7. Authenticity, Originality and Contemporary Art: Will the Real Elaine Sturtevant Please Stand Up?

by Anthony Downey

Fig. 1: Elaine Sturtevant in *The Store of Claes Oldenburg*, 623 East Ninth Street, New York, 1967. © *Elaine Sturtevant, courtesy Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris/Salzburg*

In the winter of 1961, on the Lower East Side of New York, Claes Oldenburg opened *The Store*. Cleverly designed to fit in with the other stores on the street, down to the '99 cent' sign in the front window, Oldenburg's intervention short-circuited accepted ways of selling art and offered all the 'goods' on display direct to the public. Inside the store, which was effectively a narrow room, the objects for sale included painted plaster models of a blueberry pie, an outsized hamburger, and a wide selection of undergarments and swimsuits – all handmade by Oldenburg using chicken wire, enamel paint and plaster. Although the show was a critical success for Oldenburg, a significant number of the works displayed at the time no longer exist, having been inadvertently destroyed or simply forgotten about and discarded over time. Given its seminal status, and the fact that few of these works have survived, *The Store* has since passed into the pantheon of Pop Art folklore where it continues to maintain a mythic status. Oldenburg's gambit paid off, so to speak, and the trajectory of his international career was to thereafter closely follow that of Pop Art as a worldwide phenomenon.

Six years later, on 623 East Ninth Street, Elaine Sturtevant opened *The Store of Claes Oldenburg* (fig. 1), a 'Junk Art' store a few blocks from where Claes Oldenburg had staged his original exhibition on 107 East Second Street. Sturtevant was born in Ohio in 1930 and was a contemporary of artists such as Oldenburg and Andy Warhol. However, her practice differed from theirs insofar as she would master the techniques of painting, sculpture, photography and film in order to 'copy' works by other artists, Oldenburg and Warhol included. Complete with enamelled plaster models of hamburgers, slices of cherry cake, baked potatoes and a not inconsiderable amount of candy, Elaine Sturtevant's *The Store of Claes Oldenburg* effectively restaged Oldenburg's earlier one, including her meticulous rendition of a pie display unit complete with six pies (*Oldenburg Store Object, Pie Case*, 1967). The reaction from the public to Sturtevant's restaging was, perhaps understandably, mixed. For many, this was merely copying or, worse, fakery. The reaction of fellow artists was likewise ambivalent and, although initially supportive of Sturtevant's intervention, Oldenburg became increasingly irate at what he considered to be a case of his work being 'ripped off'.

Observing reactions at the time, the curator Christian Leigh noted that '[w]hat initially just caused laughter ... subsequently and very soon caused general anger and outrage, leading to mistrust and misunderstanding'.[1] In a further twist to this affair, and in what would be no doubt an ironic afterthought today, there are more of Sturtevant's 'remakes' still in circulation now than there are of Oldenburg's originals.[2]

It would be relatively easy to write off Sturtevant's intervention as an art-world prank or, indeed, a form of art-world self-promotion by virtue of riding on someone else's artistic coat-tails; however, such responses neglect the more radical aspect of her *oeuvre*, which has (amongst other things) recreated fellow artists' works for over four decades now, a period broadly commensurate with the history of contemporary art. Moreover, Sturtevant produced a considerable number of her works at a time when the artists she was looking at were far from famous or indeed getting known. In this context, and in what follows, I will suggest that we therefore need to understand Sturtevant's work as an engagement with issues such as authenticity, originality and the conceptualisation of singularity. I will briefly address the context out of which she emerges so as to further situate these points, but also propose that her work is effectively a rigorous investigation into the limits of terms such as authenticity and originality, nowhere more so than when used in discussions of contemporary art practices. Sturtevant, I will offer by way of a conclusion, is a disturbing presence in any theory of contemporary art that employs the ideal of authenticity as a cornerstone for understanding the conceptual foundations of contemporary art practices.

Contemporary art and authenticity

A significant element in any debate about originality and authenticity in contemporary art concerns the work of Marcel Duchamp. In its most basic sense, Duchamp's work pointed not to the object of contemplation as such (the manifest aesthetic form of an artwork), but to the abstract thought-process behind it. What, his work asks, are the parameters within which art comes to be understood as art – or, indeed, how does art come to be understood as original and authentic in the first place? The objects in question, be they bottle racks or urinals, were often the seemingly arbitrary opportunity for Duchamp's exploration of so-called 'non-retinal' art and his use of 'readymades' discloses many of the conundrums we encounter in determining notions of originality and authenticity today. Duchamp's *Bottle Rack* of 1914 – a mass-produced bottle-drying rack signed by the artist – is still widely considered to be the first readymade. However, the most famous of these readymades, or perhaps the most infamous, is his *Fountain* of 1917. Effectively a mass-produced urinal with the one-off pseudonym 'R. Mutt' painted on it, this work goes some way to describing what Duchamp meant when he used the term 'non-retinal': the objects were chosen to refute traditionally 'retinal' artwork – art that existed on a purely visual or formal level – and therefore address the realm of the intellect and the thought processes behind the ideal of the 'original' and what could constitute art. Duchamp's *Fountain*, in short, fundamentally questioned what art could be and, perhaps more importantly, interrogated the nominal notion of originality as a foundational ideal in the understanding of modern and contemporary art.

In 1965, almost fifty years after Duchamp's *Fountain* and two years before her *The Store of Claes Oldenburg,* Sturtevant continued this practice of usurping traditional notions of what constitutes originality in contemporary art practices and exploring the limits of such ideas. At the Bianchini Gallery in New York, where Andy Warhol had shown the year before, Sturtevant lined the entire space with panels of Warhol's 'flowers', a Jasper Johns 'flag' painting, a Roy Lichtenstein 'comic book' painting and, at the centre of the gallery, a George Segal sculpture – all of which appeared to be, to all intents and purposes, original works by the artists in question.[3] One year later, at Galerie J in Paris, Sturtevant restaged this exhibition in its entirety under the title 'America America', but this time with an exception: the gallery was to remain closed throughout the exhibition and the work could only be seen through its front window. In one sense, Sturtevant's exhibition in Paris could be understood as an overt engagement with Oldenburg's earlier invitation to come in and 'consume' his work. For Sturtevant, these models of consumption are based upon a desire to acquire that which can be only seen through a shop

Fig. 2: Elaine Sturtevant, *Johns Double Flag*, 1966.
© Elaine Sturtevant, courtesy Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris/Salzburg

window which she, in the withholding of any transaction other than a conceptual one, thwarts. It is to the realm of the conceptual rather than the visual – as in Duchamp's work before her – that we must turn if we are to understand these works more fully.

One of the many questions Sturtevant addresses in both of these exhibitions and throughout her *oeuvre* concerns the interior – or what she terms the 'understructure' – of an artwork and how, by engaging with the same techniques used by an artist such as Warhol, Sturtevant creates a wholly original artwork. 'The intentions', she explains, 'were to expand current notions of aesthetics, probe the concepts and limitations of originality, disclose the understructure of painting and sculpture, and break open wide spaces for ... new thinking'.[4] This is not so much about producing objects as it is about understanding how they circulate and come into being as objects; or, more specifically, how they are produced, received and understood as art. Do Sturtevant's paintings of Warhol's 'flowers' therefore represent an image of those paintings or are they more about the artistic 'understructure' and the thought processes that produced these images? The distinction is critical: are we looking at copies or are we engaging with the practice of producing art? How, that is to further enquire, do we approach her practice without getting lost down a rabbit hole of ever-decreasing interpretive returns? To address these questions, we must note that Sturtevant's works are authentically Sturtevant – they are not facsimiles (most are done by her from a memory of the work in question); nor are they an attempt at fakery (all works are signed and dated by her making them emphatically not works by Claes Oldenburg or Andy Warhol); nor can they be dismissed as appropriationist or recuperative (they were often produced at the same time or soon after the artworks they reference). Something else is afoot here and it concerns a rethinking of how the ideals of originality and authenticity prefigure the value of a painting not only in financial terms but also as a conceptual gambit.

We arrive here at a question that may at first appear obvious: when is a Warhol not a Warhol? This question has troubled commentators and interested parties alike for some time now, not least the Andy Warhol Estate, which is the effective gatekeeper of his legacy. The question has, of course, an obvious economic purchase to it: the distinction between an accredited and a non-accredited Warhol can be the difference between a few hundred dollars and a few million. To date, there have been a number of high-profile lawsuits concerning the Andy Warhol Foundation and its subsidiary, the Art Authentication Board. One of the more recent lawsuits involves a Warhol self-portrait, from the so-called ***Norgus*** **series (named after the New Jersey-based company responsible for the printing of the image),** that had been previously authenticated by the Andy Warhol Foundation. Bought by Joe Simon-Whelan in 1989 for **$195,000, the painting depicts Warhol against a red background and with a slightly raised chin.** However, upon submission to the Authentication Board, and even though the painting made direct use of acetates apparently provided by the artist, the Board argued that they were produced without Andy Warhol's direct supervision and, moreover, by printers with whom he had never worked – and for those reasons, and those alone, the painting was deemed not to be an authentic Warhol.[5]

Putting to one side the intricacies of this case, it is obvious that Sturtevant's *Warhol Marilyn Diptych* and *Warhol Gold Marilyn*, dated 1972 and 1973 respectively, are emphatically not Andy Warhol paintings. They were painted from memory by Sturtevant, dated differently and signed by her, and no attempt thereafter was ever made to confuse the two, other than on the relatively superficial grounds of visual resemblance. And even here, we can always see differences between a Sturtevant 'Warhol' and a painting by the artist. Apart from the superficiality of visual correspondence – upon which we may be placing far too much emphasis if we really want to understand Sturtevant's work – these are not paintings by Andy Warhol nor have they ever been presented as such. So, what precisely is at stake when Elaine Sturtevant remakes another artist's work? To answer this question, we need to focus here on the act of repetition rather than simply remaking. We might also be better served examining an example of repetition from theatre, namely, Samuel Beckett's 1953 play *Waiting for Godot*, in which the play's two acts begin and end in the same place at more or less the same time with more or less the same characters, and in more or less the same *mise-en-scène*. Writing of the play, the Irish critic Vivien Mercier wryly noted that the playwright had written a play in 'which nothing happens,

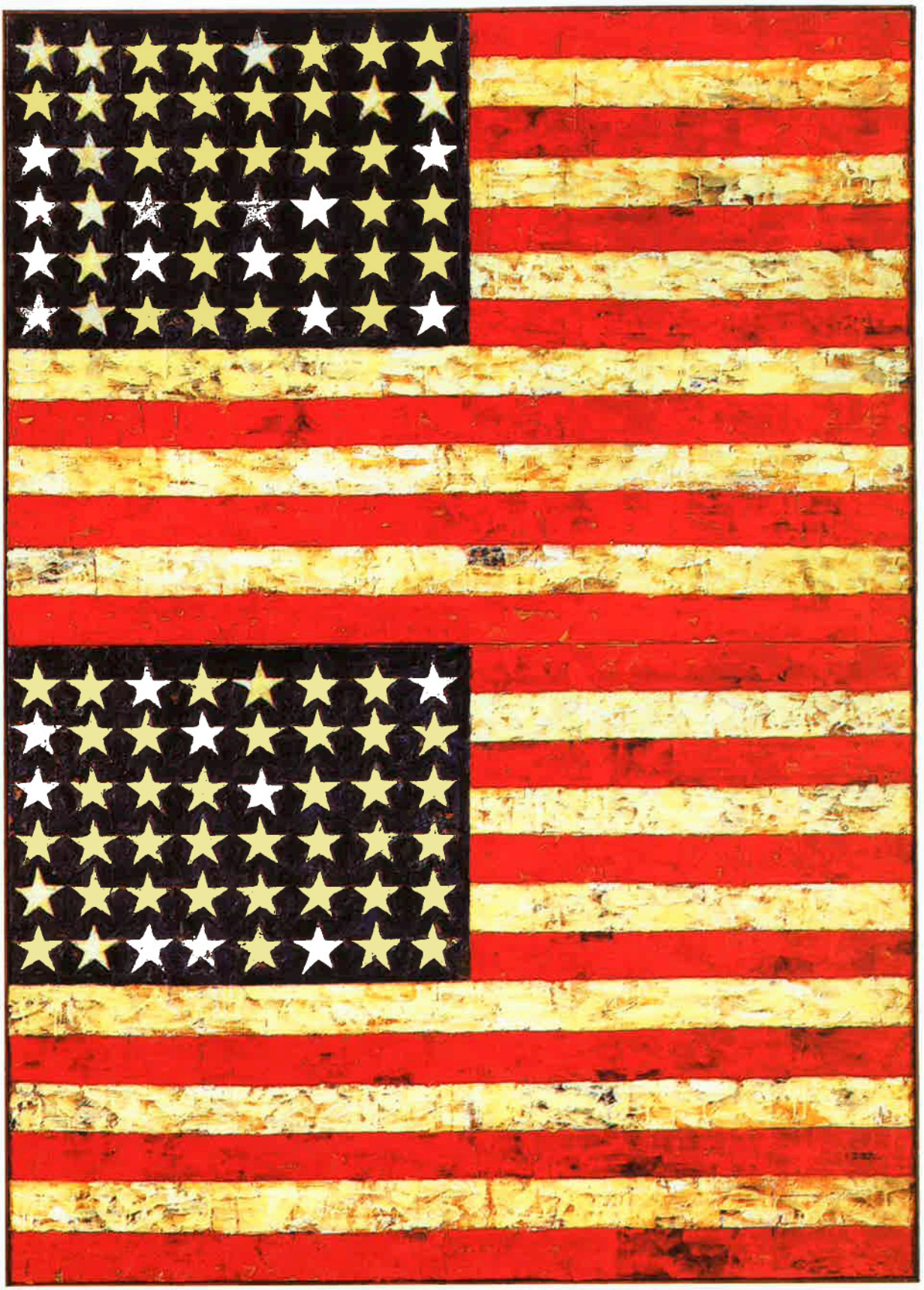

Fig. 2: Elaine Sturtevant, *Duchamp descendant l'escalier*, 1992, black and white photograph. © *Elaine Sturtevant, courtesy Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris/Salzburg*

twice'.[6] As with all things Beckettian, Mercier's aside gets to the heart of a radical gesture in his work: when nothing happens twice, something does indeed happen insofar as the repetition of an event or utterance opens up a temporal increment between when it was first said and, crucially, when it was said again. Time intervenes, as ever, but more crucially so does an emphatic and interrogative moment of difference between two related utterances or indeed objects (or, to return to the case in hand, paintings). Repetition, in sum, begets difference and a distinction between a before, during and after. To paint a painting that already exists, without any intention to deceive an audience as to its authorship, questions the authentic artistic 'gesture' so beloved of modernist critics. It goes to the core of what it is to create in the first place.

Repetition, in its introduction of difference, describes not only the uniqueness of both things and events (the difference between two events or utterances or objects), but also underwrites the notion that no artistic use of a technique or form is ever truly equivalent to its other uses and intentions. There is a clear distinction of difference being opened up between a Sturtevant 'flower' and an Andy Warhol 'flower'. When Sturtevant remakes a Warhol she is asking us to return to the genesis of the work, the processes behind the work, the moment of inception and, coterminously, the historical trajectory and reception of the work thereafter. She is asking us to rethink what it is to make art. Repetition here, the remaking of a Warhol, instils not only difference but sets up two forms of synchronistic time: the time of Warhol's painting and the time of Sturtevant's insofar as the latter's early endeavours were produced at more or less the same time as the works they reference. In that point of connection, the pause between the moment of Warhol producing his painting and Sturtevant's version of it, there are obviously two ways of thinking about originality. 'Repetition', Sturtevant has noted in this context, 'is thinking'. 'Thinking is at the centre of my work, not the visible surface. My work is the immediacy of the apparent content being denied'.[7] Elsewhere, she has noted that her practice 'repeats the seductiveness of the surface and dissolves it in the process of repetition to make room for what is really important, thinking'.[8] So, if repetition begets difference, which in turn opens up a conceptual slippage in ways of thinking about authenticity and originality, how do we understand or indeed approach the work of Elaine Sturtevant and Andy Warhol alike – what exactly are we being left with to think about?

In 2004, I travelled to see the first retrospective of the work of Elaine Sturtevant, displayed at the world-famous Museum für Moderne Kunst (MMK) in Frankfurt. The show was appropriately titled 'The Brutal Truth' and, in room after room, Sturtevant displayed works that name-checked the history of contemporary art. This was Sturtevant's first retrospective so no one had yet witnessed the sheer magnitude and depth of her intervention into the history and trajectory of contemporary art practices. Everything in the Museum für Moderne Kunst in Frankfurt for the duration of this show – containing over 140 works in total – had been made by Elaine Sturtevant. On display were Warhol's 'Marilyn' and 'flower' series, renamed *Warhol Marilyn*, 1965, and *Warhol's Flowers*, 1971, respectively. A series of Jasper Johns' 'flags', *Johns Flag, 1965/66* (fig. 2) alongside Marcel Duchamp's 'bicycle wheel' and 'bottle rack', vied with newer works by the artist that included references to Joseph Beuys, Anselm Kiefer, Robert Gober and Paul McCarthy. Looking at these works, I was struck by a number of things. First, as already suggested, we effectively had a retrospective that covered forty years of Elaine Sturtevant's work which in turn, and albeit idiosyncratically, traced forty years of contemporary art from its origins to present-day practices. In a building renowned for its surprising traversals and reversals, I was now experiencing my own mental *mise-en-abîme*, a conceptual slippage in time and space whereby the sinuous reality and singularity of, say, a well-known Andy Warhol painting or the incontrovertible density of a lead sculpture by Anselm Kiefer were not only in question but the very authority, authorship, and authenticity associated with such works was being renounced.

Looking at these contemporaneous 'remakes' of works that have since become not only key to our understanding of contemporary art but famous in their own time, it felt as if the superficiality of the visual was being held to conceptual and critical account. The patina of Sturtevant's works – the surface ageing of what are now forty-year-old artworks – is there to behold as a verifiable fact of their age if not their conceptual

intent. This was not about images as such; this was about thinking through and beyond, if not before, the very notion and ideal of the image itself as a signifier of history, authenticity, singularity, authorship and difference. The brutal truth in question was simple: these are not copies but original works by Elaine Sturtevant that happen to explore and investigate the very notion of originality.

In conclusion

In the final chapter of *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, 1999, Thomas Crow noted how the work of Elaine Sturtevant 'acutely defined the limitations of any history of art wedded to the image'.[9] We return here to the sense that Sturtevant, despite appearances, so to speak, is not that interested in the image per se and that the image is merely the manifest coat-hanger upon which to hang investigations into the thought processes that bring an artwork into being. What, she also seems to ask, is the thought structure that disallows, for whatever reason, an artist to repeat another artist's work in any form other than that which can be recuperated under an understanding of homage or forgery? This is an interrogative as opposed to an affirmative gesture that threatens to implode – through an investigation of an artwork's 'understructure' – the very models and structures of thought that enable art to be seen as art. If we apply this to the aesthetic dimension of enquiry then Sturtevant's critique and the radicality of her art is rendered less suspect and more clear. The order of thought that enables a regime of visibility to come into being is reliant upon a manifest and misplaced ideal of originality that needs to be both relativised and revealed for what it is: an occasional but none too stable prop that was intended to uphold an outmoded and largely modernist ideal of authenticity. The brutal truth is thereafter all the more clear: originality can be and indeed is a process of repetition.

How did Sturtevant place Warhol in aesthetic inverted commas and, thereafter, make a contribution to how we understand his and other artist's work? She did this, I would suggest by way of a provisional conclusion, by becoming an uncanny mirror to the very practices she was engaging with; a form of aesthetic 'haunting' that revisits the primal scene of thought as a moment of instability and opens it up to the play of repetition. Writing of this 'return', Belinda Bowring has observed that 'the viewer is compelled to re-enter the work and reassess the impact that it made, so that the comeback that Sturtevant stages is not one of Warhol, Marilyn, 'the 1960s', or her own career, but that of every initial encounter with the object and, more importantly, the power contained in that moment'.[10] To this end, Elaine Sturtevant's work holds up a mirror to the aesthetic practices of her age and leaves us with an uncanny impression of the history of contemporary art. If the uncanny can be understood as the destabilisation of one way of thinking (realism, for example) and its replacement with another way of thinking (say, fantasy), she produces a moment when the edifices of originality and authenticity, their agreed conditions of possibility, crumble into the unreality of difference through forms of repetition.[11] Sturtevant's uncanny aesthetic 'returns', finally, question the ontology of the aesthetic moment and propose an investigation into how objects and ideas come into being. In doing so, they propose that any idealisation of originality is irredeemably attended by a 'haunting' of sorts, a conceptual slippage or sleight of hand that will inevitably question the very notions of originality and authenticity as foundational ideals in the history of contemporary art.