

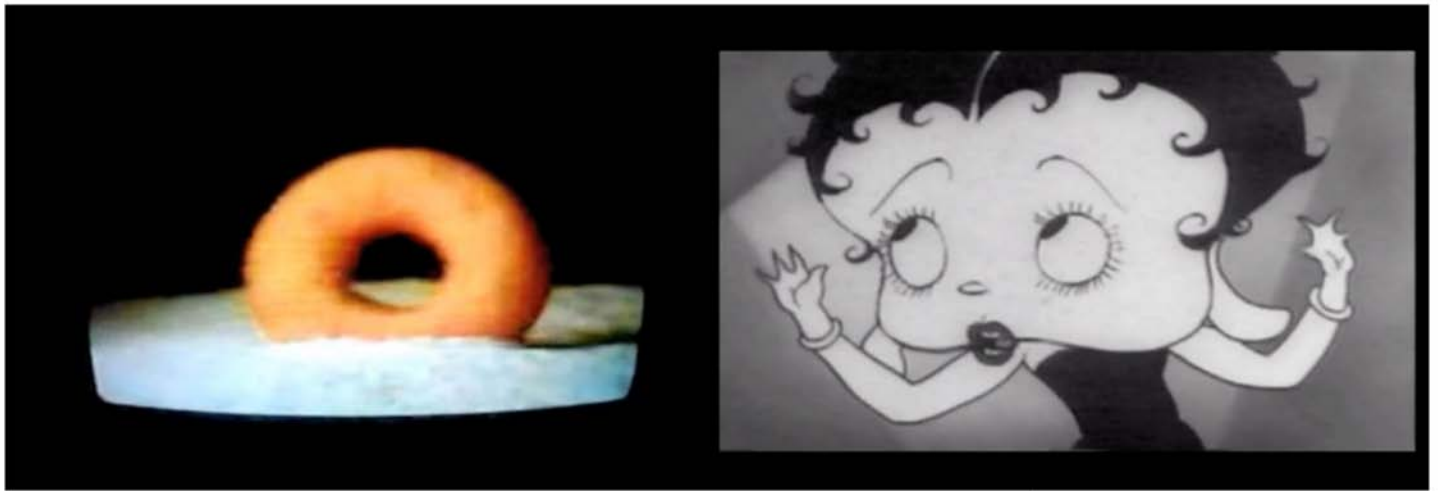
Reviews /



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Did Sturtevant Predict Meme Culture?

The artist's stuttering videos, on view at Freedman Fitzpatrick, challenge conventional notions of artistic authorship and circulation



When self-help author and American presidential candidate Marianne Williamson was asked about her performance following the second democratic primary debate, she coolly replied: 'I'll tell you later, when I see the memes.' Today, memes are not only a source of amusement, but a real cultural and political force, often more influential than contemporary art. Despite its title, 'Sturtevant: MEMES' does not quite argue for an explicit correlation between the 16 video works on view and the more contemporary phenomenon of internet memes. Officially, Sturtevant never identified any of her video output as such. Yet, these rarely seen works portend a deeply memetic truth about our present media moment: namely, that meaning is never located in the primary transmission of a message, but arrives only after that message has been remediated and recirculated ad infinitum.



Sturtevant, *Cut & Run Productions*, 2006, video still. Courtesy: the estate of Sturtevant and Freedman Fitzpatrick, Los Angeles/Paris

Made between 1999 and 2012 – long after evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins coined the term ‘meme’ in 1976, and around the time internet memes were becoming popularized in the early 2000s – Sturtevant’s videos draw from distinctly American sources, featuring what the artist might call the ‘messy mass’ of culture: cartoons, commercials, game shows, reality television and, sometimes, her own footage shot in more intimate studio environs. While her selection and combination of these banal images can be aesthetically profound, they are technically imperfect. Transferred to digital files from bit camcorders and other early technologies, much of the imagery appears pixelated and anachronistically ‘dated’ – the result of several generations of obsolescent media. Besides a pointed disdain for the promise of technological innovation, the consistently lo-fi nature of Sturtevant’s videos also suggests the artist was uninterested in the flawless copy, transfer and dissemination of images as purely original content.



Sturtevant, *Dark Threat of
Absence*, 2002, video still.
Courtesy: the estate of Sturtevant
and Freedman Fitzpatrick, Los
Angeles/Paris

Instead, Sturtevant's videos stutter. Ranging from 27 seconds to 15 minutes in length, they eschew linear narratives for terse, endlessly looping clips. Presented here, for the most part, on a grid of digital monitors with no discernible breaks delimiting one video from the next, the group of works reads as a dialectical montage of imagery and sound with no beginning or end. In this particular presentation, Sturtevant's playful use of title screens further disrupts any semblance of sequential clarity while also poking fun at conventions of cultural production. Appearing before, after or throughout a video, these bursts of text sometimes function to convey titles but mostly tell us that the videos are 'not for sale' (they are, in editions of five) and credit 'L. Muzzey' (Sturtevant's daughter and frequent collaborator). Indeed, when the excessive textual overlay starts to become both image and content, we realize that these formal attributions are not meant to credit 'authorship' as much as frame the art-market dictates that sustain it.

Similarly, in works like *Simulacra* (2010) – in which an internet-sourced video of a glaring eagle owl is stamped with a blurred iStock video watermark – we are reminded of the monetary value of images as cultural capital. Sturtevant's flagrant disregard for copyright frames the futility of attempts to control the distribution of images by blighting them with a stamp of ownership. Images (and memes), in their states of infinite reproducibility and networked circulation, have rendered questions of originality and ownership irrelevant.



Sturtevant, *Simulacra*, 2010, video still. Courtesy: the estate of Sturtevant and Freedman Fitzpatrick, Los Angeles/Paris

'The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author,' wrote Roland Barthes in his eponymous 1967 essay. This sentiment of erasure resonates with both Williamson and Sturtevant: the former in terms of the relinquishment of individualized meaning to the social body of meme culture and the latter in a more Foucauldian commitment to undermine systems of ownership and value by dismantling the belief that 'authorship' is engendered exclusively through acts of originality and singular creation.

'Sturtevant: MEMES' continues at Freedman Fitzpatrick, Los Angeles, USA, through 26 October 2019.

Main image: Sturtevant, Dumping Down & Dunkin Donut, 2008, video still. Courtesy: the estate of Sturtevant and Freedman Fitzpatrick, Los Angeles/Paris

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