

Sturtevant

1924–2014

BRUCE HAINLEY AND CLAUDE WAMPLER

BRUCE HAINLEY: The Lady died. When I first heard the news about the sad, too-soon event, all I could think was: What a total drag. Not that the spaceship wasn't going to come for her eventually, but I just couldn't believe she wouldn't stick around to cause double trouble at her exhibition this November at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Anything memorial strikes me as so antithetical to the forward movement of her every act of thinking, her art. We should open up a great Meursault in her honor and really get into it, since fresh, involved dialogue was one of her fortes.

CLAUDE WAMPLER: Meursault-filled glass raised! The spaceship? Is that what happened? Why don't we get Jodie Foster or whomever to make contact and ask them to turn around, bring her back! Transport her to MOMA for her opening. Now *that* would be a hot entrance. Materialized! (Maybe that's what's going on with Michael Jackson: Those aren't projected holograms but aliens trying to beam him back because he's hosting inappropriate sleepovers with the little aliens.) If Sturtevant was indeed taken by a spaceship and we requested her safe return, I'd like to think she would say,

"No, don't turn back. The mental retards are catching up. My work there is done. Time to fuck things up on another planet."

BH: Never one to suffer fools, she made the unnervy cry. After one such incident with a curator, she told me she was going to have T-shirts made, emblazoned with a warning slogan (I always imagined them Katharine Hamnett style): BAD FUCKIN' MEAN. Of course, she could also be incredibly tender—totally generous and committed to a dynamic exchange of ideas with anyone willing to keep up. I can still see her in her apartment near the Marais, comfortably curled on her vivid-blue daybed, ready to tackle any topic.

CW: What I'll really miss is how demanding she was. She had such an intense work ethic or, rather, a *think* ethic, and she expected the same from her audience—and absolutely no less from her friends! Her superconfidence! As if there were no other option. Insecurity is such mindless toil, and she didn't tolerate mindlessness. I told her once about a new series of works that I was considering, titled something like "Taking Credit Where Credit Is Due," in which the promotion for the new Wampler show would lead the audience to a performance/exhibition/film by a completely different artist. Elaine

said, "Claude, that's just lazy." I loved her bluntness. **BH:** Ah, the lazy and mindless! People forget—especially because she's now *everyone's* favorite artist, even making it into *W* magazine—that although Sturtevant was showing extensively in Europe soon after her 1986 return to the American scene, between 1993 and 2012 her work was almost completely absent in the US, with a few starry exceptions. You had to remain alert to catch her stealth moves here. When requested by a supposedly "critical" dealer in Manhattan in the early 2000s, I sent a box of

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Sturtevant materials (catalogues, various reviews and essays, etc.); they were soon returned, with a note informing me that there was "no market" for such work. **CW:** The moment I really understood what repetition meant to Sturtevant—how the integrity of the original was actually of utmost importance—was just before the opening of her epic show at the Museum für Moderne Kunst in Frankfurt in 2004, when the go-go boys arrived at the museum to activate *Gonzalez-Torres Untitled (Go-Go Dancing Platform)* [1995]. There were two equally hot young men, if memory serves, one white and one black. They were going to dance in shifts during the opening. As I recall, Elaine was totally disturbed by the recruitment of a black dancer, because she thought [Felix] Gonzalez-Torres never showed the

PETER ELEEY

STURTEVANT WAS NOT HER NAME. It originally belonged to someone else, but she inhabited it and made it her own, inaugurating a kind of vaudeville that she would repeat many times over the fifty years of her career. She often said that she liked the name because of its power, but its camouflage surely also appealed to her. Abandoning any kind of recognizable style, she began in 1964 "utilizing Johns, Duchamp, or Warhol . . . as catalysts to dispose of representation," dedicating herself to a practice whose force depends upon first being seen as what it is *not*. This meant that a lot of people missed it altogether, and still do.

"If something is not yet known, then only what it is not can be understood," Sturtevant wrote in a 1971 letter, pointing beyond the horizon of our recognition and indicating the difficulty of her path toward it. A few years ago, I found myself on a certain Sturtevant Road in New England and noticed that it was a dead end. **NO OUTLET.** It was a reminder that Sturtevant seemed to represent a cul-de-sac to many: Her detractors dismissed her as a sideshow plagiarist, while her fans hyperbolically described her as the destroyer of modern art. "Does she send us back," Bernard Blistène eloquently wondered a decade ago, "to face a void with no



Sturtevant at "Sturtevant: Image over Image," Moderna Museet, Stockholm, March 2012. Photo: Åsa Lundén.

piece with anything but white dancers. It was all wrong. **BH:** There were *two* go-go platforms at the MMK, facing off directly across from each other, which took advantage of the palindromic architecture—hers and his. Is it just me, or might Gonzalez-Torres too have preferred Latin dancers? In any case, my memory is that the real problem for Elaine was that the black dancer was too *ripped*.

CW: Oh, it was a texture issue then, not color! During one of those endless evenings at her local Bistrot Beaubourg (basically her kitchen when guests arrived, although she was a superb cook), Trisha Donnelly and I had a historic conversation with Our Lady Elaine about *d-i-c-k-s*. It was uproarious and profound.

BH: I love a blow job—

CW: We know!

BH: Giving, receiving—but I don't wish everything to be set to that tempo, that *durée*. Sturtevant's *Blow Job* [2006], a three-channel video, not 16 mm like Warhol's notorious slo-mo quickie, used that temporality to

question it, while also providing, momentarily, a disruptive sound track of a woman's laughter—all, as she wrote, to “emphasize the vast space of pornography: its blatant subjectivity, its use and abuse, its reality and brutality, its beauty and distortions; its ‘funny-fun’ and rabid sadness and sadism.” Sigh. I'm rabidly sad. We're just beginning to get started with her.

CW: I know. Speaking of rabid, I am concerned: Who will be there to rabidly defend the work? Remain alert against the contaminant of small-minded misinterpretation? Sturtevant's art benefited from the relentless performance of her special presence. It is so very satisfying to teach Sturtevant and witness an amoeba of a student fiercely connect with her bold repurposing. Although they intuitively get it and are truly inspired by the recent work, they still welcome the guidance of Elaine's screeching them to attention—

BH: “Cybernetics!” The technological (ontological?) turn switching everything so that, as only the Lady could put it, “the exterior of simulacra has become the

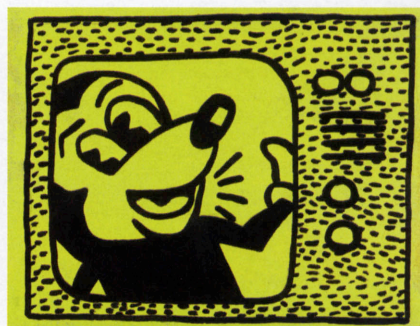
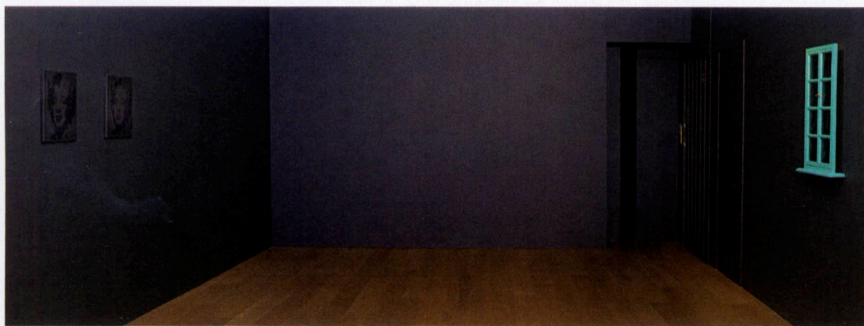
entrenched interior of our ‘being.’”

CW: I can't stop thinking about the prescience of that extraordinary, meditative show at Anthony Reynolds Gallery in London in 2006. Hanging across from each other: a *Duchamp Fresh Widow* [1992] and two *Warhol Black Marylins* [2004]. The way her *Widow* lit her *Marylins* so generously and the way the *Marylins* so glamorously rejected that glow, a dialogue that now becomes an essential clue leading to her new location—the exquisite and off-limits territory between light and dark. That must now be the place to be! Such entirely still but powerful confrontation created night music that, yet again, destroyed chronology! How can Elaine now be “late”? That makes me weep. It's just not possible. She will ever be AVANT!

BH: Always and ever AVANT!!!

BRUCE HAINLEY IS A CONTRIBUTING EDITOR OF ARTFORUM. HIS STUDY OF STURTEVANT, *UNDER THE SIGN OF [SIC]*, WAS PUBLISHED BY SEMIOTEXT(E) EARLIER THIS YEAR.

CLAUDE WAMPLER IS AN ARTIST.



From left: View of “Sturtevant: Cold Fear,” 2006, Anthony Reynolds Gallery, London. From left: Warhol *Black Marilyn*, 2004; Duchamp *Fresh Widow*, 1992. Sturtevant, *Haring Tag July 15 1981, 1985*, sumi ink and acrylic on cloth, 9 7/8 x 12 7/8”.

landmarks, no date or limits, no beginning nor end?” But that was the thing with Sturtevant: Relentlessly looking ahead rather than back, she was always an end and a beginning. The artist's show at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm in 2012 premiered a new video work based on *Pac-Man*, in which the avatar runs mindlessly around the digital maze until the ghosts catch him. THE END, it then proclaims, and starts up all over again.

Two years before Sturtevant began her innovations, art historian George Kubler referred to “precursors” and “rebels” to describe what he viewed as the two types of innovators in the history of art. “The precursor can have no imitators,” Kubler wrote. She “shapes a new civilization; the rebel defines the edges of a disintegrating one.” That Sturtevant could have been both inimitable precursor and edge-riding rebel is a testament not only to the strange contours of her era but to the unparalleled razzle-dazzle of her thinking, the push and shove

of her work, and its sweeping leaps, bumps, and jumps.

Long before the attention she would enjoy during the last decade of her life, Sturtevant was asked if her work would end once it was fully understood—what would happen if the “not yet known” finally became comprehensible? In characteristically zigzagging language, Sturtevant replied, “There never has to be something else. It has to be everything else and not something else. There is no end. The head doesn't go dead after you understand it. On the contrary, there are many places to go.”

After her memorial in Paris in June, three of us gathered at an apartment there and raised our glasses to a remarkable lady who was everything else and not something else to all of us lucky enough to have known her. We watched the late-afternoon light move across a *Warhol Black Marilyn* from 2004 hanging on the wall. The glossy star moved fabulously in and out of view against the matte darkness of the painting's back-

ground, an evocation of the elegantly conflicted visibility that marked its maker's career.

I later learned that Sturtevant had planned to surprise those of us at her memorial with a video statement. She reminded me in one of our last conversations that she still had a show to install with me at the Museum of Modern Art in New York this fall, and she was at work on a new video installation about “the demise of the binary system.” Probably thinking that she had plenty of time, she hadn't gotten around to making her send-off. Or perhaps she saw no need to repeat herself. After all, we have her great little *Haring Tag July 15 1981, 1985*. Mickey Mouse waves to us from inside a television, as if saying, “Hello, voilà, good-bye,” in a permanent repetition. Now, sadly, that will have to suffice. □

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