



Sturtevant
Dialectic of Distance
Sturtevant Oldenburg Store

55th anniversary

8 September—3 October 2022

London Ely House

Thaddaeus Ropac

London Paris Salzburg Seoul

Sturtevant

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Fifty-five years after its 1967 opening, Thaddaeus Ropac London is delighted to present the exhibition *Sturtevant: Dialectic of Distance*, retracing the performance of American artist Sturtevant (1924–2014) in which she recreated *The Store* (1961) by Claes Oldenburg.

Known for her disconcerting replicas of works by her contemporaries that would become iconic, Sturtevant's practice challenges the prevailing discourse around originality and authenticity in art. In 1967, Sturtevant rented a shop on Manhattan's Lower East Side, in which she displayed several coloured plaster objects including dresses, cakes, hamburgers and cigarette butts as part of a happening re-enacting Oldenburg's famous performance. Fourteen of the objects Sturtevant made in the 1960s will be brought together for the first time in this exhibition alongside *The Dark Threat of Absence* (2002), a video work in which Sturtevant re-enacts Paul McCarthy's film *Painter* (1995). Together, the two works will provide a rare insight into the pioneering artist's multifaceted practice.

A destabilising feeling accompanies Sturtevant's exhibitions as her works continue to break the barriers and taboos of the art world. At the time of the happening in 1967, the artist's radical gesture was met with hostility. On the day before the opening she was severely beaten by a group of schoolchildren, and ended up in hospital. Among the small circle of avant-garde intelligentsia that Sturtevant was part of, some shared this feeling of incomprehension. *The Store* by Claes Oldenburg, which had taken place only seven blocks away a few years earlier, was already a landmark of the Pop Art movement, as it circumvented the commercial structures of the art world and highlighted the increasing commodification of works of art. Sturtevant's iconoclastic repetition of *The Store* took the Pop critique even further by exploring the implications and assumptions around creativity itself.

Audacious and provocative Sturtevant's works generate confusion in order to elicit thought and spark, as she calls it, 'fire'. Each item in the shop, recreated from memory, was not an exact reproduction of one of Oldenburg's objects, but rather, as Musée d'Art Moderne curator Anne Dressen described it, 'a simulation of a facsimile.' Sidestepping the notion of originality, the process of repetition is a way for Sturtevant to explore the tensions that inevitably arise through subjectivity. As she explained in a 2013 interview, 'The appropriationists were really about the loss of originality and I was about the power of thought. A very big difference.' The exhibition title, *Dialectic of Distance*, invites viewers to approach her works on these terms, as it repeats, fifty-five years after its opening, the artist's own re-creation of Oldenburg's performance.

ABRIL 22^{AL} JUNIO 11

STURTEVANT

**THE
STORE
OF
CLAES OLDENBURG**

623 E. 9TH ST.

**HOURS: TUES., WED., THUR., FRI., 12-4
SATURDAY 12-6**

AND BY APPOINTMENT

OPENING: APRIL 22

Sturtevant 67

Sturtevant, The Store of Claes Oldenburg, 1967

Made more than three decades after *The Store*, *The Dark Threat of Absence* is a re-enactment of an artist acting as another artist, representing a unique mise en abyme of Sturtevant's practice. In *Painter*, McCarthy disguised himself as a cartoon-like character with exaggerated rubber prosthetics and wandered around a wooden set designed to look like an artist's studio. He was dressed in a blue garment, halfway between a painter's smock and a hospital gown, and periodically shouted 'de Kooning!' in a clear parody of the Abstract Expressionist painter.

At the same time, she pushes the critique of the image of the artist as a tortured genius even further in her version, highlighting the phallogentric nature of the myth with explicitly sexual close-ups and cutaways to hysterical crowds at pop music concerts. She describes a work in which 'time is image, movement is thought, empty space is the exhaustive force – all forming a powerful totality that shoves and jolts the constructive parts.' Ketchup bottles and phalluses alternate in quick succession, often reappearing as flashes on the screen as the video gradually moves away from McCarthy's performance. *The Dark Threat of Absence* establishes a visual dialectic through the dual channel format of the video – at the start both sides appear to be showing the same footage, but a time gap soon begins to appear, which turns into what the artist describes as an 'agitated imbalance that is stuck and glued by transgression.'

Sturtevant's approach resonates with the theories put forward by French philosopher Gilles Deleuze in his early masterwork *Difference and Repetition* (1968). In repeating the works of other artists through her own actions and movements, she creates difference, in the Deleuzian sense; that is, the distance that simultaneously separates and connects two entities. This doubling up in Sturtevant's re-creation emphasises 'the infrathin discrepancy', as art historian Anne Dressen terms it, 'which makes all the difference for Deleuze: in essence, two peas in a pod cannot be identical, and every reprise puts restrictions on hyperrealism, because subjectivity inevitably creeps in.'



Sturtevant, *The Dark Threat of Absence*, 2002



Sturtevant at her *The Store of Claes Oldenburg*, 1967

About the artist

The American artist Sturtevant is best known for her repetitions of works by other artists, which she recreated from memory after having seen an artwork that would become iconic. These can immediately be identified with the original, but they are not copies. Her first exhibition, held in 1965 at the Bianchini Gallery, New York, featured Sturtevant's Andy Warhol silkscreened flowers, Jasper Johns flag, Frank Stella concentric square, Claes Oldenburg garment and other paintings suspended on a clothes rack. When Warhol was asked how he made his work he famously replied: 'I don't know. Ask Elaine [Sturtevant]'. Other artists whose work she replicated include her contemporaries in American Pop – Roy Lichtenstein, James Rosenquist and Tom Wesselmann – as well as Marcel Duchamp, Joseph Beuys, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Keith Haring and Anselm Kiefer.

Sturtevant worked across media, ranging from painting and sculpture to photography and, from 2000 onwards, video works that combined advertising and internet images with her own film material. Her videos engage with today's image-saturated media culture through a repetition of a different kind based on a continuous loop. As the artist stated in 2012, 'What is currently compelling is our pervasive cybernetic mode, which plunks copyright into mythology, makes origins a romantic notion, and pushes creativity outside the self. Remake, reuse, reassemble, recombine – that's the way to go.'

Born in Lakewood, Ohio in 1924, Elaine Sturtevant received her BA from the University of Iowa and studied philosophy at the University of Zurich. She then obtained an MA in psychology from Columbia University. In 1990, she relocated from the US to Paris, where she lived and worked until her death in 2014. She was awarded the Golden Lion for lifetime achievement at the 54th Venice Biennale in 2011, and her pioneering work has been featured in numerous solo exhibitions, including at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (2015); The Museum of Modern Art, New York (2014); MMK Museum für moderne Kunst, Frankfurt (2014); Albertina, Vienna (2014); Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin (2014); Serpentine Galleries, London (2013); Kunsthalle, Zürich (2012); Moderna Museet, Stockholm (2012); Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris (2010); Le Consortium, Dijon (2008); Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt (2004); École Régionale des Beaux-arts de Nantes (2000); MAMCO, Geneva (1999) and Villa Arson, Nice (1993). Notable recent group exhibitions include *Carte blanche à Anne Imhof*, *Natures Mortes*, Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2021) and *She-Bam Pow POP Wizz ! Les Amazones du POP* at MAMAC, Nice (2020).