



# REPEAT OFFENDER

On a nondescript side street in the Les Halles district of Paris, seven floors above a convenience store in a building with no elevator, there's a modest apartment with some eye-catching things on the walls. In the living room is what looks like one of Jasper Johns's iconic Numbers paintings, and the entryway is plastered with floor-to-ceiling images of pink cow heads—Warhols, evidently. In the bathroom, along with a photo of a stern-looking woman dressed as Joseph Beuys dressed as John Dillinger, there are jumbo white-on-black sketches of penises and vaginas. Discerning eyes will recognize the images from Robert Gober's *Male and Female Genital Wallpaper*, 1989.

"Whenever a plumber comes over, he gets so nervous," says the apartment's owner and sole occupant, the 89-year-old American artist who goes by the name Sturtevant. "I'll say, 'Would you like some water?' And he'll say, 'No, thank you!' He just wants to get out of here."

Plumbers are not the only ones who might be surprised to learn that the wallpaper, along with the Warhols and the Johns and the large photograph of a Hellmann's mayonnaise label are, in fact, original artworks by Sturtevant. The artist got her start by replicating the works of the art stars of the 1960s, long before the craze for appropriation took hold in the art world, on the Internet, and in the culture at large. Now, after more than 50 years as an enigmatic art world outlier, Sturtevant, who has often felt more of a kinship with French post-structuralist philosophers than with the hot artists of the day, finds that she is in the strange position of being a hot artist herself. Her contributions are undergoing a major reappraisal: At the 2011 Venice Biennale, she was awarded the Golden Lion for lifetime achievement, and this November she will have her first major American museum show, at the Museum of Modern Art, in New York. "Sturtevant's work is very 'now,' and even her pieces from the '60s look as fresh today as they did when she created them," says the curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, who oversaw a retrospective at London's Serpentine Gallery last year that drew record crowds. Citing the work's unique blend of urgency and timelessness, as well as its growing impact on younger generations of artists, Obrist dubs Sturtevant "one of the most important artists of the 21st century."

Few people saw that coming in New York in 1965, when she had her first solo exhibition, featuring her versions of a Frank Stella concentric painting, a Jasper Johns flag, and dozens of Andy Warhol silk-screened flowers. The works, she emphasized then, were not copies but "repetitions"—likenesses that she created from memory and sold as her own. Many viewers and art critics were appalled, dismissing the show as an assemblage of shameless forgeries. Others praised it for the wrong reasons, figuring that Sturtevant was mocking the pretensions of contemporary art by showing how easily the works could be reproduced.

Lost on most people were the work's conceptual underpinnings and Sturtevant's real intent: to use repetition as a device for getting beneath Pop's shiny surface and revealing what she calls the "understructure of art." Although her work has become increasingly complex in recent decades as she's branched into video and other media, Sturtevant is still essentially trying to get the viewer to question what he or she is seeing. When you look at a Robert Rauschenberg that you know isn't really a Rauschenberg, Sturtevant says, "one of two things happens. Your head either goes forward or it goes backward." If it goes backward, you dismiss the work as a worthless copy. "Forward is, 'Oh, my God, what is that? How does that work?'"

From the beginning, Sturtevant (whose full name is Elaine Sturtevant) showed an uncanny instinct for zeroing in on the work of contemporaries who would later be recognized as masters, beginning with the Pop figures and later with conceptualists such as Beuys. (Yes, that's her in

After 50 years in the art world, Sturtevant—a true American original best known for her remakes of 1960s masterworks—is finally getting her due. *Christopher Bagley* meets the octogenarian enfant terrible.

the bathroom photo, re-creating Beuys's imitation of Dillinger.) Some of these artists had no objection to Sturtevant's facsimiles. In the mid-1960s Warhol actually gave her a silk screen so that she could reproduce his series of Marilyn Monroe portraits—though Sturtevant cautions against misinterpreting that gesture: "Everyone says, 'So, Andy really understood!' Well I don't think so. I think he didn't give a fuck. Which is a very big difference, isn't it?" (Once, when Warhol was asked about the details of his silk-screening process, he said, "I don't know—ask Elaine Sturtevant.")

Other artists were far less receptive. In 1967, when Sturtevant re-created Claes Oldenburg's installation *The Store*—a faux boutique of crudely made sculptures of household items, including everything from men's shirts to blueberry pies—a few blocks from the East Village site of his original version, Oldenburg "freaked out," she recalls. "And he'd been very much in favor of my work. I said, 'You can't do that, Claes! You can't be for me, and then be against me when I do your store.'" Oldenburg's dealer, Leo Castelli, is said to have felt so perturbed by Sturtevant's pieces that he bought some of them in order to destroy them. "I believe it," she says.

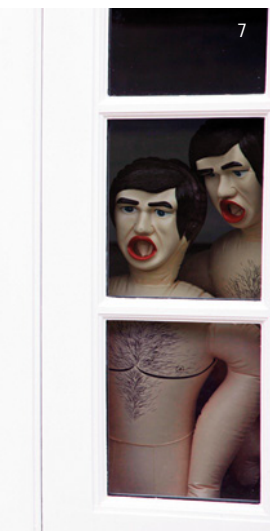
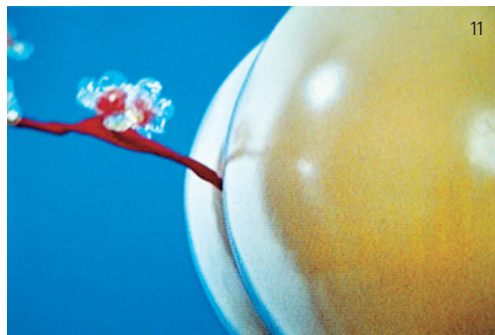
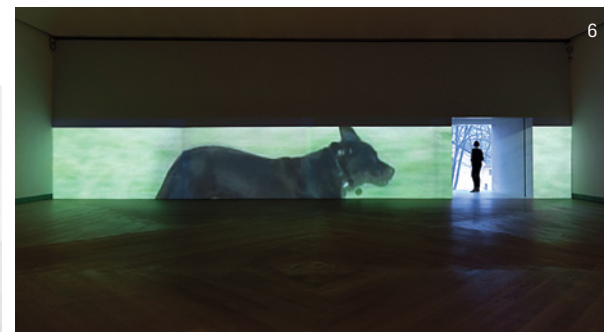
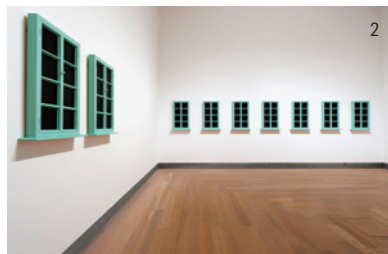
Peter Eleey, the curator of the MoMA exhibition, says Sturtevant recognized early on how thorny her chosen path would be. "In order to achieve what she was interested in, she would essentially be giving up everything you were told as an artist that you needed to succeed—a recognizable style, et cetera," he says. "She's somebody who basically adopts style as a medium, and in order to do that she assumed the guise of the artists around her. This is an incredibly powerful and threatening thing to take on."

Sturtevant, in any case, has never been what you'd call a people pleaser. Notorious for a kind of impatient, suffer-no-fools gruffness, she acknowledges that her fearsome reputation is entirely deserved. "I *am* difficult," she says. "If I don't like somebody, I tell them." On the rare occasions that she has sat for interviews, she's been known to cut things short with remarks like "Dumb question!" During Q&A sessions at museums, her acerbic or abstruse answers have sometimes left the audience silent, either too baffled or too frightened to ask her anything.

When she's in the right mood, however, as she is on this chilly afternoon in Paris, Sturtevant is very good company, dishing out hard-earned wisdom and sharp humor in equal measure. Perched on an armchair in her living room, wearing a gray cardigan and deep-white nail polish, she seems simultaneously spry and frail—perennially on the verge of leaping to her feet but unable to make it happen. An Ohio native who has lived in Paris for more than 20 years, Sturtevant speaks with a slight Midwestern twang that's often punctuated by a raucous cackle. When discussing the annoying habit that some Parisians have of speaking English to all foreigners, even those who try to speak French, she says, "If you start in French, they'll reply [in English],

Opposite: Portrait of Sturtevant, by Loren Muzzey, 2013.





**“NO MATTER HOW I ARTICULATED WHAT I WAS DOING, IN PEOPLE’S MINDS IT WAS A COPY—PERIOD.”**

“What would you like, Madame?” And I want to say, ‘Fuck you!’” Later, she apologizes for her language and blames it on watching too much HBO: “Every other word on those shows is ‘fuck,’ so it has become part of my vocabulary.”

Since the beginning, Sturtevant says, she knew that her work would eventually have an impact. If her self-assurance helped sustain her artistic drive, it also invited further criticism. “People don’t like you if you’re too confident—have you noticed that?” she says. “Boy, they really get angry. It’s like, ‘Get rid of her.’” The art world did manage to expel Sturtevant for a full decade beginning in 1974, when she stopped working entirely, fed up with seeing her work misinterpreted. “No matter how I articulated what I was doing, in people’s minds it was a copy—period,” she says. “And you know, if someone continues to call something something, it eventually becomes that something.”

Sturtevant has never said much about what she did during that 10-year hiatus, aside from an oblique remark about playing a lot of tennis, which some saw as yet another copycat move—an homage to the artist Marcel Duchamp, who stopped making art so that he could devote himself to chess. Today she says the statement can be interpreted literally: She used to take the train from New York to hit the courts at a friend’s tennis club in Washington, D.C., where her opponent was a man whose serve was too fast to return.

Many details about Sturtevant’s private life and her formation as an artist remain a mystery, even to friends. It’s known that she was born in 1924 in Lakewood, Ohio. She was married, and she has a daughter, Loren, who helps her in the studio, and two grandsons. Pressed for details about her childhood in Lakewood, she offers, “You know, tree-lined streets. Suburbia.” She recalls doing a lot of sketches as a kid—“drawing inanimate objects in order to make them animate.”

In college at the University of Iowa, when she took an introductory course in philosophy, the professor invited her to his graduate seminar. “It was Nietzsche, Hegel, Schopenhauer, all sorts of weird guys, and that was wonderful,” she recalls, running her fingers through her short pixie-meets-punk gray hair. “And, of course, after I got out of college I continued my study of Nietzsche. Today every once in a while someone will say to me, ‘Oh but you’re so

negative!’ And I say, ‘Well, I come out of Nietzsche.’”

When she emerged from her hiatus, in 1986, with a show at White Columns in New York that included her re-creations of works by Duchamp, Beuys, and Roy Lichtenstein, Sturtevant had gone deeper into the writings of Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and other philosophers who explored notions of appropriation and repetition. Meanwhile, the art world seemed more ready for her, having embraced a newer wave of appropriation artists like Richard Prince and Sherrie Levine, whose *After Walker Evans* series—photographs of Evans’s photographs—brought a postmodern, feminist slant to the discourse about originality and authenticity. Sturtevant says that her own work continued to be largely misunderstood but adds that Levine and the appropriationists were crucial in helping to clarify it, because she was able to define herself in opposition to them.

In 1991, the Austrian dealer Thaddaeus Ropac, who’d recently opened a space in Paris, took the bold step of devoting an entire show to Sturtevant’s re-creations of Warhol’s flowers. None of them sold. “France was always more open toward Sturtevant, since there was a greater understanding of her work in philosophical terms,” Ropac says. “But for years and years, we couldn’t sell the work. We did about 12 shows where nothing sold at all.” At a time when she seemed destined to forever remain an artist’s artist, appreciated by only a few insiders, Sturtevant was producing increasingly elaborate pieces, including a large-scale Anselm Kiefer airplane made of lead, for which she hired two sculptors to help. “We got to the point that it was almost finished,” she remembers. “And the last thing I did was the nose of the plane. It required taking a piece of lead and turning it while pressing. And I did it over and over, and I never could get it right. The wonderful thing is that when Kiefer saw the finished plane, he said, ‘You know, I would think that was really my plane—except for the nose.’”

Three years later, when Sturtevant had moved to Paris full-time and started making video work, European museums and collectors began slowly circling her. In 2004, Udo Kittelmann, then director of Museum für Moderne Kunst, in Frankfurt, invited her to take over the entire building for a solo show that she treated as one giant installation, based on concepts of tension and tonality. “Sturtevant’s exhibits have always been total works of art,” says Obrist, who recalls how the artist, drawing on her interest in cybernetics, prepared

for last year’s Serpentine show by “reading the space and creating feedback loops,” while coming up with “an amazing series of inventions” regarding rhythm, sequencing, and sound. Pretty much anyone who spent time in Kensington Gardens last summer still remembers Sturtevant’s lineup of blow-up sex dolls, most male and some half-inflated, staring vacantly out the gallery’s floor-to-ceiling windows.

Julia Stoschek, the prominent young video-art collector, snapped up nine of Sturtevant’s time-based pieces just before the Serpentine exhibition opened. “It was the last chance to get them,” says Stoschek, who went on to organize a solo show with Sturtevant, now on view at her private space in Düsseldorf, Germany. At the entrance is a new video piece re-creating Diesel’s 2010 “Be Stupid” ad campaign. “Just think about it—Sturtevant was in her 70s when she decided to expand into the field of moving images,” Stoschek says. “And she is still one of the most contemporary artists out there.”

Indeed, one reason Sturtevant is a major reference for much younger artists such as Trisha Donnelly is her cold-eyed take on digital culture, whose frenzied hollowness she seems to have anticipated 50 years ago. In a world where repetition seems to have replaced reality—where a tweet only truly becomes a tweet when it has been retweeted—Sturtevant is looking more and more like a prophet. Walking into her home, you half expect to find her behind a bank of LED monitors, but her only apparent concession to gadgetry is an iPhone, which she rarely uses. (“Most people are always picking up their phones to see if they have a message,” she says. “I never pick mine up, even when it rings.”) Sturtevant has an e-mail address but reads her messages only once a week, when someone retrieves them for her. To really understand the Internet, she asserts, the last place you want to be is online. “It’s such a trap. Once you start looking at the Internet, that’s all you’re doing. So I spend my time reading, thinking, things like that.”

The resulting artworks often feature belligerent, beat-heavy soundtracks and fragmented barrages of found images. Much of the source material for *Elastic Tango*, 2010, a stack of nine video screens that recalls the home-electronics department at Best Buy, was recorded straight from Sturtevant’s TV set. “She’d be sitting there, and something would come up and she would tape it,” Eley says. Gavin Brown, the New York gallerist, is one of many

who’ve lately discovered her pieces to be perfectly attuned to the anxieties of the day. “To be honest, I was just as ill-informed about Sturtevant’s work as most people are,” says Brown, who invited her to join his roster in 2011. “It has been a kind of lonely journey for her, waiting for us to open our eyes and ears. But it has happened. It’s like she has blown the dust off what we thought was reality and revealed the actual reality underneath.”

If the upcoming MoMA show represents a major validation for Sturtevant, considering the long decades she was ignored, MoMA’s institutional prestige isn’t making her any more willing to bend to a museum’s view of how her work should be presented. She is famously controlling about every aspect, down to the labeling of the works. “I don’t mess around with curators,” she tells me, smiling but not joking. When I repeat that line to Ropac, he says, “Artists can’t curate their own shows, and I’ve told Sturtevant that. But she’s very stubborn. And her work is so precise. When anything goes outside her own concept, it irritates her.” As she gets older, Ropac says, she’s become even more particular about any project she agrees to, carefully weighing every move.

For Sturtevant, it’s clearly frustrating that at the moment her work is most in demand, her body is least capable of producing it. Friends are dumbfounded by her insistence on remaining in her seventh-floor Paris walk-up, where climbing the stairs is a lengthy ordeal. She also has a studio in Paris but rarely makes it there anymore. A few days before my visit to her apartment, when severe pollution levels in the city were causing health warnings and car bans, we’d spoken by phone; Sturtevant hadn’t been outside for days. “The world is really becoming impossible, isn’t it?” she’d said.

We’ve been talking for about 90 minutes when Sturtevant says she’s too tired to explain things in the way that she’d like, which is a clear signal that the interview is over. Before leaving, I ask her why she prefers to use only her last name. She says it’s yet another issue that people have misunderstood. The choice has nothing to do with gender or politics, as some have speculated. Instead, it’s because of the sound of the word itself, and the sense of force conveyed by its three solid syllables, which she enunciates for me: “*Stur-te-vant*. It’s so strong.”

Occasionally, she notes, a friend will make an audacious request. “Someone will ask, ‘Can I call you Elaine?’ And I’ll say, ‘No! You can call me Sturtevant.’” ♦

1, 2, 4, 6, 8, 9: MODERNA MUSEET / ANSA LUNDEN; 3: COURTESY SERPENTINE GALLERY, LONDON; PHOTOGRAPH: JERRY HARDMAN-JONES; 10: © MAIRE ALLEN / DICHTORHALLEN HAMBURG; EXHIBITION STURTEVANT AT DICHTORHALLEN HAMBURG, I.A.S.—ZFL/BBZ; 11: MOMA

1. Sturtevant takes in her *Warhol Flowers*, 1990, at an exhibition of her work at the Moderna Museet, Stockholm, 2012. 2. Installation view of *Duchamp Fresh Widow*, 1992–2012, Moderna Museet, 2012. 3. *Pacman*, 2012. 4. *Johns Target With Plaster Casts*, 1999. 5. Sturtevant as Beuys as Dillinger in *Dillinger Running Series*, 2000. 6. Installation view of *Finite Infinite*, 2010. 7. Installation view of *Sex Dolls*, 2011, at Serpentine Gallery, London, 2013. 8. *Elastic Tango*, 2010, a video installation. 9. Installation view of *John Waters Dorothy Malone’s Collar*, 2012, and *Haring Untitled*, 1987, Moderna Museet, 2012. 10. *Kiefer Voyage au Bout de la Nuit*, 1992, at Deichtorhallen, Hamburg, Germany, 1992. 11. A detail of *Trilogy of Transgression*, 2004, a three-channel video.