

Sturtevant.

F

rom Space in the Head.

"You're an exciting broad, but I don't have to tell you that; you know it."

So Reese Palley summed up his feelings about the opportunity to work with Sturtevant.

His beaming statement, part of a correspondence in which Palley demonstrates to what lengths he's willing to go to assist the artist in pulling off

her Heizer *Double Negative*, has about it a lot to admire: the gangster swagger in his use of the word broad; his thankful, chest-swelling pride at the chance of working with Sturtevant on her

audacious plan to double *Double Negative*, not merely within spitting distance of, but on the very same topography as, Heizer's own, at Mormon Mesa, near Overton, Nevada; and his confidence in her self-knowledge, regardless of what he couldn't possibly ever know she knew in knowing it.

January 15, 1971

Miss Elaine Sturtevant

17 Ruse Campagne — Premiere [sic]

Paris 15, France

Dear Elaine,

Please don't thank me. The chance of working with you is thanks enough. You're an exciting broad, but I don't have to tell you that; you know it.

My lawyer shot me down. He sent the SCC (Security Exchange Committee) it [the proposal to pull moneys together] and they climbed right into my navel at the idea. So we are back into the same problem of having to depend on an act of God. But the old man has come through for the Israelite's before, but even though you don't fit that category, you can count on my intercession.

I am perfectly convinced that in our bumbling way, we will certainly fall into a great, big hole.

Passionately,

Reese

Palley writes the artist at "17 Ruse Campagne," an orthographic slip due, perhaps, to his unconscious take on the questioning, transpositional activities she trafficked in rather than to mere inattention. Because of the broad's pursuit, the dealer must rally not only terrestrial powerbrokers of high finance and federal law but also the heavenly intercession of Jehovah—leading players always contracted for but often uncredited in the machinations slated by one wily cowboy as Oz-like "earthscapes" and "landworks." What Sturtevant herself probably hadn't ever characterized as "bumbling" nevertheless produces a blockbuster-like outcome: everyone involved will "certainly fall into a great, big hole": simultaneously, "passionately," a geological rupture, a money pit, and an inverted Big Bang.

Going west, out into the desert, the exciting broad staked a claim for aesthetics beyond the romantic frontier of earthscapes and landworks. Some Hollywood hotshot could have pitched the trek as a remake of Johnny Guitar, with Sturtevant replacing Joan Crawford as Vienna, the gunslinging saloon proprietor who finds her transactions between the cross fire of local rustlers and big

business in so-called no-man's-land. Priority, she learns, frequently gets determined by whomever seizes it. The roughneck locals burn Vienna's establishment to the ground; meanwhile, federally sanctioned railroad concerns continue blowing up anything that stands in their way. Call it the patriotic poetics of the landgrab, manifest destiny, or the unconscious of Westerns; true speculation's always a gamble, the authorities suspicious as they are trigger-happy.

Where are "we" really now in this country?

It's a question to keep asking, always.

How do aesthetics tally with wherever the country is, is another.

Calvin Tomkins surveyed the unreal regions Sturtevant was gearing up for.

Driving out of Las Vegas into the arid and empty Nevada landscape is a fairly memorable experience in itself. After the preposterous air-conditioned hotel lobbies, with their twenty-four-hour gambling tables and housewife-mesmerizing slot machines, the seared desert valleys and eroded hills looked equally unreal, and nearly as hostile to life. The military installations and nuclear-test sites, which show up on the road map as "Danger Zones," are for the most part invisible to freeway traffic; we saw jet fighters flash down over a rust-colored mountain range as they headed for Nellis Air Force Base, eight miles north of Vegas, but we could not see the huge base itself. Roughly 87 per cent of Nevada is government-owned land, and one has the impression, from the radar and other electronic sentinels on the hilltops, that the owner is watching. *"Walter de Maria and Michael really dig this place—no pun intended," Miss Dwan told me. "They feel it sums up where we really are now in this country—all the materialism and vulgarity of Vegas, and the death industries outside. It's a kind of instant America—instant marriage and divorce, instant winning and losing, instant life and death. The boys cut their hair before they come out here, because the local police are tough on hippies, but they like the frontier mentality, and they're very much into the whole gambling thing. Michael's title, Double Negative, really refers in part to the double zero on the roulette wheel."*

Because of everything her work is not, Sturtevant synchronizes the energy or force of the untimely to confront—under the sign of art—instant American, instant life and death. Whether she cut her hair or otherwise adjusted her appearance before heading out into the frontier remains unrecorded. If Heizer was making an art concerned with "the gap between the world and our idea of it," Sturtevant, with her Heizer *Double Negative*, a work of material (topological as well as economic, aesthetic) displacements and dislocations, cuts into the gap between art and any idea of it, irradiating the various systems, acknowledged or not, allowing them to be. The precise cuts of her thinking demonstrate the difference between her Heizer *Double Negative* and Heizer's; they also schimatize much of the initial understanding of Heizer's work, upon which many subsequent valuations would be structured.

"Friends of mine often look very surprised when I tell them that Michael Heizer's Double Negative, say, has nothing to do with conceptual art," Virginia Dwan, whose New York Gallery, the Dwan, represented several of the leading earth artists until she closed it in 1971, has noted. "They say, 'But you can't really see it, can you?' or they try to argue that it exists only in photographs. So I have to explain that anybody can see it simply by going to Nevada, and that when an artist has moved two hundred and forty thousand tons of dirt around, it is not just a concept."

Sturtevant questions what it means to see, where and when seeing originates, recognition scoring cognition and vice versa, as well as how and why conceptualization can have physical and psychic consequence. What might it mean for anybody, simply by going to Nevada, to really not see Double Negative? What if the travelogues about Heizer's work, as much as any misunderstanding, contributed to its not being seen?

Rather oppose tons of dirt to a concept, Sturtevant digs underneath, to what structures such oppositions (photographically intractable). With Heizer Double Negative—syncopated when the movement is not only becoming publicly and/or critically recognizable (the first sentence of Tomkins's essay on Heizer, De Maria, Dwan, et al., reads: "A lot of people have not yet made up their minds about earth art.") but also is already over (the summer 1971 issue of *Art International* ran a half-page ad for Dwan Gallery that ended: "June Nineteen Hundred And Seventy-One Final Exhibition")—Sturtevant minds the gaps, between art and any idea of it; between the gamble of the Strip and the gamble of entering Danger Zones; between dirt and concept. Dave Hickey noted that in the desert, "[s]ince you do not see things, but simply see, it is always easier to experience what has been taken away than what has been added. So you can 'add' by taking away." Instead of adding by taking away, Sturtevant, scraping away such additive subtraction, takes away by adding—doubling—then surveying what remains. Hickey clarifies: "By making his two cuts across the concavity of the mesa, Heizer has 'created' a 'double negative' space between them. Once negative by the mesa's cul de sac, and twice by the horizontal column implied by the cuts." Exactly what Sturtevant set out not to do with "the big machinery such work requires."

June 28, 1971

Mrs. Paley
93 Prince Street
New York, New York

Dear Mrs. Paley:

This has reference to the information you requested concerning the property at Mormon Mesa, near Overton, Nevada.

The owner's name, address, and telephone numbers are as follows:

Mr. Forrest Purdy
3652 Lossee Road
North Las Vegas, Nevada 89030

I sincerely regret the delay in forwarding this information to you which was due to the fact that I was unsuccessful in reaching this man until last Friday.

If I can be of further assistance to you, please advise.

Attached herewith is our invoice in the amount of \$60.00 to cover your air charter of June 8, 1971.

Very truly yours,
PYRAMID AIRLINES, INC.
George M. Kessler,
President

"Mrs. Paley" should not be confused with Truman Capote's

favorite swan, "Babe," wife of the founder of CBS. In a note about this letter, Sturtevant wrote: "Called 'Mrs. Paley' [sic] 'cause used his credit card when in Las Vegas, for plane, hotel // Funny—Funny." Not unlike the conjugal syntax in Jill Johnston's description of Sturtevant's *Relâche* ("Rumors of Elaine and Bob Rauschenberg appearing naked. Rumors of omission.") or the relational juggling signified by the artists asked to bunk together in Rauschenberg's *Short Circuit*, the passing accomplished in the funny-funny fake ID speaks to an asymmetry within traditional civil law. All of which is to say that the letter (sent to "Mrs. Paley," c/o the address of Mr. Paley's New York gallery), in addition to tracking the planning of the "great, big hole," throws a Las Vegas (or Reno) spotlight on the complex machinations backing the works of, say, among others, Michael Heizer and Walter de Maria, neither of whom was ever referred to as "Mr. Dwan" or "Mr. Menil"—as if a matrimonially transvestite nomenclature, no matter how metaphorically accurate, would even make sense.

On the letter from the head of the resonantly named Pyramid Airlines, a corporate moniker suitable for the air surveillance of earthworks, ancient or modern, Sturtevant jotted notes and memoranda about crucial matters required to realize her Double Negative: an item to Kessler "re Ivan Jones re Push Cat," about operators of the big machines (various Caterpillars) needed to move mountains; notations about letters posted to the landowner, Forrest Purdy, and to her dealer, "Reese." At the bottom of the piece of stationery, just above the corporate logo of a little photo of a Pyramid Airlines airplane, the artist has penned the topographical data (longitude, latitude, UTM's) for the fit depression on the property owned by Purdy at Mormon Mesa, a rugged territory uncannily near Heizer's deep cuts (the trenches of his Double Negative occupy part of the same mesa). The Virgin River runs equidistant from both.

During the spring of 1971, while she was digging into the ramifications of her Heizer Double Negative, Sturtevant was grappling with how to site her own work for others. In correspondence with dealer Reinhard Onnasch about what he referred to as "the details of an exhibition personal" at one of his galleries, either in Berlin or Cologne, Sturtevant circumnavigated the unknowns from which she made her work. On March 17, 1971, from 17 Rue Campagne-Première [sic], Paris, the artist wrote to Onnasch:

If something is not yet known then only what it is not can be understood. Therefore, although I am not about specifics, here are a few about what it is not.

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.

* *Time*, Feb. '69

*** *Domus* '70

While this apophatic approach—an antimanifesto rather than a “No Manifesto”—reverberates frequencies from the “no place” the artist fathomed in prior brief elucidations of the contradictory zone from which she rises (“I have no place at all except in relation to the total structure”), the list of a few of the specifics of what her work isn’t nevertheless provides some hooks for grappling the inclination of her thinking. That she writes down this formulation of her aesthetics during the period when she is logistically rustling the necessities for a work the manifestation of which, as Mr. Palley put it, might end up requiring divine intercession emphasizes the conceptually materialistic consequence of the Sturtevant event horizon. Always at least two things at once (part of the reason the “work cannot be treated in a material or non intellectual way”), she doubles the inextricabilities to defy such either-or gambits, like those stabilizing Virigina Dwan’s insistence that “when an artist has moved two hundred and forty thousand tons of dirt around, it is not just a concept.” Displacing tons of inherited aesthetic beliefs like so much dirt in the desert, Sturtevant delineates an epistemological difference in “copies” and “imitations” while making neither; jettisons doctrine of being a “Great Artist” as “real medieval”; and shrugs off “paintings sculptures or objects,” which isn’t to say she doesn’t make them. With the efficiency of a Caterpillar grader, she scrapes away the known in an act of double negation that allows the unknown to occupy space, which in the mind is as vast as vast can be. In her letter to Onnasch, there is no mention of any sort of “appropriation,” nor any question of appropriateness or permission.

On the back of the Pyramid Airlines letter, the first name (and address) listed in “Mrs. Paley’s” handwriting is Chester Davis’s, of the firm Davis & Cox. A warning, infamous, should emblazon the vicinity of wherever Davis’s handle appears, since by all accounts, from counsel both against and for him, he was: “the roughest, toughest, meanest, and, in turn, most affable and engaging character they’ve ever run across.” To begin with, his real name was not Chester Davis, but Cesare Simon. He was born in Rome, Italy, and he is believed to be of Italian, Jewish, and Algerian descent. He came to this country as a small boy, then attended Princeton and Harvard Law School. In 1961, Davis was in the trial section of a New York law firm when the Hughes half of the Howard Hughes-TWA litigation landed in his lap. He formed the firm of Davis & Cox, with one client, Howard Hughes, and has fought the same TWA litigation ever since. He has also represented Hughes with great skill and stamina in a wide range of other litigations... Davis is much more to the Hughes organization than his official positions as counsel and director might imply. He is the sort of man who seems to be everywhere and know everything—including the contents of the Hughes organization’s many dark closets. It seems only fitting that as the Hughes organization’s involvement in the Watergate affair was revealed to be much deeper than first suspected, it should turn out that Davis law partner Maxwell Cox is the brother of former Watergate Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox.

After Davis’s Manhattan street address and telephone number, some additional information appears: “Hughes Tool Co SANDS.” Howard Hughes owned the historic hotel and casino on the Strip. A pilot who formerly worked for Hughes flew Heizer and de Maria on desert surveillance missions. Go west to dig a great, big hole, and you might have to do-si-do with some honery characters—high rollers, heavy hitters, construction honchos, Rat Packers, and the liaisons of hermits and powers-that-be. The land and its brutal climate never accommodate the feint of heart, or mind. Manifest destiny isn’t pretty.

Sturtevant scribbled down further information, for the President and Vice-President of the Sahara-Nevada Corporation; the first publicly traded company to have holdings in Las Vegas gaming establishments, including The Sahara, the corporation was a construction powerhouse. All her remaining notes record names and telephone extensions, contacts for construction and big machinery firms, most of them near Overton, Nevada, the proposed site of the work: men to operate Caterpillars with shovels, scrapers, and rippers; local scouts for transportation, hotel rooms, and garages. The final item in her hand registers the pure dirt conversion of land acreage to volume.

Decades after the various gambols in the desert, when I inquired about her Heizer Double Negative, Sturtevant put the endeavor in these terms:

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

Some of the finances of Heizer’s Double Negative were public knowledge by the time of Tomkins’s New Yorker profile of movers of “earth art.”

A Swiss dealer named Bischofberger and a German dealer named Friedrich thought they had acquired Heizer’s Double Negative from the Dwan Gallery last year [1971]. (Double Negative is on sixty acres of land bought by Heizer, who made over the property deed to the Dwan.) Bischofberger was planning to sell it to a German collector at a price rumored to be in the neighborhood of sixty-five thousand dollars, but Heizer abruptly decided that he didn’t want dealers dickering over the work, and he cancelled the deal.

More than a few make-or-break structural matters—property deeds, man-hours of labor, finances, not to mention the physical and psychologically toll of desert climate and remote terrain or the neighboring military-governmental “Danger Zones”—disappear from contemporaneous critical reckonings of Heizer’s work, in favor of, at times, literally, a discussion of tea cakes. (See, for instance, Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*: “And we might analogize the modes of cognition formulated by modern sculpture to the encounter with the madeleine.”) Ricochet from Sturtevant’s pursuits rattles many dark closets: her Heizer Double Negative not only makes structural matters and modes of cognition doubly visible, bright as neon on the Strip, but also, paradoxically, her folding and negating reveal what’s hidden from sight—and site—altogether. The “financial impediments” caused the pleats of Heizer’s dual declivities, by Sturtevant’s doubling of them, to be folded into continuous ideation, site of sightlessness folded into a sight of sitelessness: Heizer’s Double Negative doubled and negated, to the extent that the actual abyssal cuts are transmogrified: Sturtevant’s Heizer Double Negative is a baroque desert mise en abîme.

Which shouldn’t impede any potential resonances.

Hickey was one of the few writers to discern the horizontality of Sturtevant’s thinking. Even if he never invoked her by name in “Earthscapes, Landworks and Oz,” his foundational examination of the so-called “earth art” people hadn’t made their minds up about yet, he was the gallery director of Reese Palley during the planning and (in every sense) execution of her Double Negative exhibition, replacing James Harithas, who had moved on to become the director of the Everson Museum. When most others

were stuck in and/or troubled by the appearance of different styles, modes, territories, and individualisms, Hickey was cutting through to something else altogether.

There is a curious kind of Shem-Shaun relationship, too, between Pop Art and Earth Art. They are both arts of location and dislocation, deriving energy from sophisticated forms of trespassing. The Pop artist imposes his vulgar image on the sanctioned "art" environment, while the Earth artist imposes his artificial image upon a secular "non-art" location.... Probably the most illuminating "cut" which could be made would be to distinguish those arts concerned with the semantic idea of "place," those concerned with the cultural idea of "art" and "non-art" space, and those concerned with actual cartographic "location." This would make a cut which would group Huebler's conceptual pieces and Oldenburg's monument proposals and Ruscha's books with the other work [by Heizer, de Maria, Oppenheim, Lichtenstein, et al.] I have been discussing.

Recall that Sturtevant's Heizer Double Negative follows The Store of Claes Oldenburg, her Study for Yvonne Rainer's "Three Seascapes," and her Relâches, all seen in 1967; in terms of solo exhibitions, only her two shows, Huit Tableaux et un Prototype, repeated exactly a year apart, in the springs of 1969 and 1970, both at Galerie Claude Givaudan, come between. Sophisticated trespasser, trafficker in fake IDs, "Mrs. Paley" turns informer and suborns a credit as well as an identity check when it's least expected from everything within the horizon of art—making a "cut" that is a line of force; making her work "of" but also beyond this predicament, concretizing rather than a commenting. "So you get a constant confusion between closeness and distance," Deleuze explained to Claire Parnet, about such a line of force and the ramifications of folding. "Thinking doesn't come from within, but nor is it something that happens in the external world. It comes from this Outside, and returns to it, it amounts to confronting it. The line outside is our double, with all the double's otherness." Sturtevant moves past impediments, cutting deeper, to the fundament or construct that would allow Hickey to "group" as well as to "distinguish" the various categorical concerns of "arts" and artists in the first place.

Negotiating Sturtevant's repetitions demands horizontal as well as transitional thinking. In his agitation of what was going on in all this going west—not only by artists, but also by those turning in "breathless accounts" about their safaris to these various "indefinite art forms"—Hickey focuses on seeing scraped of almost everything: "There is literally nothing to see, so that is what you look at: the nothingness—the no-thing-ness." With her desert work, Sturtevant ends up interrogating not only what it would mean to see nothing doubled, since her work begins where all that upon which seeing, even the seeing of nothing and nothing-ness, ends, but also to feel thinking's force. Something, as she reproved Reinhard Onnasch, "not yet known," pursued for unforeseeable consequences, perturbs. The cuts of Sturtevant's desert line of research paradoxically suture, by being neither "Conceptual" (like Huebler's pieces), nor a proposal (like many of Oldenburg's monuments), nor sited (like Heizer's "1,100 x 42 x 30 / 40,000 TONS DISPLACEMENT"). "It's no more in thought than in things," Deleuze hazarded about such a line of research, "but it's everywhere thought confronts some thing like madness, and life some thing like death."

In the midst his sly raconteur of the various machinations in

the west (the entire narrative of which concludes with something like a cowboy ballad), Hickey pauses to note what art, catching one "unawares," can still motivate: "Sometimes, when this happens, you can have a kind of low-grade epiphany, the kind which would help Lew Artcher solve a case, but which only helps us nonfiction characters forget the war." What might following Sturtevant's line of research from The Store of Claes Oldenburg to Heizer Double Negative manifest? The "radical movement" from storefront phantasmagoria to desert fold in the Danger Zone produces an endeavor with resonances as ancient and elegiac as they are totally in tune with the times, an investigation or line of research which "at its most sorrowful has an air of deep festivity." Anne Carson has called such a mood and mode of sorrowful festivity Catullan.

On October 1, 1967, upon returning from watching "city gravediggers" in Central Park excavate "a level area of ground six-feet long and three-feet wide...to a depth of six feet," then observing while, "after a short interval—say, a break for lunch—the excavated earth is replaced" and "neatly raked with attention to clear edges and the ground left unplanted," Oldenburg wrote notes on Hole, what he considered "his first public monument, beginning at the beginning—with the hole itself." The inescapably funereal implications of Hole shadow other monumental works, by him as well as others. Oldenburg observed: Grave is a perfect (anti) war monument, like saying no more a whole trend of seeing invisible monuments, hallucination monuments like the watcher high at the excavation, supersensing, or a movement of "grave" digging as protest

In addition to activating supersensorial tripping as an aspect of watching, art and the epiphanies, low-grade or otherwise, it engages can motivate grave thinking: protest to rather than any forgetting of the war then being waged. Even in his final note on his invisible monument, despite the festivity of his bawdy punning, Oldenburg confronts the grim mood of the national zeitgeist: "The BM (Burial Monument) is not frivolous. In fact, it is a frightening introduction to a year of burials (don't be melodramatic). One hopes that all climaxes will not come at once."

The double negation of Sturtevant's hallucinatory "great, big hole" is haunted by such removals, evacuations; negations her illuminating cuts negate, for a kind of wake. "Monuments in the mind" were what Jill Johnston called Sturtevant's cancellations, circa 1967, having now way of knowing how mentally monumental they would become, their climaxes, never coming all at once, and still coming, allowing no one to forget anything.