

Sturtevant's Provincialism: "Sturtevant: Double Trouble" at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (until February 22, 2015)

by Pac Pobric | December 18th, 2014 | Los Angeles Review of Books



Installation view of Sturtevant: Double Trouble, The Museum of Modern Art, November 9, 2014–February 22, 2015. © 2014 The Museum of Modern Art. Photo: Thomas Griesel. All works by Sturtevant © Estate Sturtevant, Paris

It seems like a trifling provocation, if it can be considered a provocation at all, to call "Double Trouble," Elaine Sturtevant's retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA) an unoriginal show. For nearly 50 years before her death last May, the artist created imitations and copies of work by her contemporaries in an attempt to drown what life remained in modernism. Modern art's insatiable appetite for innovation was, for Sturtevant, not worth the effort; it had to be starved. "Originality is too limiting," she wrote in 1972. "To be a Great Artist is the least interesting thing I can think of." In place of something new, she offered, relentlessly, something old. Marcel Duchamp, Andy Warhol, Frank Stella, Robert Gober, Félix González-Torres; the list runs on. Here is Sturtevant doubling Jasper Johns ("Johns Flag above White Ground," 1967-68); there she is miming Joseph Beuys ("Beuys Fettstuhl," 1993). Seemingly any artist's work, recreated or imitated in close likeness, could be put at the service of Sturtevant's copycat project and its shabby, singular postmodern refrain: that there was nothing new left to say, or perhaps that originality had always been a lark.

Grand ideas, great art, were done with. Hoping to become a great artist, Sturtevant once wrote, was "real medieval thinking." So in place of expansive concepts, she offered one small regional observation, like a surveyor with a map. In every instance, in each imitation, her provocation rides a single polemic, a critique of

originality that does not breathe. This is her postmodern provincialism: that her idea does not expand, that it is a town with a population of one. Her art does obvious, monotonous work. It draws repeatedly from the same wellspring without recognizing that the result is an intellectual drought. "Specifics are totally [sic] crippling and of no concern to me," she wrote in a letter to the dealer Virginia Dwan. What mattered was what Sturtevant called "the total structure" of art, the postmodern condition that made invention impossible. Culture was trapped in a single region and the only thing left to do was illustrate the point through ruthless repetition. Whether she reiterates Warhol ("Warhol Diptych," 1973/2004) or Duchamp ("Duchamp Fresh Widow," 1992/2012), the point is the same: that the province of culture is closed to expansion.



Sturtevant. Warhol Diptych. 1973/2004. Synthetic polymer screenprint and acrylic on canvas. 6' 11 7/8" × 10' 6 3/4" (213 × 322 cm). Pinault Collection. Photo: Axel Schneider, Frankfurt am Main. © Estate Sturtevant, Paris

An entire career devoted to a thin idea wears poorly, but it is true that, in the local world of postmodern ideas, Sturtevant's provocations came early. She began her copies in 1964, a generation before appropriation artists like Sherrie Levine and Richard Prince cemented their own threadbare polemics. Her earliest art predated the philosopher Jean-François Lyotard's announcement about the collapse of grand narratives in 1968 and Gilles Deleuze's book *Difference and Repetition* from the same year. Her late-career paranoia about technology (she called her 2008 performance piece "Spinoza in Las Vegas" a "critique of Spinoza and of the cybernetic world") forecasted the concerns of many contemporary net artists. In

these regards, she may have been influential. It is an indication of how narrow her art is, however, that it opens up to nothing more. Sturtevant may have anticipated or even marked the culture that followed her, but her descendants have developed little over time. Her work, like that of all minor artists, has inspired no complex growth. At bottom, her mantra can be summed up neatly, without the need for elaboration, either by her or by anyone else. Repetition, anyway, is easier than enlargement. If she arrived early, she did so with a stifled contribution, which is not itself worthy of admiration.

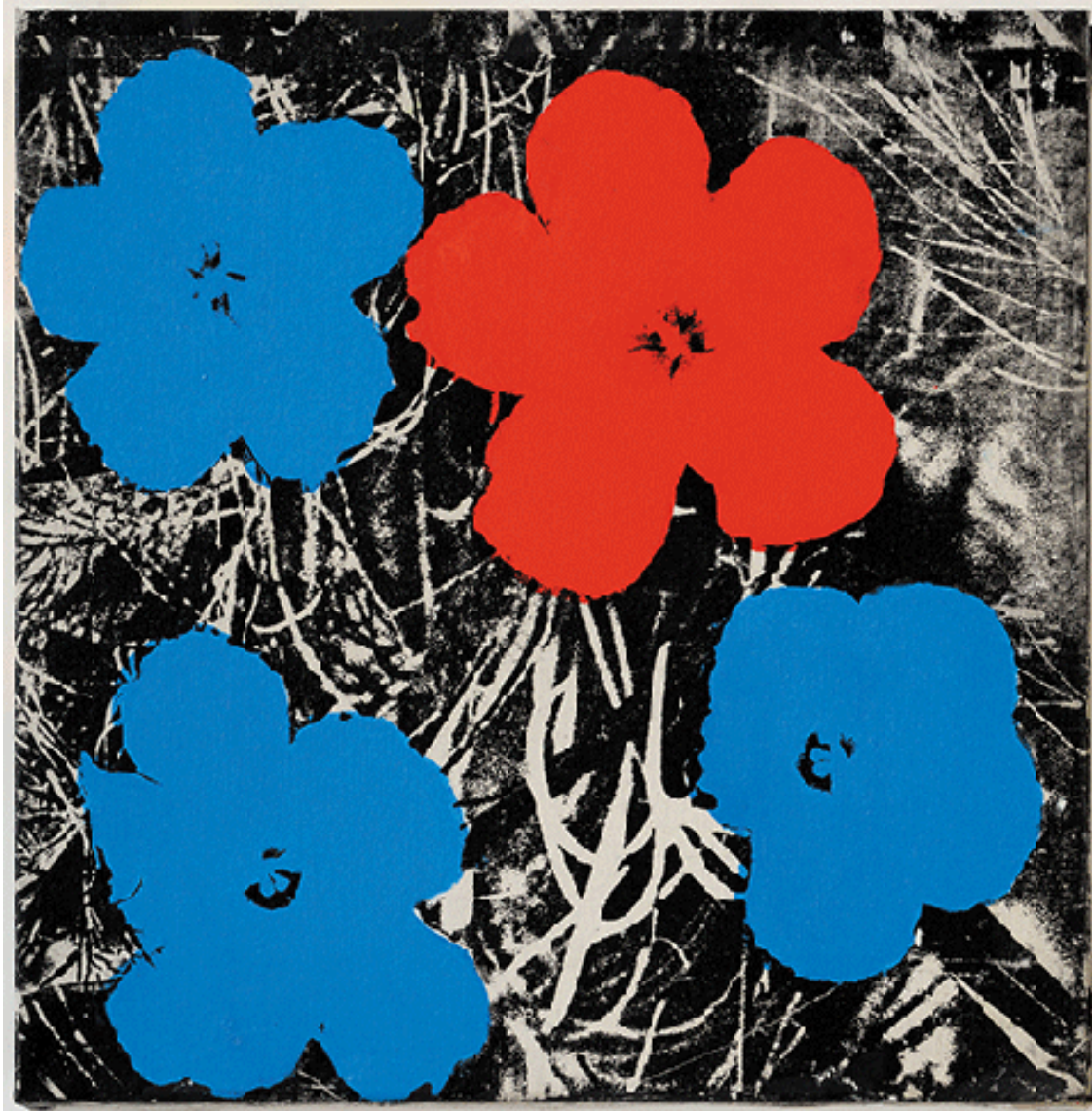


Installation view of Sturtevant: Double Trouble, The Museum of Modern Art, November 9, 2014–February 22, 2015. © 2014 The Museum of Modern Art. Photo: Thomas Griesel. All works by Sturtevant © Estate Sturtevant, Paris

Countless minor artists have their supporters, and Sturtevant is no exception, as a retrospective at the MoMA proves. Her devotees take everything that is otherwise obvious about her work (its relentless reiterations; its intellectual shabbiness; its inability to expand beyond its local concern), turn it upside down, and call it upright. Counter-intuition is prized above all. In the face of art that never moves beyond its provincial intellectual borders, her supporters see frenzied activity. The critic Bruce Hainley, perhaps her chief advocate, [claimed in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*](#) that her “body’s and her mind’s movements, various catalytic transpositions — all of these clarify the importance of action to Sturtevant’s endeavor.” Elsewhere, he

argued that “her various catalytic conversions prove that art can be (at its best?) an impetus for action — aesthetic, cerebral, insurrectionary.” Peter Eleey, the retrospective’s curator, makes similar claims in the exhibition catalogue: “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.” For Eleey, she occupies a sacred position in the history of art, arriving both before and after her time. She was, he writes, “the first postmodern artist and, in retrospect, she was also the last.” Godlike, her art brings life to an idea, but also takes it away.

Here, despite Sturtevant’s provincialism and her inability to grow an idea beyond its bare beginnings, is her obscured grand gesture, itself a copy of one of postmodernism’s own unadmitted grand narratives: that there will never again be innovation. Sturtevant is not simply saying that she cannot invent; she is also saying that nothing new remains to be invented by anyone. The hope for great art died with modernism, and her art offers a final requiem for both. What remains in the wake is an endless reiteration of old ideas, each copy a fainter Xerox of the last. The gesture has sweeping implications. It claims, in a declaration of biblical magnitude, that repetition is the necessary condition of contemporary art. It is all we have left. When Eleey calls her the first and last postmodernist, one is reminded of another claim in the Book of Revelation: “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.” After Sturtevant, there can be nothing more. Why else would she feel the need to copy Warhol’s flowers in 1965 (“Warhol Flowers”) and then, more than 30 years later, to re-create his cow-print wallpaper (“Warhol Cow Paper,” 1996)? “What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again,” the Preacher declares in Ecclesiastes. “There is nothing new under the sun.”



Sturtevant. Warhol Flowers. 1964–65. Synthetic polymer screenprint on canvas. 22 1/16 × 22 1/16" (56 × 56 cm). Estate Sturtevant, Paris. Courtesy Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris–Salzburg. © Estate Sturtevant, Paris

Postmodern: the word, it's worth repeating, means "after modern," and Sturtevant's shrouded millenarianism betrays how much she relies on the sensibility of her intellectual predecessors. She wants, as all modernists wanted, to shake us to our cores. She wants to convince us that her work is important, that it has more than just a local relevance. And her art, like all postmodern art, has, in that sense, a perverted optimism, a half-breed utopian aspiration that is born of modern art's grand narrative. Sturtevant's work wants to have a profound impact on culture, to change the way we see the world. But great art only does so because it fosters expansion. It encourages growth and change. Sturtevant, on the other hand, boxes us into a provincial locale. She offers only a singular, repetitive claim. "The head doesn't go dead after you understand it," Sturtevant once said of her art. "On the

contrary, there are many places to go.” Yet exactly the opposite is true. Hers is an art of minimal discussion and maximum rhetoric. It enforces a singular law in a minor jurisdiction through repeated commands. It makes no attempt at the craft of subtlety. If she is the Alpha and the Omega, it is because, beyond the initial illustration, there is nothing more to say. She may have been the originator of a now well-understood polemic, but that makes her the god of a very small province, one with narrow possibilities. “Nobody wants a retrospective,” Sturtevant said in 2007. “Once you’ve had a retrospective, you’re done.” But Sturtevant was done long before her MoMA show.

“Sturtevant: Double Trouble” travels to the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, on March 21, 2015.

<https://lareviewofbooks.org/essay/sturtevants-provincialism-sturtevant-double-trouble-museum-modern-art-new-york-february-22-2015>