

## Art Review. “Innovation” or “Kidnapping”: Elaine Sturtevant in Seville

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Seville, Spain, on an oppressively steamy summer afternoon. Heat shimmers off the stone paving of the former Monasterio de la Cartuja, situated on the outskirts of the ancient city. During the typical siesta hour, quiet loosens the sense of time, as if the fourteenth century were near and the monks still moved through cloisters at a patient cadence. The site now serves as the Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo, CAAC, which is hosting Spain’s first retrospective of American artist Elaine Sturtevant (1924–2014), titled *Sturtevant: The Echo of Innovation* (February 27 to September 21, 2025). The artist is best known for decades of rigorous “repetitions” of contemporaries from the early 1960s, engaging the work of Marcel Duchamp, Andy Warhol, Joseph Beuys, Claes Oldenburg, and Félix González-Torres, among others. By the late 1990s, Sturtevant declared that copying no longer concerned her. The work pivoted to digital constructions assembled from scavenged cultural shards.

Soon after the opening, a sharp rejoinder arrived from Spanish art critic Ángela Molina (Molina, 2025), who published an article in the national newspaper *El País* titled “Elaine Sturtevant and the Multiple Abduction of Authorship” (translated). “The work cannot be located in the discourse of copy ... I’m talking about the power and autonomy of originality, and the force and pervasiveness of art” (Sturtevant cited in Kittelmann, 2005, p. 20). Declaring in the 1960s that her work constituted an original operation rather than a copy placed Sturtevant in a decade of neglect by critics, institutions, and the market. During the Appropriation movement of the 1980s, however, what had been labeled imitation became

a prized currency in the very market she often rebuffed. Molina contends that the show, under the strong force of institutional framing, risks kidnapping the work beneath the banners of authorship or innovation, a move that runs counter to the artist's intention to unsettle entrenched mental structures and power arrangements.

For Molina, an exhibition that assembles Sturtevant's work from museums and private collections can read as "un store de los auténticos" (a real store) rather than a renewed challenge to the original artistic intention. Jimena Blázquez Abascal, the director of CAAC and chief curator of the exhibition, explained during the interview that "She (Sturtevant) wanted to engage audiences critically, not polemically" (personal communication, June 2025). If the exhibition is understood as a deliberate attempt to confront the audience with the tension between Sturtevant's work and the architectural typology, its appearance as innovative becomes more comprehensible. As visitors move through corridors, chapels, and courtyards, saturated with sacred motifs, the works unfold in varied configurations, inviting a reading of her sixty-year inquiry as a progression from the power of Copy to the gravity of death, to the exhaustion of Information.

Entering through the Puerta de Tierra, before the Capilla de Afuera on the right, a portico with a pair of wooden doors comes into view. Flanking the doorway are two framed ceramic tiles: on the left, St. John the Baptist; on the right, St. John the Evangelist. On the side wall, over peeled and scarred paint, a red and black offset print, close to A4 in size, is pasted at the same height. It displays a mugshot-style pairing, front and profile, with the legend "\$2,000 REWARD" beneath it (Figure 1). Against the chapel's spiritual guardians, the print reads as an interruption. Titled *Duchamp Wanted*, it is the first artwork visitors encounter. Created in 1992, the piece alludes to Marcel Duchamp's 1923 readymade poster *Wanted: \$2,000 Reward*. Two curatorial decisions frame the encounter: placing an artwork outdoors without protection and setting this criminal-style poster in parallel with two Christian figures. Under this arrangement, three habits of visual consumption are deliberately unsettled: first, as Sturtevant intends, seeing gives way to thinking through her repetition of Duchamp's antiretinal strategy; second, the aura of the museum and the artwork is punctured; third, equating the criminal portrait with major religious figures in Christianity dislodges fixed hierarchies between religious iconography and contemporary art, activating both the status of the artwork and its new cultural context.



**Figure 1**

Sturtevant,  
'Duchamp Wanted'

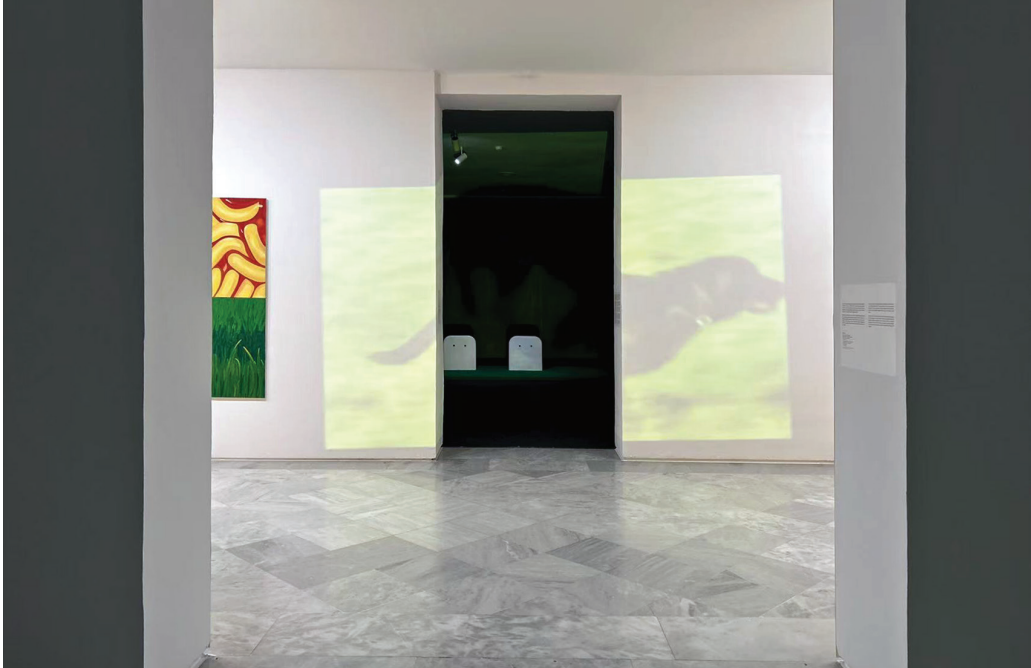
Note: Photo by Ruohong Wu,  
10 July 2025 at the  
exhibition *The Echo  
of Innovation*, CAAC,  
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The unusual setup extends into a stretched rectangular white cube. At first glance, the space resembles a crowded shop: around eight closely arranged Marilyn Monroe diptychs ranging in size from roughly 30 by 40 centimeters to two by three meters, accompanied by two American flags, two large striped paintings on black backgrounds, and several comic-style canvases. Off this corridor-like room, a side chamber gathers everyday objects, including a bicycle wheel, a bottle rack, and a street sign. Across the long axis sit two more rooms: one lined with flower prints, ranging from small to large; the other displays a pair of white ceramic tombstones on artificial grass and a mannequin in a white bridal gown. For visitors unfamiliar with Sturtevant, the dense and irregular sequence of the monastic cloister, with narrow rooms and eccentric openings, can feel disorderly, as if works by Warhol, Duchamp, Jasper Johns, Frank Stella, Robert Gober, and Roy Lichtenstein had been carelessly swept together. The effect leans toward Molina's argument of an institutional souvenir store.

Then a projection appears: a black dog running in a loop while the projector slowly rotates, the image washing over *Lichtenstein Girl with Hair Ribbon* (1966–67), *Gober Partially Buried Sinks* (1997), and the four white walls (Figure 2). This shift in medium and the anonymous canine protagonist signal Sturtevant's 1990s turn to digital repetition that collapses interior and exterior representation. The work, titled *Re-Run* (2007), suggests that social power has moved from physical institutions to cybernetic systems that expose everything, generating endless circuits of representation and cognitive overload. Everything seems exposed yet remains concealed, provisional, and trapped in circularity. Image upon image, information upon information, the sequence corrals static objects that stand for cultural and political victims into inescapable loops. History's weight folds into a present that repeats as if the future were already here, and figures from the past, once stable, now confront a new regime of value through the chaotic layout of work and the overlaid images.

## Figure 2

Sturtevant, 'Re-Run'



Note: Photo by Ruohong Wu, 10 July 2025 at the exhibition *The Echo of Innovation*, CAAC, Seville.  
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To zoom out from the exhibition to its architectural context, the site records layered regimes of power and belief, from a twelfth-century Moorish pottery kiln under Islamic al-Andalus, through the Christian Reconquest and the fourteenth-century monastery, to a nineteenth-century tile factory, to the 1992 World's Fair, and now an art center. The exhibition clarifies a double tempo in which mutable and persistent cultural rhythms intersect. The main exhibition areas, where Sturtevant's repetitive paintings and video works are displayed, are set apart from the *Duchamp Wanted* poster. Visitors walk a long path under the bright, unshielded sun, crossing the expansive patio of Ave María before entering the solemn Gothic church, built in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and expanded in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. From there, they move into the inner courtyard, where austere stone sculptures of monks create a quiet, reflective atmosphere. The route continues to the Sala Capitular, the chapter hall once used for critical monastic meetings and later serving as the burial site of the Ribera family, including the wall tombs of Pedro Enríquez and Catalina de Ribera, who were guards of the monastery. After confronting the presence of mortality in the age of knights, visitors reach the entrance to Sturtevant's luminous exhibition, a transition that brings

them back to contemporary concerns. Simultaneously, Gober's *Partially Buried Sinks* and the yellow wallpaper, entirely composed of the word "KILL," (Figure 3) ingeniously pulls the journey into an endless loop of anxiety.

### Figure 3

Sturtevant, 'Warhol Flower' Painting Over the 'Kill Wall'



Note: Photo by Ruohong Wu, 10 July 2025 at the exhibition *The Echo of Innovation*, CAAC, Seville.  
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"Sturtevant's concern is not with selected individual artworks..." observed Gerd de Vries, the key figure who introduced Sturtevant to the German art scene (Kittelman, Maculan, & Blistène, 2005, p. 34). This exhibition aligns with de Vries's perspective, emphasizing Sturtevant's approach as a sustained inquiry rather than a simple shift from repetitive paintings and sculptures to digital reworkings. As Byung-Chul Han has argued, the violence of sovereignty in pre-modern society has evolved into a form of positivity, a hidden violence cloaked in the guise of freedom, shifting from the physical to the psychological realm, and from collective revenge to individual burnout within a neoliberal order (Han, 2018, pp. 88–89). Here, Sturtevant underscores how violence operates across society as a progression and loop rather than as isolated acts. Crucially, her work loosens the grip of authorship and functions less as a fixed artistic identity, serving instead

as a mirror to past and present. The contribution of Sturtevant's lifelong exploration of repetition reminds us that power structures have never truly dissipated. Immersing decades of her work within this seven-hundred-year architectural organism evokes Karl Marx's observation: "History repeats itself, first as tragedy, then as farce" (1852). In this light, the artistic polemics may cool.

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