

STURTEVANT

**DRAWING DOUBLE
REVERSAL**

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Press conference	13 February 2015, 10 am
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Curator	Dr. Mario Kramer, MMK Museum für Moderne Kunst Frankfurt
Works	100
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Sturtevant. Drawing Double Reversal

14 February – 10 May 2015

The Albertina presents a comprehensive exhibition on the drawn output of American artist Elaine Sturtevant (1924–2014).

From the early 1960s onward, Sturtevant produced deliberate repetitions of artworks by figures such as Roy Lichtenstein, Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol, Frank Stella, and Joseph Beuys, doing so shortly following the originals' creation. Whether they were paintings, drawings, prints or sculptures, the artist created her own duplicates - which occasionally featured modifications in terms of format, motif details, technique, and/or presentation.

The artist's graphic works play a key role in her uncompromising and conceptual oeuvre: her reproductions of graphics by representatives of pop art are done with technical precision and at the highest level of artistic quality, with her mastery of Johns' crosshatching being equal to her proficiency in emulating the regularity of Lichtenstein's technique. It is particularly her *Composite Drawings* of 1965/66 that indicate Sturtevant's status in art history as a protagonist of *mega Pop* or *Pop surplus*. In these works, she employed a collage technique to combine motifs by various artists, bringing together Warhol's *Flowers* with Lichtenstein's *Pointed Finger* or Wesselmann's *Great American Nude* with Lichtenstein's *Hot Dog*. Her pictorial compositions give rise to new contexts and also evoke sexual associations - which Sturtevant, however, played down with the comment: „I have nothing to do with feminism“. In an analogous manner, the artist placed great importance on being mentioned without her first name, a deliberate strategy meant to afford her a gender-neutral presence within the male-dominated art scene.

In her aesthetic gesture of repetition, she took after the example of Marcel Duchamp, whose work was receiving much attention in New York at the time - though she simultaneously developed 'anti-readymades' in the form of original 'Sturtevants'. The artist proceeded to carry forward the fundamental ideas of 1960s pop art and concept art, in the process taking questions on notions of creativity, originality, and art-as-intellectual-property to a new and radical level.

As early as two decades before the movement within concept art that practiced artistic repetition, paraphrasing, and reuse came to be known as *Appropriation Art*, Sturtevant was already questioning the originality of the artwork as such. And she also did so long before Cindy Sherman, Richard Prince, Robert Longo and David Salle made their own efforts to explore just what true authorship of an artwork might be in an era of found material's reuse.

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With over 100 drawings by the artist, this presentation - developed in cooperation with MMK Museum für Moderne Kunst in Frankfurt and Nationalgalerie Berlin - is the first museum exhibition to feature Sturtevant's radical conception of her 'art of repetition'.

The accompanying catalogue was prepared in close collaboration with the recently deceased artist, and as a *catalogue raisonné* FIRST DRAFT, it presents a largely complete cataloguing of her drawings.

In conjunction with the exhibition *Sturtevant*, the Albertina will also be opening its new, 450-square-meter *Galleries for Prints and Drawings*. From this point onward, the museum will be devoting these exhibition spaces exclusively to the presentation of drawings and printed graphics.

Curator: Mario Kramer, MMK Museum für Moderne Kunst

Biography

Elaine Sturtevant (1924–2014)

Sturtevant was born in Lakewood, Ohio, USA, in 1924. She earned a degree in psychology from the University of Iowa and also studied at the Art Students League, New York.

Sturtevant spent the first years of her life as an artist working in New York, where she began in 1964 to manually reproduce paintings and objects created by her contemporaries, with results that can immediately be identified with an original. Sturtevant thus turned the concept of originality on its head. All of her works are repetitions of the works of other artists. But all are original and authentic works by Sturtevant, which she self-confidently signed without her first name in order to place herself on an equal footing with her male colleagues. She initially focused on works by such American artists as Roy Lichtenstein, Claes Oldenburg, Jasper Johns and Andy Warhol. Sturtevant repeated Warhol's silkscreens so often that Warhol himself, when bombarded with questions about his working practice, once said: „I don't know. Ask Elaine”.

As early as in the late 1960s, Sturtevant concentrated on replicating works by Marcel Duchamp and Joseph Beuys, who was nearly unknown in those days, thus exhibiting her profound knowledge of and interest in most advanced contemporary art.

In the early 1970s, Sturtevant deliberately stopped exhibiting art for more than ten years. From the early 1980s she focused on the next generation of artists, including Robert Gober, Anselm Kiefer, Paul McCarthy and Felix Gonzalez-Torres. She mastered painting, sculpture, photography and film in order to produce a full range of copies of the works of the artists chosen by her. In most cases, her decision to start replicating an artist happened before he or she achieved broader recognition. Nearly all of the artists she used as models are today considered iconic for their time or style.

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Original or Copy

Especially today, at a time in which we are increasingly faced with the world as a remake and preprocessed by the media, Sturtevant's oeuvre appears to be more up-to-date than ever and of pre-eminent importance. One might wonder where reality ends and fiction starts and what distinguishes an original from a copy in our universe of life. All of us talk about sampling, remix or cover – about versions or remakes in the disciplines of film or music – matter-of-factly. Sturtevant posed these questions to the visual arts, the last ideological haven holding the hope that there was something like intuitive and presuppositionless creativity, an unmistakable uniqueness, authenticity, and individuality.

Drawings as Collages

Sturtevant's output as a graphic artist plays a key role in her uncompromising oeuvre: her reproductions of drawings and prints by the artists of Pop are executed with great manual precision and are of superior artistic quality. She equally mastered Johns' hatching and Lichtenstein's technique of neutral regularity. Especially her *Composite Drawings*, made in 1965/66, attest to her status in art history of *Mega-Pop* or *Pop Surplus*. In an approach resembling collage, she combined motifs deriving from various artists, bringing together Warhol's *Flowers* and Lichtenstein's *Pointed Finger* or Wesselmann's *Great American Nude* and Lichtenstein's *Hot Dog*. Her pictorial compositions produce new contexts and invite sexual associations that – if not in terms of form, at least thematically – recall attitudes adopted by the feminist avant-garde. Yet Sturtevant declared: „I have nothing to do with feminism“. At the same time it was important to her to be referred to without her first name, as she deliberately wished to appear neutral in the male-dominated art world.

Finding instead of Inventing

In 1966, Sturtevant began to commute regularly between New York and Paris. In 1967 she took an interest in Marcel Duchamp, as did many artists of her generation. His readymades were the intellectual basis for a work that was deliberately based on things found instead of things invented. Sturtevant's preoccupation with Duchamp also plays a significant role in her drawings. Her series *Duchamp Rotary Discs* illustrates the principle of movement and countermovement in the form of a loop.

Sturtevant's concept expanded Marcel Duchamp's reproductive method by resorting to extant works of arts as models. At the same time, however, her works are also 'anti-readymades', as the artist produced original 'Sturtevants'. Sturtevant juxtaposed the art productions of her contemporaries with duplicated originals. Once, when talking about the conceptual foundation of her work, she referred to „the force of non-identity“.

The Double as an Artistic Strategy

Sturtevant's early interest in the work of the German artist Joseph Beuys, which began in 1969, is surprising. It can be assumed that his oeuvre was hardly known in the United States at the time. Even in the German-speaking area, Beuys only came to be recognized by a broader art-minded public after his first museum exhibition in Mönchengladbach in 1967 and the traveling exhibition of the Karl Ströher Collection in 1969/70. Sturtevant's duplication of Beuys' famous *Fat Chair*, her filmic restaging of his actions at her studio in New York, for which she donned his distinctive outfit, and, above all, her drawings are stunning examples in this regard.

At this early point in time, Sturtevant seems to have known Beuys' works only from the few publications existing then, produced by the Kunstmuseum Basel (1969/70) and the Moderna Museet in Stockholm (1971). They contain illustrations of all of the works by Beuys she referred to in her art. The degree of her appropriation of his seismographic drawing style and her free approach to it are therefore all the more remarkable.

The Kat Who Walks By Herself

From 1965 onward, the figure of *Krazy Kat* – conceived by the Swedish artist Öyvind Fahlström, who in his works of the early 1960s frequently quoted the comic strip of the same name by George Herriman – runs through Sturtevant's drawn oeuvre like a red thread. Sturtevant developed a particular predilection for the absurd adventures of this comic figure and for the subversive cat-and-mouse game entirely devoid of morals. One might deduce Sturtevant's motto for her life from this figure, which resembles an alter ego: „The Kat Who Walks By Herself“.

From her beginnings in 1964 to her death in 2014 Sturtevant consistently pursued her own way. Looking at her oeuvre in its entirety while focusing on her drawings in particular reveals how intensively she concentrated on issues shattering the foundations of art and how stubbornly she insisted on sticking to her choice of motifs: an extremely radical gesture by which she vehemently defied the overabundance of images and their multiplication. There is no doubt that Sturtevant's art numbers among the most outstanding contributions to contemporary art. Although she is rarely mentioned in art history's discourse on Pop and Conceptual Art, her work must be considered essential for developing an understanding of both movements.

In the final decade of her life, Sturtevant succeeded once more in creating a completely independent oeuvre in the spirit of appropriation – through the secondary exploitation of what preexists – with her video works. From 2000 on, this also came to be reflected in her drawings in the form of corresponding notations in the manner of storyboards. In the *Dillinger Running Series*, for example, she slipped into the role of the infamous American gangster John Dillinger; in *Dark Threat of Absence Fragmented & Sliced* she quotes Paul McCarthy and advertising images of the US-American television industry.

Double Reversal

Confronted not only with growing incomprehension and harsh criticism but also with distrust and misunderstanding, Sturtevant ceased artistic production in 1974. Only after a decade did she manage an extraordinary comeback, uncompromisingly revisiting her early themes. It seems that the cultural climate of Postmodernism was only now ready to reassess and appreciate her work. From the mid-1980s on she produced extensive groups of drawings that took her back to her beginnings as an artist: the so-called *Reversal Series*.

Roy Lichtenstein and Jasper Johns

As if caught in an infinite loop, Sturtevant devoted herself to Roy Lichtenstein and Jasper Johns in her *Reversal Series*, begun in 1988 and 1990 respectively. This impulse may have been triggered by exhibitions of drawings by Roy Lichtenstein at the MoMa in 1987 and by Jasper Johns at the National Gallery of Art in Washington in 1990. Especially such drawings as *Lichtenstein Study for Two Paintings, Folded Sheets* (1988) directly hark back to her own early *Composite Drawings*. For in the original model, Lichtenstein himself had combined two works by different artists: a Jasper Johns motif and his own *Sketches of Brushstrokes*.

The Beauty of Repetition

This exhibition also comprises Sturtevant's early artist's books and the drawings, sketches, and collages she made when she designed her artist's book *The Brutal Truth*. Her artist's book *STURTEVANT, Author of the QUIXOTE*, which only appeared in 2009, constitutes a conceptual climax. The original manuscript was conceived in Paris in September 1970. In what resembles a dialogue with the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges, Sturtevant expanded his famous story *Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote* (1939), which is about a fictitious author who has decided to rewrite Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quijote*. In his original text, Cervantes also has the story told by an imaginary narrator, Cide Hamete Benengli. In an extensive thought experiment that is exemplary of her oeuvre as a whole, Sturtevant plays with notions of authorship and original, the role of the genuine creator and the authenticity of a work. She reflects upon the relationship between original and originality and puts both of these concepts up for negotiation. Aura, authenticity, an obsession to innovate, individuality, uniqueness and the identification of genuineness can all be associated with the idea of the original. For Sturtevant, 'the beauty of repetition' became an artistic strategy. Sturtevant's works function like mirrors without reversing the image. They represent perceptibility as such and are thus the epitome of art.