



Jana Sterbak, *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic*, 1987. Collection: Musée national d'art moderne, Paris. Courtesy Galerie René Blouin, Montréal. Photo: Louis Lussier.

Chapter Twenty

Jana Sterbak: Materials and Their Truth

Jana Sterbak is a Czech artist by birth and upbringing who moved to Canada in 1968, at the age of thirteen, in response to the crushing of the "Prague Spring," and subsequently moved to Paris. From 1978 to 1990 she showed her work primarily in Canada, and since has showed it widely in Canada, the United States, and Europe.

Sterbak is an artist who honors the truth of the materials she uses—from the famous "meat dress" (formally entitled *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic*, 1987) made of stitched-together flank steaks, to cast lead pieces whose sheer weight is a hidden but meaningful part of their presence, to store-bought objects like tape measures (in *Measuring Tape Cones*, 1979) that plainly proclaim their identity. Thus in her work, as in many late and post-Modern oeuvres, there is in effect an iconography of materials. The materials are not only to be contemplated visually but also to be "read."

The tape measures, for example, embody the theme of the "measure," the unit or scale or template of physical reality and especially of the human being, for whose clothing, shaped to the body, these measuring devices are intended. Sterbak's concern with the concept of the template of humanity relates her work to important European late Modernist oeuvres such as Joseph Beuys's, Janis Kounellis's, and Marcel Broodthaers's. The cast lead works might similarly seem to suggest alchemical associations and the theme of transformation. This resonance, though present, is not highly prominent, however, as the other materials of the alchemical *opus* are not present to interact with the lead, and some of the cast works are not lead but iron. In any case, lead is the base material to be transformed, not the supposedly transformative substance itself. So the lead again suggests the body, its weight, its subjection to gravity, its open invitation to a transformation whose agency is not seen. Both the lead and iron castings, by their weight, inertia, and resistance to change, again suggest the bodily aspect of the person with its various insistent limitations and its mute cry for release from them.

Above all, of course, the meat dress focuses with unsurpassed intensity on the theme of the bodily nature and its mortality. Perhaps an ironic residue of a scene of carnage, a token left, say, by a fiendish murderer for the police, the piece has both the smell and the look of death deep inside, ineradicably inside, the human "mea-

sure," which in this case is represented by the tailor's mannequin the meat dress hangs on.

Still, in the meat dress, as in the alchemical associations of lead and the tape measures' suggestion of a remeasured or rescaled reality, there is also an association of escape. When the meat dress was first shown, a young woman wore it on the night of the opening; subsequently it was hung on a mannequin and allowed to decay in the gallery space for the duration of the show (smell was definitely a material of the piece). In the emptying of the dress there is a suggestion of a human self, which can escape somehow from the meat-nature, which has in fact done so. Involving cultural associations of the young woman as a Romantic-era signifier of the spirit, the piece suggests the escape of the spirit from the body, or the possibility of somehow transcending the body.

The theme of transcendence is common in religious literature and in much of the world's art that still resonates to its ancient association with religions. Perhaps the classic instance is in the Orphic tradition of ancient Greece. In the remnants of that tradition preserved by Plato, Pindar, and others we learn that the body was regarded as the prison, or the tomb, of the soul (the Orphic motto *soma sema* means "the body is the grave"). The soul fell into the bondage of flesh through some primal crime committed during its life among the gods, and it is through the weary burden of the body's limitations that the soul must undergo its punishment, or imprisonment, finally to reascend to the company of the gods on high. The body is both the place of the soul's bondage and the potential instrument of its release.

The thematic drift of Sterbak's materials toward the theme of mortality and the body is deepened by her direct involvement in so-called Body Art as well as in the genre of art *about* the body. Much art, of course, back to Christian crucifixions and Greek athletes, has been about the body in one way or another. But that theme has become especially prominent recently, not with an implication of transcendence or religious feeling so much as a deconstructive response to the post-Modern sense of the decentering and indefiniteness of the self. The body is a down-to-earth materialistic channel through which to approach the theme of the self, and its implications of vulnerability and ephemerality mock the pretensions of much earlier art about the body, which covertly featured affirmations of the soul. Such works which deconstruct the self by way of the body have been offered up lately not only by male artists such as John Coplans and Robert Gober but perhaps even more prominently in the work of women such as Kiki Smith and Helen Chadwick. Sterbak's work is ambiguous in this respect: Tough-minded in its focus on the decay of the flesh, it nevertheless implies a more tender-minded, partially hidden theme of transcendence. In this ambiguity or double-edgedness it might be compared to the work of Marina Abramovic and Rebecca Horn.

In *The Artist as Combustible* (1986), a young woman stands naked with a heap of gunpowder on her head, which is ignited; a pillar of flame emerges from her skull—yogically speaking from her *sahasrara chakra*, the uppermost energy point at the birth crease in the cranium through which ascent to higher realms is considered to be effected in the yogic tradition. While there is something horrifying to the

image, it nevertheless suggests that moment when, in the yogic tradition, the inner energy is at last released upward, like the escape of the soul in the Orphic model.

I Want You to Feel the Way I Do (the Dress), 1985, is an electrified dress of metal mesh; as in the meat dress, the garment is empty, the inhabitant has fled. The feminist message is that the woman feels painfully electrified by the enforcement of her role as sex object (wearing a dress so one can easily reach under it), and wants to communicate this fact to men. A more Orphic suggestion is also present: that through the shock of bondage in the body, or of the realization of that bondage, a potential for release is found. Still, that potential is dangerous to the body and involves its destruction.

Seduction Couch (1986) is an electrically charged chaise lounge of perforated steel. The process of human mating, with all its romanticized reputation of ecstasies, is presented as a kind of punishment, like an electric chair, through which the murder of the soul and its incarceration in the tomb of the body is perpetuated rather than transcended.

Along with the stark theme of the flesh, Sterbak's portrayal of humanity also involves mechanization and the machine. *Remote Control 1 and 2* (1989) were aluminum structures with motorized wheels, designed on the lines of a Victorian-era hooped skirt or crinoline. The references to clothing point to, among other things, the idea of the bondage of women within gender stereotypes reflected in articles of dress which minimize the wearer's autonomy and self-sufficiency. At the top of these structures a fabric harness is hung and into it a young woman is placed. Suspended within the oversized symbolic garment, her feet unable to reach the floor, she steers it through the available space by a kind of "joystick," prevented by its voluminous circumference from directly contacting the surrounding world of experience. (Both the mechanization of Horn's work and certain works of Klaus Rinke, especially those in which he is suspended overhead, come to mind.)

In terms of the quasi-Orphic thematics implicit in some of the works, this piece suggests the helplessness and bondage of the person within the constraints of the body. It also involves social stereotyping and the power structures it buttresses. While not an explicitly or exclusively feminist artist, Sterbak's work is directed primarily toward themes involved with female humanity and its particular problems of autonomy within a patriarchal system. The human, it is implied, is made into a kind of machine or robot by the social and gender categories that constrict it.

As a part of its contemplation of the thematics of the body and its clothing, Sterbak's work focuses specifically on the reality of gender difference. *Hairshirt* (1992) is a transparent sleeveless shirt with male chest hair woven into it, which is to be worn by a woman, her breasts showing from behind the hairy male chest. There is an immediate suggestion of the idea of androgyne, of the human as a bisexed being whose destiny can be fulfilled only by a realization of both aspects. In addition the piece comments on power: The delicate breasts of the woman are bound within the hairy chest of the male, which holds them bondage for its desires. While the hair shirt is a piece of clothing, it does not so much protect its wearer as it does hold her prisoner.

As art in the last generation or two has moved increasingly out into the everyday world, turning its back on the sublime, various types of traditionally non-art objects have entered the art realm. Many artists have made furniture-like things, both aesthetic sculptures and functional worldly objects at the same time. Similarly, some artists have imprinted their sensibility upon clothing.

The genre is important in recent European and American art. Beuys's empty felt suit suggested the idea that humanity had temporarily vacated its identity—through the war and the Holocaust—and that its measure or shape awaited some new humanity to occupy it. Broodthaers's vests as well as works by Claes Oldenburg and other male artists reveal their tendency to view humanity as primarily male, presenting male clothing as a generic template for all humans.

More recently this genre has become associated with women artists such as Judith Shea, whose works deal with the ancient tradition of the sculpture of the figure along with the implications that clothing has for the social contextualizing of the female. Lisa Milroy's dressworks tend to emphasize the childishness of the roles thrust upon women in patriarchal societies.

Sterbak's series of dress-related works features empty women's garments such as the electrified dress alongside bigendered pieces like *Hairshirt*. The empty women's garments, with their suggestions of a falsified or vacated identity, tend also to involve signs of powerlessness or torment, as in the electrified dress or the suspended skirts.

Vest (1992) is the upper half of a military-style uniform mounted on a tailor's mannequin, with the usually open ends of the sleeves stitched together so the hands cannot reach free. The sculpture shows the male as empowered because of his access to official positions, but at the same time, with its sleeves linked together as in a straitjacket, implies his powerlessness in subjection to the social role that the uniform signifies. The corresponding garment piece, *Jacket* (1992), is revealingly different: The sleeves of a plain woolen jacket are linked together in the same position of claustrophobic helplessness. The man is characterized as a uniform, an official functionary of the patriarchal order, while the woman is signified by a featureless and anonymous garment which bears no sign of office. Both are equally disempowered by the straitjackets' grasp of their hands, yet their social positions are very different. There is an implication that the social forms in place today simply do not work, either for those supposedly empowered or for the disenfranchised.

Sterbak's focus on the body and on the social torments inflicted upon it in the name of gender leads naturally to an element of danger or threat in her oeuvre. *Seduction Couch*, as mentioned above, invites the viewer to recline while at the same time threatening him and her with electrocution. *The Artist as Combustible* elicits feelings of bodily dread, as do the meat dress and the electrified dress.

An edge of danger has been important art material, in works from Yves Klein's famous *Leap into the Void* (1961), in which he leapt from a second-story ledge to the pavement below, to Chris Burden's *Shoot* (1972), in which he was shot in the arm with a .22-caliber rifle in a gallery. In those cases it was the artist's own

body which was threatened, in the tradition of Body Art. In other cases, a kind of threat is implicitly directed from the artist toward the audience.

Such aggression against the audience is a longstanding practice of artist-provocateurs. In the fifth century B.C., the comic playwright Aristophanes had his cast attack the audience in the middle of the play, first throwing water, then wheat chaff, on them. Early in this century Eisenstein and Meyerhold had an actor enter the stage by way of a tightrope over the audience.

In the Performance Art tradition of the last thirty years, this way of conceiving the artist-audience relationship has been especially foregrounded. One could find the roots of that tradition in Dada and in more recent sources such as Klein, who conceived, but did not execute, a piece which involved handcuffing the audience to their seats. One could cite numerous pieces by Burden, such as the work in which he nailed shut the door to the exhibition space, trapping the opening-night crowd in a closed room. Carolee Schneeman has swung herself over the audience hanging from a long rope. Dennis Oppenheim once set up a skeet-throwing device to hurl a clay pigeon into the gallery space every few seconds.

Sterbak's work is sometimes physically intimidating in that way, as when, in *Remote Control 1*, the mechanized vehicles cruise around the gallery space. But mostly there are menacing associations in a theatrical sense: the *Seduction Couch* and related works suggest a scenario in which the viewer might fantasize about participating, but the works do not actually pose an imminent threat to the body.

Sterbak's work seems to rise from the currents and crosscurrents of political and social change in Europe and the world—the separation of Eastern Europe as well as the various stratifications within society. At the same time it rises from the tides of aesthetic ferment that attend such moments of social and political change.

Golem (1979–1982) is a series of small cast-metal sculptures laid out in a pattern on a gallery floor; they are representations of human bodily parts: eight lead hearts, a bronze spleen painted red, a lead throat, a bronze tongue, a bronze stomach and a rubber one, a lead hand, a lead penis, a bronze ear—as if these were among the array of parts that the legendary maker of the Golem might have put together to make his monster. All cast in metal, they occupy the floor with a deep inertia. Are they fragments of a new humanity about to be made, or of an old one which has fallen apart? Who or what is the Golem? Does humanity make the monster history or does history make the Golem man?

Sterbak's work seems to interrogate human destiny and its relationship to history in complex ways. Human aspiration is seen on the one hand as lofty, as, in effect, an aspiration to escape the inherited limits of the body. But at the same time the central message may be its formidable entrapment—in the body, the gender group, the surrounding society, the whole monstrous grasp of history upon it all.