

'80s THEN

STURTEVANT talks to BRUCE HAINLEY



BRUCE HAINLEY: Before we launch into the '80s, a little back story. When you mounted your landmark exhibition at White Columns, in New York, in 1986, on the heels of your being in Bob Nickas's 1985 show "Production Re: Production," it had been over a decade since your last shows—"Studies for Warhols' Marilyns Beuys' Actions and Objects Duchamps' Etc. Including Film," at the Everson Museum of Art, in 1973, and your Joseph Beuys show the following year. Were you making art during that period?

STURTEVANT: Totally, totally out of the art world from 1974 until 1985 or so. I was writing, thinking, playing tennis, and carrying on. My art, with its burden of being devised by conceptual thinking, was not banging against my head but in silent red alert.

BH: Well, something sounded with the White Columns show! It's hard for me to wrap my head around how thrilling it must have been, after so long an absence, to encounter your Warhol Gold Marilyn [1973] and Warhol Marilyn Diptych [1972], your Lichtenstein But It's Hopeless [1969] and Duchamp Fontaine [1973], and one of your huge Beuys copper-fat-and-felt pieces. How did you decide what to put into that show? How exactly did it come about?

S: That great White Columns show. It happened with the devotion and commitment of Eugene Schwartz, as curator, and the churning openness of Bill Arning, the director. Together we produced a show of high intensity and polemics that jolted and bounced in all

directions. Fortunately the appropriationists were hanging out at the time, which gave me a whole new space for potent dialogue. This was very crucial, as it allowed entry into the work by negative definition—a valid, powerful position. Then again, the appropriationists made me a precursor, although refusing to be jammed into that category immediately put me back in hot water. The dynamic difference was that Sherrie Levine, leading the pack, brilliantly used the copy as a political strategy, whereas the force of my work lies in the premise that thought is power. 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.

BH: The notorious impresario and curator Christian Leigh was another big supporter of your work. Could you say a little about him?

S: Dear, dear Christian, with his keen and intense face—so clever, so fast, so funny, so bad. He played out fantasies in the murky art world that would have played out better on the dramatic stage. He was a supertalented guy, with critical panache, who made twisted turns that sucked him up—and that was that. As for where he is now: Maybe he's a master samurai in Tokyo.

BH: You participated in one of his most extravagant exhibitions, "The Silent Baroque," at Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Salzburg, in 1989. How do you think that show, coming at the end of the 1980s, summed up the decade, the good and the bad?

S: The silence in "The Silent Baroque" was not very silent, but the baroque was very baroque. It was an event, a performance, a

challenge to spectators—elaborate and much elaborated, all exceeding the frame. It anticipated the turn of the object to description, of concept to narrative, and of subject to content, which has the perverse, simultaneous double trouble of being ahead and being behind.

BH: One of my favorite pieces of yours from the '80s is your plan to repeat Michael Heizer's *Double Negative* [1969–70]. Could you comment on that idea—why Heizer, and why that work? It seems so amazing, so weirdly fitting, that although you got to the point of surveying land out west, the project was never realized.

To double *Double Negative*, both negating and non-realizing it, seems one of your most radical gestures.

S: Ah, yes, *Double Negative*. But I did that piece in the '70s, not the '80s. I was probing a repetition that conceals a terrifying paradox: To fold Heizer's piece back on itself, or to fold it forward, is to negate its being, or to bring its being to a higher power. But then financial impediments created a work of art that was more radical than radical—the intent of radical movement.

BH: For some, especially those too young to have lived through the '80s, there's such a glow to the decade—its Day-Glo and neon hues, its slickness and gloss and easy gain. But whatever its glamour, there was something truly amok there, though probably no more amok than now.

S: Well, the big blast of the '80s was the beginning of a not interesting place. Discourse was rhetoric; everyone

was fraught with the feeling of money and the loss of parameters. Meaninglessness was posited as the meaning. New was no longer new. The times contained this loud rumble of fraudulent mentality: galleries cheating artists, artists giving paintings to critics and curators in exchange for reviews and shows, and other such dubious actions. But there was dancing at the Mudd Club, hearing raucous, often bad bands at CBGB's, snorting in the toilet, shouting over music and dinner—the chic of wine, Pac-Man, money, stars, and hype. It was a kind of buzz that was exciting but not good—heralding the '90s

'80s AGAIN RACHEL HARRISON

A lot of women artists of that period have a tremendous sense of humor. Sherry Levine rephotographing a Walker Evans makes me crack up, and so do the pictures by Cindy Sherman. There's a gutsy playfulness to that work, the playfulness of popular culture.

Warhol is the '80s artist who wasn't an '80s artist. He was a '60s or '70s artist who did not become hugely popular until the early '80s. Everybody was and is influenced by him; you can't not be. David Letterman is influenced by Warhol. Even people in the mainstream are influenced by Warhol. ■

—AS TOLD TO TIM GRIFFIN

Opposite page: Sturtevant with *Stella Bethlehem's Hospital*, 1988. Photo: Peter Muscato. This page, right: Sturtevant, *Study for Stella Getty Tomb*, 1988, enamel on canvas, 28 x 32". Bottom: Sturtevant with Eugene Schwartz at White Columns, New York, 1986.

task of permitting cybernetics a full swipe at art.

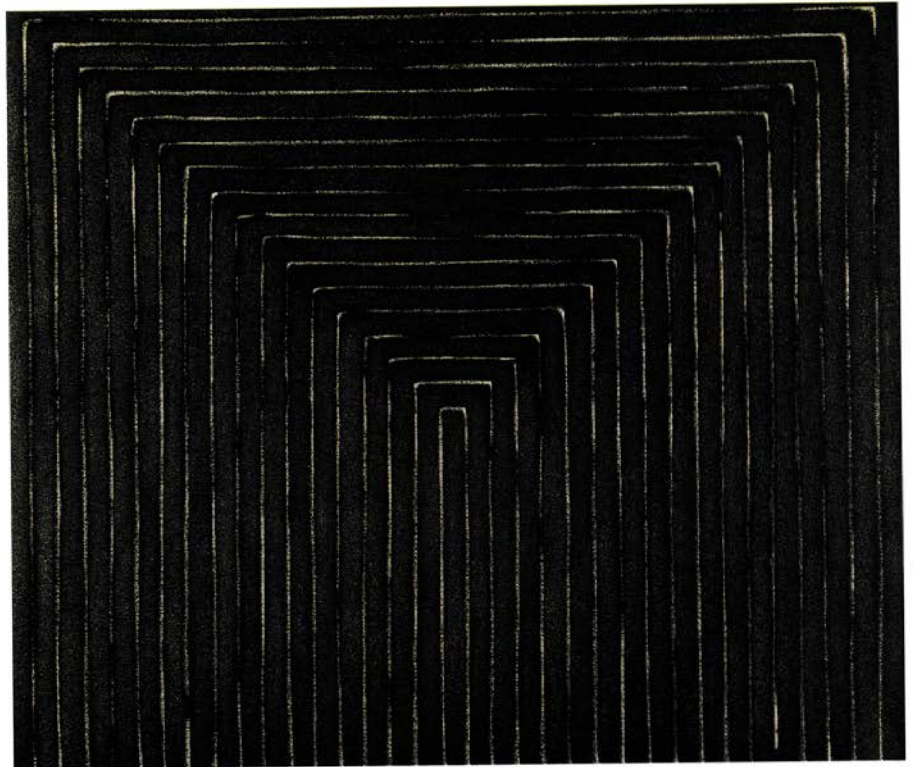
BH: There among the folderol of it all was Warhol. I know you've about had it with *Andy Andy Andy*—have you seen the postage stamp?—but Warhol's one of the few figures who makes a great Nietzschean return in your work in almost every decade. You had encounters with him both before and after he was shot. Could you talk about Warhol in the '80s, as a person and as an artist?

S: As you say, *Andy Andy Andy*. Not everything has been said about him, but everything has been said. Whatever. However. I actually saw more of Andy in the high-tension time of the Factory. Later I had some great encounters of a close kind with this vulnerable and distant-but-there man who desired so much. We met at dinners, openings, parties, clubs. And that was better—once you know Andy, there is not much more to know but a lot more to see.

Once, at his "piss paintings" opening [1986], Andy, his entourage, and a bevy of admirers were standing around outside the gallery. As I approached, Andy, with his nervous slow-draw smile, asked if I was going to do

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his "piss paintings" and made some remark about how easy they were to do. **S:** "Gosh, Andy, definitely would, but I don't have the right equipment." **AW:** "Well Bianca did some. She was really great." **S:** "Wow, Andy, I didn't know Bianca had a dick." Everyone



burst out laughing, but Warhol blushed bright red.

But who is the here-and-now Warhol? All his greatness is being grabbed and tossed away by his being shoved into the rhetoric of copy. He was not making copies, and definitely not repetitions, but rather he was repeating—a crucial difference. Although to repeat is the "same," the work of Warhol holds the contradiction that the powerful dynamics lie not in the interior but in a galvanized surface, and it is this surface that pushes the work. And there lies his radical brilliance.

BH: You had a stunning show of black Stellas in Chicago [Rhona Hoffman Gallery] in 1990. For a moment I'd like to figure that show as closing the doors on the '80s. It also happens to have been one of your last solo shows in the States. Any comment? Would you ever show those works together again? I've always wanted to place them—perversely?—with your *Warhol Silver Clouds* [1987]: a powerful opposition.

S: The black Stellas: Not all of them worked, but some of them did, and maybe now all of them do. Always at stake is pushing the silent power of art to create a

hovering force and energy that leave the spectator rocking and reeling.

BH: The '60s. The '80s. The first decade of the twenty-first century. You started showing when Clement Greenberg still held so much sway; the '80s would seem to have been his nadir, the years when his reputation bottomed out. And now he's back—with the constant discussions of "beauty," he's never been more in the air. Did you ever have time for Clem, ever have any personal encounters with him? I ask this in part because some might think of your work as uninterested in formal concerns, as anti-Greenbergian, yet I think one of its real, uh, beauties is the rigor of its form of thinking. Which is to say that I would play the devil's advocate and say you are a powerful formalist and that your formal investigation is thought as power.

S: Thought as power: the infinite and the finite. **Re:** beauty—how can you talk about Kant and Hegel, even via Greenberg, when there is no structure to hang it on? No way. And talking about beauty—for those of you who are into cosmetics, remember that thinking ruins the face. □

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