assessments of the exhibition, perhaps most notably in critic Max Kozloff's insistence that Sturtevant had provided "the most pathetic advertisement of an artist's apartness from herself that I have seen."[17]

With the benefit of perspective, after half a century's worth of Sturtevant's subsequent work, we can see that Kozloff was overstating his case. But we can reasonably assume that her chameleon-like embrace of other artists' art is also part of what has led her to be largely overlooked in the history of postwar American art. As a woman making versions of the work of better-known artists—for the most part men—she has passed almost unnoticed through the hierarchies of midcentury modernism and postmodernism, virtually absent from those histories while nevertheless articulating their structures. Accordingly, what might be called the garment-district thematic of her first show can be read not simply as a reference to Sturtevant's self-costuming, or a critical equation of the art of her successful peers with the quick-turning tastes of fashion, but as premonitions of a career that would be marked by conflicted disguises and contradictory forms of visibility.

The works in that 1965 show served additionally as evocations of missing persons—including, but not limited to, Sturtevant's own. Behind the headlines of the newspapers that the artist was clipping was a steady drumbeat of bodies falling on the other side of the world, which did not pass unnoticed in her studio. Instead of ripping up that October 9, 1965, newspaper for use as collage material, Sturtevant made a work directly on top of it.[18] The headline of the *Herald Tribune*'s Business and Finance section reads: "Confident Market Bulls Way to New High." Sturtevant got out her ruler and gridded that page of the newspaper into five columns beneath the headline, roughly measured at the width of the text columns themselves, and divided those five columns with a horizontal line into two rows. In the resulting boxes, she drew the numbers *0*, *1*, *2*, *3*, *4* across the top rank, and then *5*, *6*, *7*, *8*, *9* below, all in stencil-like numerals. Then (as Johns had done), she mixed up some white encaustic and filled in and around the numbers, making them just as "white and ghostly" as her Paxton-figure "Segal." She took care to leave the headline visible, lest anyone mistake her *Johns 0 through 9* (plate 3) for some mere copy of the commercial stencil-numerals that Johns had dispassionately insisted he chose because he liked "that they come that way."[19]

In a radio interview broadcast the day after Sturtevant read about the "confident market," Johns said that for the purposes of his own art he was drawn to the way the numbers seemed, to him, "preformed, conventional, depersonalized, factual, exterior elements." He initially rendered them as single forms, alone, to avoid "putting the numbers to any use." Importantly, he explained, he didn't do *every* number at the beginning, and took pains not to do them in any order "so that there wouldn't be implied that relationship of moving through things."[20]

Sturtevant's numbers, however, are most definitely "moving through things," literally underlining news of a stock-market record. As in the case of her Warhol Flowers, her versions of Johns's numbers use Johns *whole*, deploying his highly recognizable style to subtly turn the vernacular pedestrianism he claimed of his sources against themselves, and hinting that unruly assumptions about progress sit beneath the quiet surfaces of his progressive sequence of digits. Internalizing his "exterior," "factual," and "depersonalized" elements, she treats his numbers as facts, personalizing them both for herself and, in a sense, for him, too. She flays the "exterior" facets of his numbers and leaves them to soak into the news of the day before, during which a flurry of money had changed hands, driven by optimism about a coming war, and the president had been cut open and successfully sewn back up. "War is not about dead bodies," she exclaimed in 2006, "but about money."[21]

That desire to use her subjects whole, to consume them completely and turn them into tools of their own self-depiction, was evident even before Sturtevant started making literal references to other artists. Beginning sometime in the late 1950s, she began slicing open her tubes of paint, turning them inside-out, cutting them into flattened rough shapes, and in some cases julienning them into thin strips of metal.[22] Judging from the few of these works that are known to survive, it seems that she then collaged one or more of these elements onto canvas, often exterior-side-down, sometimes seemingly after the exposed paint had dried, but probably most often while wet. Occasionally these bits of paint-crusted metal are accompanied by small daubs of paint that appear to come straight from the tube, and additional lines, scribbles, or smudged marks in pencil. Anticipating Paul Thek's gory "meat" pieces, made between 1963 and 1966, these paintings use not just the fleshy gunk of paint, but also its industrially produced container.[23] Johns himself owns two Sturtevant paintings from this period that she gave him: one from 1959 and the other from 1961. Similar works—at least two, and likely a third—appear on the wall of Robert Rauschenberg's Broadway studio in a 1965 photograph (fig. 4); certainly the largest work on the wall in that image is hers.[24]

These works, which may have been studies for larger pieces, also recall Marcel Duchamp's transition from making paintings to designating his readymades, which involved his realization that the colors he was painting with had been pre-chosen and prepackaged for him by industry.[25] Like Duchamp's final painting, *Tu m'* (1918), Sturtevant's paint-tube series was a rehearsal for the abandonment of painting (at least in the declarative expressionist form then practiced), which surely accounts in part for the paintings' implicit violence.[26] The series provides the earliest and most literal demonstrations of her often-stated interest in what she termed "the silent interior of art" and its "understructure," but also connects that silent interior with violence, a loose equation that would recur throughout the next five decades of her career. This link is made most explicit in *Ethelred II* (1961; plate 1), a work composed of patches of three different bloody reds, the most gruesome of which writer and Sturtevant scholar Bruce Hainley memorably describes as a "road-killed tube of paint."[27]

With this prehistory in mind, we can more easily see Sturtevant's renditions of the work of her peers for what they are *not*. From the moment of her appearance at Bianchini, Sturtevant troubled the double. By faking faking, she showed that she was not a copyist, plagiarist, parodist, forger, or imitator, but was rather a kind of actionist, who adopted style as her medium in order to investigate aspects of art's making, circulation, consumption, and canonization. In so doing, she manifested two of Warhol's expressed desires. "I think that would be so great, to be able to change styles," he remarked in 1963, adding, "I think it would be so great if more people took up silk screens so that no one would know whether my picture was mine or somebody else's."[28] Although questions of authorship surround Sturtevant's work, she was more essentially concerned with the power of authority, enacting style to connect art's economy and its avant-garde mechanics to the broader political, financial, labor, and intellectual economies of which it is a part.[29]

• •

How did Sturtevant move from eviscerating paint tubes to painting flags and printing flowers in the span of a few short years? A peculiar work that stands alone in her œuvre offers hints of her thinking during this transition. Sometime during or following her slicing and dicing, she made a painting that she divided into uneven quadrants, like a skewed rifle scope. Clustered around the intersection of axes near the middle of the canvas is an accumulation of gestural marks, actively

4 Robert Rauschenberg in his Broadway studio, New York, 1965. Photograph by Alexander Liberman
Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles

applied with gray and white paint and scribbled with charcoal. Beneath this expressionist calligraphy, she had scrawled the word *PONTIFICATE* in capital letters (*Pontificate*, 1962; fig. 5).[30] It is tempting to think that she had Cy Twombly in her sights here, if not her fellow Ohioan Jim Dine, whose Car Crash series (1959–60; figs. 6 and 7) includes a number of works that combine a similar application of paint and style of handwriting with a cruciform shape (meant to signify the red cross of an ambulance). Dine's Car Crash works culminated in a performance at the Reuben Gallery in New York in the fall of 1960, the set of which critic Jill Johnston described (in a remarkable premonition of Warhol's Death and Disaster paintings) as "the scene of the crash, its aftermath, and its eternal persistence."[31] Asked about her inscription, Sturtevant recalled simply that she felt certain people were doing a lot of pontificating at the time; it is easy to imagine that Dine was on her list.[32]

It is impossible, however, to know whether *Pontificate* was an effort to engage directly with one (and maybe two) peers, who were themselves making the transition out of Abstract Expressionism and treating aspects of the gestural mark in quotes.[33] "The Abstract Expressionists were all about emotion," she remarked in 2005 about that earlier period in her development, "and the Pop artists all surface. That got me into thinking. What's underneath?"[34] Given Sturtevant's shifting conception of what her work could be, it is hard to guess what role might have been played by Pop's critical reception, which was already starting to sour by late 1963.[35] Or the effect that encountering Pop packaged together into group shows and reproduced in magazines might have had. Or what she might have gleaned from her experience, some years earlier, serving as a prop stylist for a commercial photography studio.[36] Or whether her friend Rauschenberg's erasure, in 1953, of a drawing that Willem de Kooning had given him had sown something in her mind about "taking," "reusing," and the way invisibility can assume a paradoxical visibility. And whether Rauschenberg's subsequent demonstration of replication in his painting-after-itself study *Factum I* and *Factum II* (1957; figs. 8 and 9) codified something else for her. (By the time Rauschenberg explained, in 1968, that he had painted that pair of canvases because he "wanted to see how different, and in what way, would be two different paintings that looked that much alike," Sturtevant had already taken his experiment to its logical conclusion.)[37]

One can wonder if she knew that the term *readymade* had originated in the garment industry; or if she

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Front and back covers:
Sturtevant. *Warhol Flowers*. 1990
Screenprint and acrylic on canvas, 9' 7 ⅝" × 9' 7 ⅝" × 1 ½" (293.8 × 293.8 × 4 cm)
Courtesy Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris–Salzburg

Frontispiece:
Plate 136, After Muybridge—Woman with Hands on Her Hips. 1966
Gelatin silver prints collaged on paper, 10 ¼ × 12 ⅝" (26 × 32 cm)
Estate Sturtevant, Paris
Courtesy Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris–Salzburg

Page 192:
Sturtevant. *Krazy Kat* (detail). 1986
Ink on paper
14 x 11" (35.4 x 28 cm)
Courtesy Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris–Salzburg

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