

Nathan Hrdlicka

Art and Visual Culture 1960–1989

December 6, 2023

Sturtevant: Conceptual Pop

Pop Art was an art movement that drew on elements from popular culture and advertising and changed their meaning through replication. This art movement was most popular from the 1950s-1960s and included artists such as Jasper Johns, Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol. Each of these artists drew upon different visual elements from popular culture, recreated them, and critiqued them. The artist Sturtevant took the new tradition of Pop Art one step further than her contemporaries by recreating their artworks. By creating artworks that were replications of Pop Art, Sturtevant drew on Duchampian conceptual questions and provided a space for her viewers and the art world to question what was the meaning and significance of (contemporary) Pop Art.



Figure 1. Installation view of *Ethelred II*, 1961 and 'Kill' wallpaper (based on the Quentin Tarantino film "Kill Bill," 2003) in the exhibition "Sturtevant: Double Trouble." Photo by Thomas Griesel.

Elaine Sturtevant, who was known for not revealing her date or place of birth, rose to Pop Art stardom in the mid-1960s when she gained recognition for her reproductions of other contemporary Pop Artist's artworks.¹ It is often misconceived that Sturtevant went by her last name because she was a woman and wanted audiences to not know her gender. In reality she went by Sturtevant because "it's a strong, powerful name..."² Little is known of her work prior to her reproductions, but an example of such work is *Ethelred II*, 1961 (fig. 1). This work is a part of a series, and it features a mostly white canvas with a cut-open tube of red paint attached to a canvas and a few red smears of paint on the right side of the canvas. The red smears of paint are reminiscent of blood and may pass a feeling of unease unto her audience. This piece takes the tools of art making and slices them open, foreshadowing Sturtevant's future conceptual art pieces and dissection of artwork.³

In the 1950s Sturtevant became friendly with Jasper Johns and other contemporary artists, and during the mid-1960s Sturtevant began to produce reproductions of her contemporaries' artworks from memory. She started by creating reproductions of artists such as Johns, Robert "Bob" Rauschenberg, Marcel Duchamp, Roy Lichtenstein, etc.. Sturtevant even recreated video, photo, and performance art pieces through the use of her own body. One example of this is *Duchamp Man Ray Portrait*, 1966 in which she poses as Duchamp rather than using a male figure or Duchamp himself. Her works during this time period caused her to gain a level of fame and infamy that her contemporaries either appreciated or hated her for.

¹ *Oxford Art Online*, "Sturtevant, Elaine," Morgan Falconer, December 10, 2000, <https://www-oxfordartonline-com.ezproxy.mica.edu/groveart/display/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.001.0001/oao-9781884446054-e-7000097169#oao-9781884446054-e-7000097169>.

² Elaine Sturtevant and Anne-Julie Esparceil. *Sturtevant: The Razzle Dazzle of Thinking* (Paris: ARC/Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris, 2010), 50.

³ Ashley McNelis, "Sturtevant: The Troublemaker," *IFAContemporary*, February 20, 2015, <https://ifacontemporary.org/sturtevant-the-troublemaker/>.



Figure 2. Robert Rauschenberg, *Short Circuit*, 1965. Combine painting. Oil, fabric, and paper on wood supports and cabinet with two hinged doors containing a painting by Susan Weil and a reproduction of a Jasper Johns Flag painting by Sturtevant.⁴

In 1955, Robert Rauschenberg created the art piece *Short Circuit* (fig. 2) as a means to protest a new policy at the Stable Gallery (where it was displayed) that did not allow artists to recommend new artists to be included in future showings at the gallery. In this piece, Rauschenberg invited artists Jasper Johns, Stan VanDerBeek, Ray Johnson, and Susan Weil to create small pieces to be included in his cabinet-shaped art piece.⁵ In 1965, the Johns American flag was stolen from *Short Circuit*, and Rauschenberg commissioned Sturtevant to create a reproduction of the Johns piece to replace the original. Unlike her other art pieces, Sturtevant did

⁴ Erin Hogan, "Whose Flag is it Anyway?" *Art Institute of Chicago*, June 14, 2011, <https://www.artic.edu/articles/177/whose-flag-is-it-anyway>.

⁵ Hogan, "Whose Flag is it Anyway?"

not have the opportunity to reference the original Johns' flag she was replicating. By employing Sturtevant to create a replacement flag for *Short Circuit*, Rauschenberg and Sturtevant allow their audience to question whose art piece is more important to the original meaning of the piece and what does Sturtevant's flag represent as a replacement?

In the original showing of *Short Circuit*, the intentionality of Rauschenberg and Johns is fairly simple. The piece featured a small Jasper Johns flag, which is similar to his other flags and is an easily recognizable motif of Johns. If one were to see this art piece at the original showing, they would have easily recognized that Johns (and other artists) was included in a painting that was marketed as being made by Rauschenberg. When the Johns piece of this painting was stolen, Rauschenberg could have employed Johns to recreate his own painting, but he employed Sturtevant to recreate the painting instead. By doing this, Rauschenberg added another aspect of artist representation in this art piece. The motif of Johns' flag is still recognizable, but now there is another name attached to the piece: Sturtevant.



Figure 3. Sturtevant, *Study for Warhol's Marilyn*, 1965. Acrylic and silkscreen ink on canvas.

Following the death of Marilyn Monroe in 1962 Andy Warhol soon thereafter began to create a series of silkscreen paintings that used her image. These images, alongside Warhol's *Campbell's Soup Cans* (1962), *Brillo Boxes* (1964), and portraits of Jackie Kennedy became defining works for Warhol and Pop Art in the early 1960s.⁶ Warhol's *Marilyn* portraits drew upon, satirized, and exaggerated her death and iconoclasm as a celebrity. Warhol's *Marilyns* became synonymous with Pop Art because of the surplus of them that Warhol created. Through his usage of a silkscreen, Warhol was able to create over fifty *Marilyns* from 1962 to 1964 over a period of 25 months.⁷ By creating this many portraits, Warhol was able to show viewers how often they viewed Marilyn Monroe when she was alive and how often they viewed her image following her death.

In 1965, Sturtevant approached Warhol (who had veered from his silkscreen work towards filmmaking) and requested to use his *Marilyn* silkscreen. Warhol agreed, and directed Sturtevant to take whatever *Marilyn* silkscreen that she desired, but after searching through Warhol's silkscreens Sturtevant was unable to locate a *Marilyn*. Instead, Sturtevant took her own image of Warhol's *Marilyn* to his silkscreen creator and was able to obtain her own *Marilyn* silkscreen.⁸ Sturtevant fully embraced the motifs of Pop Art through her creation of her *Warhol Marilyn* artworks (fig. 3). By creating portraits of Marilyn Monroe in the same way as Warhol had done, Sturtevant left audiences questioning what the difference between her art and Warhol's art was, and if it mattered whose-was-whose. A common interpretation of Sturtevant's Pop artwork at the time was that it poked fun at other contemporary artists.⁹

⁶ Patricia Lee, *Sturtevant: Warhol Marilyn* (London: Afterall Books, 2016), 8.

⁷ Lee, *Sturtevant: Warhol Marilyn*, 8.

⁸ Lee, 14-15.

⁹ Sturtevant and Esparceil. *Sturtevant: The Razzle Dazzle of Thinking*, 130.

Following Sturtevant's acquisition of a Warhol silkscreen, oftentimes when Warhol was asked how he produced his silkscreen works he would say "I don't know, ask Elaine."¹⁰ This sentimentality by Warhol is reflective of the nature of Pop Art. Pop Art was often impersonal and focused on common things in one's environment

[?] and was used as a breakaway from Abstract Expressionism, which was a highly personal non figurative type of art. Though they were more reflective of Pop Art, even Sturtevant's *Warhol Marylins* were a part of her conceptual practice as an artist. Despite Warhol's comments, Sturtevant was dismissive of his understanding of her work, stating "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?"¹¹

¹⁰ Lee, 15.

¹¹ Lee, 15.



Figure 4. Sturtevant, *Duchamp Relâche*, 1967, black and white photograph, 28 x 21.5 cm. Photo by David Hayes.

Sturtevant is a key figure in conceptual art and Pop Art because she expands upon the motifs and conceptual questions of her contemporaries. In 1924, Marcel Duchamp performed in the ballet *Relâche* by Picabia in which he recreated the pose of Adam in Lucas Cranach's painting *Adam and Eve* (1528.) Duchamp originally saw the piece in 1912, and was influenced by it at the time.¹² Duchamp's recreation of Cranach's *Adam and Eve* may be a reference to the artistic tradition of copying. During the Renaissance period, many artists created artwork by referencing artwork made by other artists. Lucas Cranach's *Adam and Eve* was influenced by Albrecht Dürer's *Adam and Eve* (1504), which was influenced by the Apollo Belvedere and the Medici Venus, two ancient Roman copies of Greek Hellenistic sculptures.¹³

Duchamp is often referred to as being anti-art, but this art piece is extremely informed by artistic tradition and history. By the time Duchamp represented Adam in *Relâche*, there were at least 4 generations of copies before him, and over 2000 years since the first piece referenced in this chain of art was created. In 1967, Sturtevant became the sixth generation of artists in this chain of copying by creating *Duchamp Relâche* (fig. 4) with Rauschenberg. In this photograph Sturtevant poses as the feminine figure Bronia Clair who posed as Eve, and Rauschenberg poses as the masculine figure Marcel Duchamp who posed as Adam. Like Duchamp, Sturtevant was a Conceptual artist who was extremely in-tune with art history.

This photograph embraces the new tradition of copying in Pop Art and the historic tradition of copying through classicism. Pop Art was often intended to satirize everyday symbols and make audiences question them. Sturtevant spun the conventions of Pop Art because she did not copy directly from pop culture or commercialism, she copied from other artists. *Duchamp Relâche* is more Conceptual than Pop because unlike pop, it requires a high level of art history

¹² "Marcel Duchamp Morceaux choisis d'après Cranach et 'Relâche', 1968," Accessed December 4, 2023, <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/marcel-duchamp-morceaux-choisis-dapres-cranach-et-relache-1>.

¹³ Peter Strieder and Albrecht Dürer, *Albrecht Dürer, Paintings, Prints, Drawings* (New York: Abrams Books, 1982.)

knowledge to be completely understood. In this piece it does not matter that Rauschenberg and Sturtevant are replacing Duchamp and Clair because the piece is not about the figures, it is a commentary on the tradition of copying throughout art history and the representation of man and woman as Adam and Eve. The conceptual nature of *Duchamp Relâche* does connect back to Pop Art because as one views each piece that references another they see various similar representations of Adam and Eve that eventually devolve into Apollo and Venus and so on.



Figure 5. Sturtevant, *Picabias' Ballet Relâche*, 1967. Performance View, School of Visual Arts, New York, November 20, 1967. Photo by Peter Moore.

The conceptual nature of *Duchamp Relâche* extends past art history, and into reality with Sturtevant's performance of the ballet *Relâche* (fig. 5) in 1967. Sturtevant recreated the opening showing of Francis Picabia and Erik Satie's *Relâche* in 1924, that was infamously canceled on the date of its scheduled opening. Sturtevant's performance of *Relâche* is a performance piece

that reverses the conventions of performance and makes the audience the performers. Performers of her *Relâche* include Duchamp who attended the performance by getting out of a taxi, viewing Sturtevant's poster and leaving via the taxi, which had been waiting with its meter running.¹⁴ Even Sturtevant's showing of *Relâche* is made for an audience with an advanced knowledge of art. An average person who saw advertising for this performance and went would not understand it to the same extent as someone who knew the context of the 1924 *Relâche* and the original cancellation. Perhaps no one could have understood Sturtevant's intentions as well as Marcel Duchamp.

¹⁴ Bruce Hainley, "FIRST POSITION: THE EARLY PERFORMANCE WORK OF STURTEVANT." ARTFORUM VOL 50, NO. 7 (March 2012): <https://www.artforum.com/features/first-position-the-early-performance-work-of-sturtevant-199563/>



Figure 6. Sturtevant and unidentified person at *The Store of Claes Oldenburg*, 1967, photo by Virginia Dawn.

Sturtevant's work as a Pop Artist came to a head in 1967 when she created *The Store of Claes Oldenburg* (fig. 6) by Sturtevant, mere blocks away from the original site of *The Store*. *The Store* was opened by Claes Oldenburg in 1961 and was created as a means of both creating a

literal storefront for Oldenburg's work while creating a commentary on galleries, real stores, and art as commodity. In *The Store* Oldenburg sold works such as sculptures of pies, candy, undergarments and so on.¹⁵ On the topic of *The Store of Claes Oldenburg*, Sturtevant states "I WANTED TO DO the Oldenburg store because I felt it was an important statement at the time—important enough to be revived."¹⁶

Sturtevant's *The Store of Claes Oldenburg* was met with a level of resistance that none of her other art pieces were met with. In the weeks leading up to the opening of *The Store of Claes Oldenburg* Sturtevant was repeatedly harassed by children from a nearby elementary school, and eventually she was attacked by a large group of "about 300" of them. During the time of her attack, no one came to her aid, and a police car even pulled up and left. Following the attack by the children, Sturtevant was grabbed by two men and a woman who constrained her while the woman broke a bottle on her head.¹⁷ These attacks could be indicative of a public disapproval of Sturtevant's work and presence in Manhattan.

Nonetheless, Sturtevant's recreation of *The Store* was disapproved of by Oldenburg, an artist who previously supported her work.¹⁸ The spring before Sturtevant put up her store, Oldenburg began a campaign of upping his name-brand recognition. Sturtevant opened her show before Oldenburg had a show at Sidney Janis and closed it after the publication of *Store Days*, a book about *The Store*.¹⁹ By opening *The Store of Claes Oldenburg* during a time in which Oldenburg was reminiscing about his store, Sturtevant potentially drew attention away from Oldenburg towards herself. The creation of *The Store of Claes Oldenburg* also led audiences to

¹⁵ "Claes Oldenburg. The Store. 1961 | MOMA," Museum of Modern Art, Accessed December 4, 2023, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/61054>.

¹⁶ Bruce Hainley, "Store as Cunt," *Art journal* (New York. 1960) 70, no. 4 (2011): 87.

¹⁷ Hainley, "Store as Cunt," 88.

¹⁸ Hainley, "Store as Cunt," 85-108.

¹⁹ Hainley, "Store as Cunt," 94-95.

question why they should purchase art from big-name artists when they could purchase art from little-name artists and get something of a similar quality.²⁰

At the same time as *The Store of Claes Oldenburg* was opened, the death of Pop Art was happening. John Canaday, an art critic for the New York Times began to write things such as “If pop art killed itself...” and other critics began to follow suit.²¹ Following her execution of *The Store of Claes Oldenburg*, Sturtevant continued to work on Pop through her series of *Warhol Flowers*, *Warhol Marylins*, imitations of Liechtenstein, and *Raysse Peinture à Haute Tension*.²² In 1973, Sturtevant had a gallery showing and soon thereafter went on an artistic hiatus. Little is known about the official reasoning for Sturtevant’s hiatus, but she is known to have remarked about playing tennis during that period.²³

When Sturtevant returned to showing art in 1983, she was faced with an art world changed by Pop. She continued on making reproductions of other artist’s work, but was often mislabeled as an Appropriation artist. From the 1980s to the end of her life in 2014 Sturtevant continued onward with her conceptual practice that was influenced by Pop Artists and new contemporary artists as they arose. Sturtevant is known as being an artist’s artist and her work took time to be collected by galleries and museum spaces.²⁴

Sturtevant’s work in the 1960s can be defined through her conceptual approach to Pop Art. In a time in which many artists were critiquing pop and commercial culture Sturtevant took their artwork one step further by reproducing it. Sturtevant approached her reproductions through many ways: by being commissioned to reproduce a lost piece of art, by creating work that

²⁰ Hainley, “Store as Cunt,” 98.

²¹ Hainley, “Store as Cunt,” 100.

²² “Elaine Sturtevant | 172 Artworks | MutualArt,” MutualArt, Accessed December 4, 2023, <https://www.mutualart.com/Artist/Elaine-Sturtevant/7BFF80B8A78754EF/Artworks?CreationYear=1960-1970>.

²³ Christopher Bagley, “Sturtevant: Repeat Offender,” *WMagazine*, May 8, 2014, <https://www.wmagazine.com/story/sturtevant-moma-retrospective>.

²⁴ Bagley, “Sturtevant: Repeat Offender.”

explored art history and Duchampian ideas, and by creating straight up Pop Art using Warhol's silkscreens. Through her artwork Sturtevant led audiences to question the significance of Pop Art and whether or not the names attached to the art pieces really mattered.

"The work cannot be treated in a material or non-intellectual way

I am not Anti-Art

I am not saying anyone can do it

I am not "poking fun at the artist"

I am not "reporting the current scene"

I am not in the process of celebrating process

I am not making copies

I am not making imitations

I am not interested in painting sculptures or objects

I am not interested in being a "Great Artist"

That's real medieval thinking."

-Sturtevant, 1969.²⁵

²⁵ Bruce Hainley, Under the Sign of (sic) : Sturtevant's Volte-Face, (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2013,) 218-219.

Bibliography

- Artsy. "Marcel Duchamp Morceaux choisis d'après Cranach et 'Relâche', 1968" Accessed December 4, 2023,
<https://www.artsy.net/artwork/marcel-duchamp-morceaux-choisis-dapres-cranach-et-relache-1>.
- Bagley, Christopher. "Sturtevant: Repeat Offender" *W Magazine*, May 8, 2014,
<https://www.wmagazine.com/story/sturtevant-moma-retrospective>.
- Falconer, Morgan. "Sturtevant, Elaine." In *Oxford Art Online*. December 10, 2000; Accessed 4 Dec. 2023,
<https://www-oxfordartonline-com.ezproxy.mica.edu/groveart/view/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.001.0001/oao-9781884446054-e-7000097169>.
- Hainley, Bruce. "FIRST POSITION: THE EARLY PERFORMANCE WORK OF STURTEVANT." *ARTFORUM* VOL 50, NO. 7 (March 2012,) <https://www.artforum.com/features/first-position-the-early-performance-work-of-sturtevant-199563/>.
- Hainley, Bruce. "Store as Cunt." *Art journal (New York. 1960)* 70, no. 4 (2011): 84–109.
- Hainley, Bruce. *Under the Sign of (sic) : Sturtevant's Volte-Face*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2013.
- Hogan, Erin. "Whose Flag is it Anyway?" *Art Institute of Chicago*, June 14, 2011,
<https://www.artic.edu/articles/177/whose-flag-is-it-anyway>.
- Lee, Patricia. *Sturtevant : Warhol Marilyn*. London: Afterall Books, 2016.
- McNelis, Ashley. "Sturtevant: The Troublemaker" *IFAContemporary*, February 20, 2015,
<https://ifacontemporary.org/sturtevant-the-troublemaker/>.

Museum of Modern Art. "Claes Oldenburg. The Store. 1961 | MOMA" Accessed December 4, 2023, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/61054>.

MutualArt. "Elaine Sturtevant | 172 Artworks | MutualArt" Accessed December 4, 2023, <https://www.mutualart.com/Artist/Elaine-Sturtevant/7BFF80B8A78754EF/Artworks?CreationYear=1960-1970>.

Phelan, Richard. "The Counter Feats of Elaine Sturtevant (1924-2014)." *E-rea : Revue d'études anglophones* 13, no. 13.1 (2015).

Sturtevant, Elaine, and Anne-Julie Esparceil. *Sturtevant : The Razzle Dazzle of Thinking*. Paris: ARC/Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris, 2010.

Sturtevant, Elaine, Beatrix Ruf, and Fredrik Liew. *Bild over bild : image over image*. Zurich: JRP/Ringier, 2012.

Sturtevant, Elaine, Udo Kittelmann, Mario Kramer, and Lena Maculan. *Sturtevant*. Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2004.

Sturtevant, Elaine. *Sturtevant : Push and Shove*. Milan: Charta, 2005.

Strieder, Peter, and Albrecht Dürer. *Albrecht Dürer, Paintings, Prints, Drawings*. English translation, 1st ed. New York: Abaris Books, 1982.

Tate. "Pop Art" Accessed December 4, 2023, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/p/pop-art>.

Tate. "Appropriation" Accessed December 4, 2023, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/a/appropriation#:~:text=Appropriation%20in%20art%20and%20art,little%20transformation%20of%20the%20original>.