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Jana Sterbak's Three Dresses in Relations to Freudian Theory

by

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INTRODUCTION

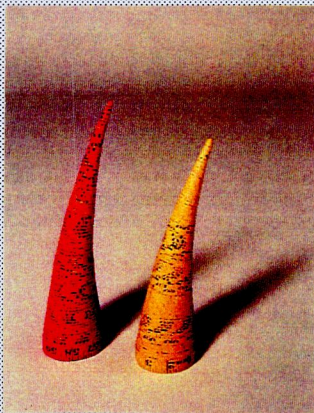
The opening pages give a brief account of the artist Jana Sterbak's upbringing in Czechoslovakia and her first museum exhibition, establishes a core for her subsequent three dresses. These are focused on individually in each of the ensuing chapters. The three dresses can be brought together as expressing a continuity, they act as a critique of certain Freudian ideas.

In Chapter II: Flesh Dress (1987) Sigmund Freud's translation of male fetishism is discussed. From there a connection with female fetishism is suggested.

In Chapter III: Remote Control Dress (1989) is related to the individual's basic need for self-preservation which also relates to Freudian theory.

In Chapter IV: Electric Dress (1984) focuses on female masochism, taking reference from Freud's essay on masochistic behaviour in the development of the little girl.

CHAPTER I
BEGINNINGS



Measuring Tape Cones
(1979)

Jana Sterbak had her first group exhibition in the Musée D'art Contemporain in Montreal in Nineteen Eighty Two. Artists included were Serge Murhpy and Sylvain P. Cousineau. The show, organised by France Gascon, was called Menues Manoeuvre and consisted of work in small dimensions. Jana Sterbak showed a wide range of strange objects. Among others were measuring tapes curled into cone shaped sculptures, thread cubes and an arrangement of body organs displayed across the gallery floor. The works were fashioned from an assortment of materials, some conventional such as plaster and steel, but others seemed more associated with a sewing room than an art gallery. The artists choice of materials were experimental playful and untraditional, asserting the gender of its maker.

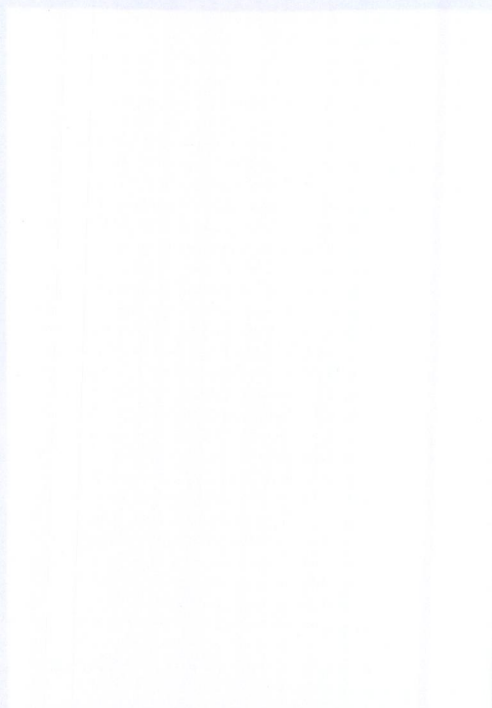
The rigid and depersonalised feature of Sterbak's *Measuring Tape Cones* (p.3,5) and *Thread Cubes* help to establish her along side Minimalist sensibility. Sterbak's work subjects to interrogation the idea that anything systematic, geometric or consisting of pure form is masculine, while the organic, the natural, the personalised or a certain 'Formlessness' is attributed to femininity; a typical way of thinking that insists on distinguishing between male and female as they are stereotypically represented in society and nature. Abstract forms depicted in Minimalist imagery extend sexual differences that serve to limit and disempower women. The square and the cone considered by many Minimalist artists as "a highly intellectual geometric formulation that reflects the logical order of mans' mind". (Haskell,1992, p.135) This notion is represented by Sterbak as impotent and lacking in any intellectual depth. Sterbak's use of materials to demonstrate the defeat of aggression by vulnerability is a strength and an empowerment in itself. Minimalist artist Agnes Martin declared that:

Nothing is weaker than water
Yet, for attacking what is hard
and tough, nothing surpasses it,
nothing equals it. The principle,
that what is weak overcomes what
is strong. And what is yielding
conquers what is resistant.
Is know to everyone.

(Haskell,1992,p142)



Measuring Tape Cones (1979)



Sterbak's work favours the low over the high, the humble over the impressive which is not unfamiliar to the works of Joerge Bataille. Bataille worships a kind of 'formlessness' or 'headlessness', the body and all its disgusting habits are violently opposed to all dignity. Bataille agrees that the energy of the obscene and the sickening may momentarily be brought to a higher degree in the elevated mind, but when it reaches its full summit it becomes "*the ejaculation of idealist religion and philosophical systems*" (Bataille, 1985, p13). At the most advanced level of evolution of absolute comprehension and understanding is blindness, humanity is reduced to animality. Bataille writes:

Thus formless is not only an
adjective having a giving meaning,
but a term that serves to bring
things down in the world,
generally requiring that each thing have
its form. What it designates has no rights
in any sense and gets itself squashed
everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm ...
On the other hand, affirming that the universe
resembles nothing and is only formless amounts
to saying that the universe is something like a
spider or spit.

(Bataille, 1985, p.31)

The term Bataille uses "to bring things down in the world" is not far from a discussion to Sterbak's *Golem : Objects as Sensations* (p.7) in which the organs of the body are taken from their elevated position and reduced to the level of the foot; the museum floor. The foot being the most base of all organs is commonly exposed to much filth and deformities, such as corns, bunions, warts, verrucas and one takes into account the phrase 'his/her hands are as dirty as feet'. As for classic foot fetishism leading to the obsession with feet, this indicates that it is a phenomena of base seduction. This work parodies the glossiness and sterility attached to images of sexual pleasures. This state of mind, uncommon in Sterbak's work, is humorous, iconoclastic and one wonders if these objects of the sensations would be objects of sexual fetishism if worn outside the body and subjected to visual scrutiny.



Golem: Objects as Sensations
(1979 - 1982)



Sterbak's tendency towards a sense of the absurd, as well as her vision of the darker side of human life might be traced back to her up-bringing in Prague. She was the daughter of parents who were politically engaged in Czechoslovakia in the years before the Russian invasion in Nineteen Sixty Eight.

She learned to be doubtful of authority and to disclose critical opinions through humorous and ironic allusions. This was both a custom of day to day life and a main feature of Czech identity, expressed by writers such as Franz Kafka and Karel Capek whom she continued to read after she left Czechoslovakia.

When she arrived in Canada with her parents in Nineteen Sixty Eight, she noticed that life in a political system that was the direct opposite of the Marxist-Lennist government of Czechoslovakia reinforced her sense of irony: *"It was amusing" she had said, to watch the complete reversal of the values which were the foundation of my childhood*" (Nemiroff, 1991, p14). What Canada and Czechoslovakia both offered was an experience of colonised identity; political for Czechoslovakia who for many years was under the control of one or another foreign power and economic in the case of Canada. Milan Kundera's statement at the Fourth Congress of the Czechoslovak writers' union in June Nineteen Sixty Seven, said of Czech culture:

There has never been anything
self-evident about the existence
of the Czech nation, and one
of its most distinctive traits
in fact, has been the
unobviousness of that existence

(Nemiroff, 1991, p.40)

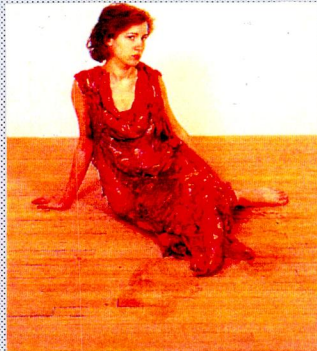
Through this experience Sterbak developed an accurate sense of the conflict between dependency and freedom that also exists on a personal level in the difficulty we have in determining between what we are and need and what we have learned to be and desire. Therefore it is not surprising that the theme of identity should become a major pre-occupation in the work of Jana Sterbak.

What could deal more thoroughly with the question of identity than Sterbak's three dresses, Electric Dress (1984-5), Flesh Dress (1987) and Remote Control Dress (1989). Each costume deals with the artist's pre-occupation with the body and its double which invokes the traditional mind/body dualism. This double, the garment, is the earliest form through which the soul is imagined.

In his essay on the 'uncanny' Freud relates the double with the individuals first 'narcissistic projection' and its obsession with transcendence. Influenced by Freud, the Surrealists replaced images of the body with a mannequin or a dressmakers dummy, to allow a perverse twist between the artificial and the real.

Sterbak's use of materials and their relationship with the works of Joerge Bataille, especially his notion of the 'informe' or 'formless' are also an important aspect of her three garments.

CHAPTER II
FLESH DRESS



One of Jana Sterbak's most powerful pieces of work is her *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic* (1987). Fashioned from twenty pounds of raw flank steak, the garment resembles the body of an abraded animal. When Sterbak's Montréal gallerist asked her to exhibit the piece with him in Nineteen Eighty Seven she was pleased because the gallery, having a small unventilated room, was perfect for it. People would have to stand close enough to inspect its gruesome presence. Like most of her work the garment aims to hit the viewer at a 'gut level'; the very core of human existence. Initially, when the medieval type of dress is hung, its colour is a fresh glossy red, knotted with rich veins of white fat. Afterwards, if the meat is not cured with salt, it eventually shrinks to a more masculine brand of solid body armour.

As a female garment, it has been subjected to many feminist readings, insisting that anything fleshy, soft or in close connection with the body is ultimately female. But, the natural decay of the dress suggests otherwise. As well as being a medieval dress, it is similar to the type of clothing, men of English knighthood wore during the middle ages. In fact, Sterbak avoids fixed interpretations associated with her work. She would rather not be associated with any 'ism' not even feminism: "*I prefer open-ended situations*" says the artists "*and I'm not out to be didactic that's not the role of the artist*" (Jackson, 1989, p.67). She believes that most of her successful works have multiple meanings. One of the primary intentions of this work for her, because she trained as an art historian, is the "Vanitas" motif:

It's a memento mori.
Also, when I did that piece I
was living in New York, and
it was at the time when a
lot of money was being made
really quickly on the stock
market. A lot of people were
acting as if they were omnipotent.

(Nemiroff, 1991, p.46)

By connecting the art historical term “vanitas” with “Anorexia” in the title of the piece, Sterbak focuses our attention on a contemporary problem. The word “Vanitas” describes a painted memento mori than warns of the transience of human existence, for instance, through images of burning candles and stacks of fresh food. Early viewers of Vanitas subjects were warned against the uselessness of the human body and its materialist comforts. Instead they were asked to devote themselves to their spiritual lives.

What emerges through Sterbak’s attraction to reminders of death is an awareness of the Greco-Christian tradition that acknowledges human existence as two discrete entities, the mind and its body or the soul and its earthly container. Traditionally, the spiritual self has been preferred over that of the body. The body was conceived as the basis of all corrupt desire. In her discussion on the mind/body duality Susan R. Bordo writes:

Plato, Augustine and most explicitly Descartes - provide instructions, rules or models of how to gain control over the body, with the ultimate aim of learning to live without it that is to achieve intellectual independence from the lure of the body’s illusions to become impervious to its distractions, and, most importantly to kill off its desires and hungers.

(Bordo, 1993, p.142)

If realised, such extreme attempts at bodily repression can provoke a false sense of omnipotence. Control over physical desires is often confused with power in itself. We have moved from a religious society to a consumer society in which the flesh has become meat. The body is considered to be the focus of supervision and force, in a world where many people have little representation. It is omnipotence that approximates to the connection

between “Vanitas” and “Anorexia”. The anorexic body as sufferer of self-inflicted starvation and self-discipline is an example of this desperate attempt to have control over one’s own identity. Sterbak’s meat dress stands as a visual example of the anorexic’s deluded attempt to use mind over matter.

In *Female Fetishism : A New Look*, Lorraine Gammon and Merja Makinen argued that Anorexia constitutes a food fetishism. It is comparable to sexual fetishism though different enough to come under a category of its own. To understand the type of fetishism that occurs in Sterbak’s *Flesh Dress* we must first know exactly what fetishism is. Although fetishism can be applied to the behaviour of every individual our concerns here are to examine it in its pathological or highest degree.

Freud has stated that a pathological fetishism takes place when an inanimate object or a particular part of the person’s body comes to be the focal point of stimulation instead of the person as a whole:

A certain degree of fetishism is
thus habitually present in [normal]
love..... The situation only
becomes pathological when the
longing for the fetish passes
beyond the point of being
merely a necessary condition
attached to the sexual object
and actually takes the place
of the normal aim, and, further
when the fetish becomes detached
from a particular individual
and become the sole sexual object

(Gammon, 1994, p.37)

Freud continued by indicating that the fetish object is phallic, representing the penis, that the female lacks. Freud’s phallicising of the fetish object is seen as the result of the child’s entry into sexuality. Taking the little boy as the norm, Freud argues that the boy moves toward heterosexuality when

castration anxiety upsets the relationship between the mother and the child. The boy's realisation that his mother does not possess a penis is understood by him to mean that she was castrated by the all powerful father. The boy fears that the father will also castrate him and in rejecting his 'inferior' mother sides with the father, and takes up a heterosexual position. The little boy's entry into 'normal' sexuality is due to the shock of seeing his mother's "lack".

A fetish is established at the point, when the boy denies that the female has been castrated (he refuses sexual difference), since to believe so would put his own possession of a penis at risk. The boy gives to the female a penis - substitute in order to allow him to perform sexual intercourse with a woman. The fetish object is a protection against the horror of female castration.

In the same essay Freud developed the 'splitting process' in which the male fetishist oscillates between the two opposing views that women have a penis (he denies sexual difference, hence his own phallus is safe) and they do not (a penis - substitute is acquired - the fetish), this prevents the fetishist from declaring sexual difference and taking up a homosexual position. The fetish object is chosen for its closeness to the trauma of seeing the female's 'lack' (metonymic) or as a substitute for the penis (metaphoric). The splitting process is therefore the oscillation between idealising and repressing the object of desire. Fur and velvet are chosen for their closeness to pubic hair, and underclothes are chosen for their closeness to the moment of undressing. The fetishist represses the denial of the females castration and concentrates on the object seen just before the moment of revelation.

Sterbak's dress, as a garment is a classic example of male sexual fetishism. It is expected to keep covered the female 'lack', but as a study of the inner terrain of emotions, in its most blatant form it produces the horror of the



*Vanitas : Flesh Dress For an
Albino Anorectic (1987)*



female sexual organ on the outside, defiantly held open like a wound for all to see and admire. As an analogue to both male and female attributes Sterbak's dress connects traditional sexual fetishism (garment) with food fetishism.

Freud claimed that women, rarely, if ever fetishise, because fetishism is the result of the little boy seeing his mother's genitalia. It is a method of coping with the possibility of his own castration, through an alternative process of accepting and denying what he has seen. The fetish object is a replacement for the female phallus and since the little girl does not possess one she does not suffer the same anxiety. (Castration anxiety).

Lorraine Gammon argues for the connection between eating disorders (anorexia, bulimia, obesity) and sexual fetishism. Bulimia in particular, the bingeing and regurgitating of food is similar to Freud's 'splitting process' mentioned earlier; the bulimic oscillates between a method of 'doing' and 'undoing' the food he/she eats. Favouring high calorific foods such as chocolate and ice cream, over the healthier fruit and vegetables, is a specialisation analogous to the fetishist's precise choice of objects such as shoes, stockings, velvet, silk etc. Food fetishism is regarded by Gammon as a 'perversion' rather than a neurosis; a "perversion of the drive for nourishment" (Gammon, 1994, p.127). Food normally used to maintain the health and function of the body is actually rejected by the anorexic to achieve the opposite result. Like sexual fetishism, eating disorders often entail a 'transitional mechanism' for dealing with repressed unconscious conflicts. Kim Chernin is astute in her perception of this:

Much of the obsessive
quality of an eating disorder
arises precisely from the
fact that food is being
asked to serve a
transformative function it
cannot carry by itself

(Gammon, 1994 p.122)

Just as sexual fetishism makes a fetish of an object, bulimia fetishes food which is only momentarily ingested.

Lorraine Gammon goes on to argue that fetishism is as much about individuation (separation from the mother's breast) as it is about castration. In her observation of Hilda Bruch's notorious book *Eating Disorders : Obesity, Anorexia Nervosa and the Person Within*, eating disorders are related to the mother's inaccurate responses to all the baby's temperamental cries (for comfort, cold, tired etc. as well as hunger) are associated with milk or feeding. The baby becomes incapable of distinguishing between hunger and bodily discomforts. In later life, the adult eats to cope with deeper psychological problems. Authority over one's hunger is a coping and control mechanism for the anorexic.

Lorraine Gammon lists many indications to justify fetishism for women which Freud regarded as a purely male phenomena. Sterbak does not subject the dress to a conditioned female experience, instead she allows both realms, male and female to develop, eliminating the clichés and conflicting dualities usually attached to them : mind/body, unconscious/conscious, human/animal, internal/external, self/persona, natural/artificial.

Part of the horror that Sterbak's *Flesh Dress* also inspires is due to the breakdown of the old hierarchy that linked the body to perfection. Having lost the meaning once implicit in its pattern or design, the body behind our efforts to control it becomes formless. We are forced to accept its "formlessness".

Sterbak also depicts this formlessness in *Golem : Objects as Sensations*. The objects are lead hearts, bronze spleen painted red, lead throat, bronze stomach, rubber stomach, lead hand, bronze tongue, lead penis and bronze ear. They are exhibited lying on the floor of the gallery space. Because each of the organs are made from different materials they are cut off from

each other functionally as well as physically. Whereas we see organs as part of a system or an organic whole. Because Sterbak severs all connections between them, they are lost to each other, these objects of the interior. Thus the self is fragmented, not belonging to a system.

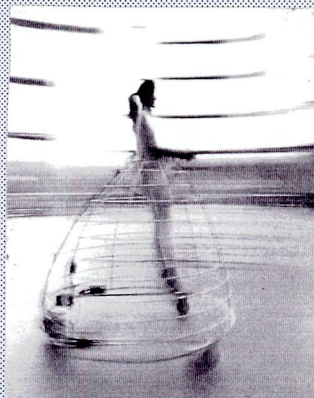
Joerge Bataille's notion of the formless or 'informe' as he put it, is a term "*that serves to bring things down in the world*". These works transgress the usual boundaries of the body and suggest a disquieting confusion of identity. Consider in this respect, Bataille:

The vicissitudes of organs, the
profusion of stomachs, larynxes
and brains traversing innumerable
animal species and individuals,
carries the imagination along in
an ebb and flow, it does not
willingly follow due to a hatred
of the still painfully perceptible
frenzy of the bloody palpitations
of the body. Man willingly
imagines himself to be like
Neptune, stilling his own waves...
the bellowing waves of the
viscera in more or less incessant
inflation and upheaval, brusquely
put an end to his dignity.

(Bataille, 1985, p.186)

Sterbak's dress is in the same way related to Bataille, in the sense that it tends to subvert the lofty positioning of human existence. Sterbak's very use of materials suggests a long list of conflicting dualities such as mind/body, internal/external, male/female etc. All those clichés relating to the self, the interior terrain of the emotions constitute a type of formlessness that historically has been related to woman. On the other hand there is form, society, the social persona and traditionally man has stood as a metaphor for these expressions. Sterbak manages to join both frontiers together in a very surreal way.

CHAPTER III
REMOTE CONTROL DRESS



For Jana Sterbak the incentive towards creation is filled with ambiguity. It is Sterbak's use of clothing that summons these ambiguities. In her *Remote Control Dress* (1989) clothing can be seen as a form of technology of the self, in which a person's social identity is constructed through dressing. Because of its close relationship with the body, clothing is often referred to as the body's double. It is important to the reading of Sterbak's work that the activity of dressing is viewed as a type of creativity or art: one that reflects human effort to overcome mortality and the confinements of the body, and one that is constantly disrupted or "brought down" as Bataille put it because of these very efforts.

Two years after her *Flesh Dress* (1987) Sterbak created *Remote Control Dress* (1989) for an exhibition at the MacKenzie Art Gallery, Canada. In contrast to the small claustrophobic room the *Flesh Dress* appeared in, *Remote Control* performs in a large open area in which more freedom is administered to the dress, but still confinement is apparent.

The garment consists of a canvas panty encased in a large motorised aluminium crinoline hoop [150 cm (height) x 495cm (circumference)]. It is positioned onto four small wheels and conducted by battery operated remote control. During performance, two men in black uniform help a slim female model into the dress. As the remote control is passed from a male attendant to the model, the gown demonstrates a debate between power and dependence.

At the height of the cage crinoline's popularity in Eighteen Sixty Three Charles Baudelaire dedicated his *Peintre de la Vie Moderne* (Painter of Modern Life) to women's fashion. He associated women with nature, in which he declared one could find nothing but frightfulness. Baudelaire believed that woman could only find redemption through fashion and cosmetics. Through these she exceeds the natural. Fashion proclaimed Baudelaire.



Remote Control Dress
(1989)



[provides] a sublime
deformation of nature, or
rather a repeated
attempt at her reformation...
Woman is quite within her
rights indeed she is even
accomplishing a kind of
duty, when she devotes
herself to appearing magical...
She has to astonish and
charm us she is even
obliged to adorn herself
in order to be adored

(Spector, 1992, p.97)

One is compelled to wonder what Baudelaire was afraid he would find under the 'muslin's the gauzes the vast iridescent clouds of stuff' (Spector, 1992, p.97) in which woman envelopes herself. Sigmund Freud would have argued that it was exactly that which could not be found that would prove so frightening. Perhaps what has been understood as modern woman's narcissistic interest for fashionable clothing is really the other side of man's necessity to hide the 'lack' embodied in femininity. The treacherous dark continent so close to nature. This recalls Freud's statement that:

.....male patients declare that
they feel there is something
uncanny about the female
genital organs. This unheimlich
place, however is the entrance to
the former heim [home] of all
human beings.

(Freud, 1957, p.399)

Influenced by Freud's theories of the 'subdued emotional activities' or repressed unconscious that could be triggered by putting together apparently unrelated or inappropriate objects, another aspect important to Sterbak's work is Freud's experience of the 'uncanny'. The subject of the 'uncanny' is connected to all that is terrifying - to all that stimulates fear and dread. It recalls to the mind that which was familiar [heim] and is now

depicted as uncanny. Not everything new and unfamiliar creates fear but it is this sense of familiarity (or having been there before) that creates this uncanniness.

Freud gives an example of a particular uncanny situation in which one doubts whether a certain figure (in a story etc) is a human being or an automaton. This is approached in such a way that the reader's attention is not fully focused on his/her uncertainty. This prevents the reader from dealing with the matter immediately because that would dissipate quickly the peculiar effect of the circumstance. What also adds to this class of uncanniness is the uncanny effect of epileptic fits and symptoms of madness, because these indicate to the spectator that automatic, mechanical courses of action are taking place, hidden beneath the normal appearance of animation. This kind of uncertainty of whether something is real or not relates back to infantile life in that the child does not sharply distinguish between living and lifeless objects. For example dolls are often fondly treated as if they are live people. According to Freud these themes are all closely connected with the 'double' that refers to all shapes and forms and objects that are visually identical with people. He relates the double with reflections in mirrors, with shadows and immortal spirits, with the belief in the soul and the fear of death. Freud writes:

For the 'double' was originally
an insurance against the
destruction of the ego, an
energetic denial of the power
of death, and probably the
immortal soul was the first
double of the body

(Freud, 1957, p.387)

This concept of doubling as a preservation against distinction is analogous with the language of dreams, which often depicts castration by a doubling or a multiplication of the genital sign. The same intentions were also used by ancient Egyptians in the art of making images of the dead from durable

materials. Sterbak herself chose a durable material for her remote control dress, in which this garment is expected to outlive the body. These ideas however stem from an unbound self love for one self, a basic narcissism inherent in all human beings.

Narcissism describes the behaviour of a person who obtains full sexual gratification from caressing and gazing at their own body. But Freud also believed that isolated aspects of the narcissistic attitude are found in all individuals, because of the need to create a double of themselves and the world they live in, in their efforts to overcome death and mortality.

Sterbak's Remote Control Dress in many ways relates to the work of the surrealists of which she declared: *That was definitely the climate I was growing up in. The whole emphasis on fantasy as being the dominant or ordering factor* (Nemiroff, 1991, p.50).

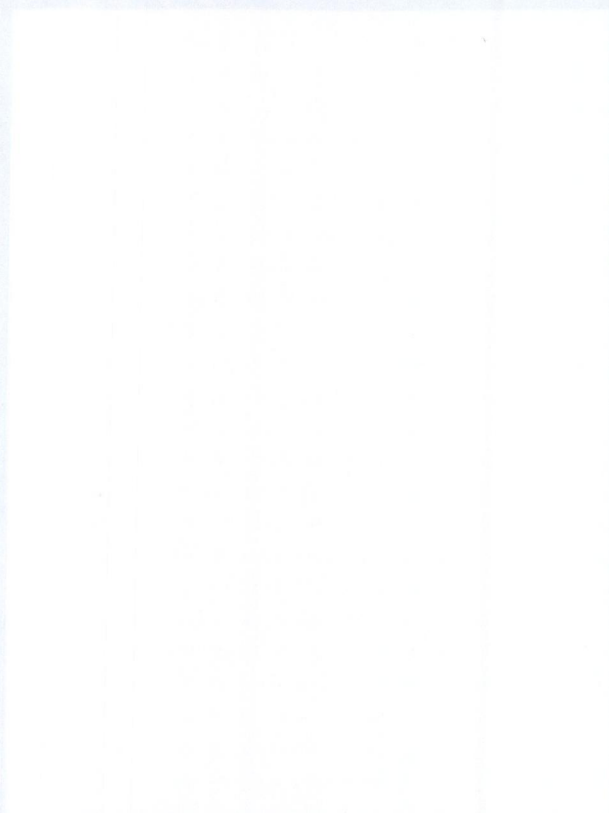
The surrealists were also influenced by Freud's theories of the repressed unconscious. The outward sign and reason for the surrealist revolution was the body. From the material symbol of ideal divine beauty that the body in art once represented it became the sign of a more convulsive beauty and living in a mechanistic world. For this reason the surrealists likened the body to an animal or a machine. Through remote control Sterbak's model is metaphorically transformed into an automaton or an artificial being. Andreas Huyssen argues that when the machine was conceived of as a 'threat' to human nature, writers began to imagine the machine as woman:

*Woman, Nature, Machine had
become a mesh of signification's
which all had one thing in common,
otherness, by their existence
they raised fears and
threatened male authority
and control*

(O'Brien, 1993, p.23)



Remote Control Dress (1989)



Inside Sterbak's dress, one could say that the female model is colonised by machine. She, like many individuals, is displaced from her natural state and given a social identity consisting of clothing and technology. One of the first modern writers to make a blatant attack on technological intervention in Czechoslovakia was Karel Capek, with his illustrious R.U.R; an absurd play about robots who proceed to exterminate humanity after being given souls by their maker. But eventually they become humans themselves.

The shortened version of the title means "Rossum's Universal Robots" which fully translated means, "Mr Brain's Universal Robots". Sterbak's dress is particularly concerned with the word 'robot' which originated from the Czech word 'Robota' meaning forced labour or de-humanisation. An interesting piece of dialogue takes place in R.U.R. in which some people are talking about the robots and one of them says "*Whoever wants to live must rule*"(Nemiroff,1991,p.49). In an interview Sterbak said of the Remote Control Dress:

..... the fact that one has
to take a stand a position.
In a lot of my work one
has to decide whether one
is the controlling agent or
being controlled, and to decide
what are the pros and cons
of both situations. And in
most of the situations that
I have constructed there are
very few options - it's either /or.
There is no way out.

(Nemiroff, 1991, p.49)

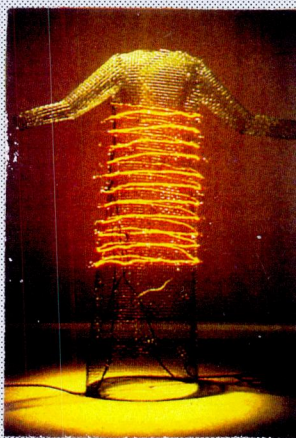
The idea of the double and dehumanisation stems from Sterbak's earlier *Golem: Objects as Sensations* (1979 - 1982). Jewish mystical tradition has it that a Golem is an artificially created man. The most distinguished of all the Golem legends depicts a creature moulded out of clay by a sixteenth century Prague rabbi Judah Löw ben Bezalel. Rabbi Löw intended the

model to be his servant and brought it to life by placing under its tongue the unmentionable name of Christ. According to Jewish tradition the word Golem refers to anything that is in a state of incompleteness or not fully formed. It belongs to a long line of automata, including artificial limbs. The best known is Mary Shelley's gothic figure Frankenstein, who eventually causes the destruction of his maker. The significance of the Golem lies in human ambitions to duplicate the act of creation. Related to the Golem and its robotic descendants is the idea of the double, the uncanny other. Sterbak makes this explicit when she writes: "*In making the sensations / I build my insides / I make myself / I am at once the Golem and its maker*" (Nemiroff, 1991, p.25).

It is apparent from Sterbak's Remote Control Dress that the more we come to rely on machines the more we imitate them. The natural self becomes lost to social conditioning and technological control. Sterbak's slim female figure which may be the model of omnipotence, suspended above ground level in a huge crinoline hoop, will in fact imminently be "brought down". With the individual's inherent narcissistic obsessions with transcendence and the immortal soul this double of the body, originally an assurance against mortality, eventually "*becomes the ghastly harbinger of death*" (Freud, 1957, p.387).

CHAPTER IV

ELECTRIC DRESS



Given the body of work that Jana Sterbak has produced over the last ten years the heterogeneity of her materials, initially surprisingly are significant. Her work suggests a precise and expressive relationship between the material and the idea: "... *very often I need the different materials to express my ideas more accurately. The material becomes part of the idea*".(Nemiroff, 1991,p.52)

In *Malevolent Heart (Gift)* a photographic project for the magazine Parachute (which was later incorporated into *Golem : Objects as Sensations* (1979 - 82). She imagined the ultimate anti-romantic valentine : a heart made of radioactive fermium, a dangerous element that consumes itself within fifty days. The heart can be read as an allegorical portrait of one who "burns the candle at both ends" Sterbak copied this verse from a poem by Edna St Millay into her notebook: "*My candle burns at both ends;/ It will not last the night/ But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends/ It gives a lovely light*" (Nemiroff, 1991, p.41).

Such a reading introduces the paradox of destruction as the means to creation. A paradox which is also evident in her early dress "*I want you to feel the way I do*" (Electric Dress,1984). In this garment Sterbak locates the basis of female identity within a more aggressive form of sado-masochistic behaviour, for this dress is anything but benign. Wrapped around its metal armature is barbed wire, connected to electrical wall sockets. As you approach the piece, an electronic eye ("which anyone can buy at Radio Shack" says Sterbak who likes her technology "old fashioned and readable" Jackson, 1989,p.66) is activated causing the barbed wire to radiate with heat at regular intervals. A written soliloquy describing the pain of obsessive love appears behind this seductive yet menacing dress.

MALEVOLENT HEART (Gift)

Weight = 2.2 kg

Size = 13 × 7 × 6 cm

Material: fermium (Fm)

Radioactive, half-life 100 days



Malevolent Heart (Gift) (1979 - 1982)

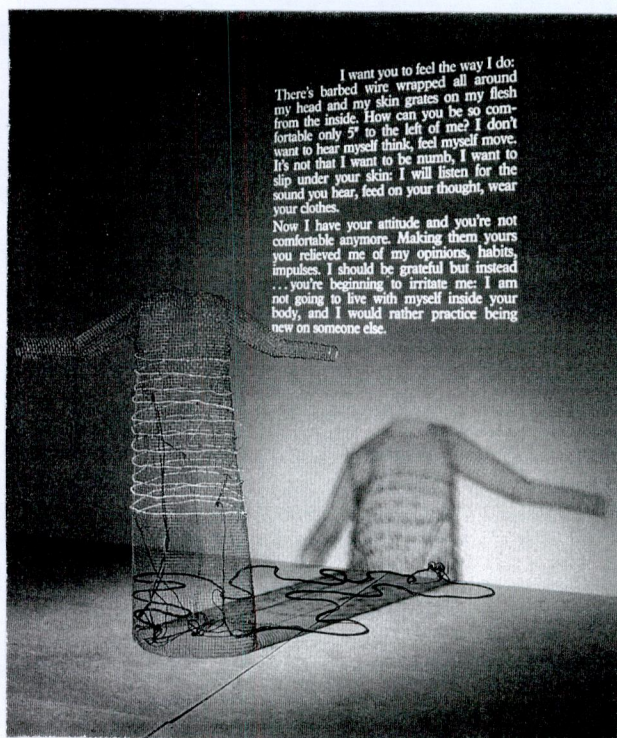
I want you to feel the way
I do: There's barbed wire wrapped
all around my head and my
skin grates on my flesh
from the inside. How can you be
so comfortable only 5" to
the left of me ? I don't want to
hear myself think,
feel myself move. It's not
that I want to slip under your
skin : I will listen for the sound
you hear, feed on your thought.
Wear your clothes

Now I have your attitude and
you're not comfortable anymore.
Making them yours you relieved
me of my opinions, habits
impulses. I should be grateful
but instead you're beginning
to irritate me. I am not going to
live with myself inside your
body, and I would rather practice
being new on someone else.

(Nemiroff, 1991, p.72)

The dress mocks the traditional assumption that woman's love is all consuming and when frustrated totally hysterical and destructive. Through her text Sterbak relates her garment to the most vindictive and revengeful woman in literary history, Euripides Medea. Rejected by her lover Jason, Medea sends his bride a poisoned wedding dress and crown. A messenger describes the girl receiving the lethal gifts in the most horrific of terms:

A double plague assailed her.
The golden diadem on her head
emitted a strange flow of
devouring fire, while the fine
robes were eating up the
poor girl's white flesh. All
aflame, she jumps from her
seat and flees, shaking her head
this way and that, trying to
throw off the crown. But the
golden band held firmly, and
after she had shaken her hair



I want you to feel the way I do:
There's barbed wire wrapped all around
my head and my skin grates on my flesh
from the inside. How can you be so com-
fortable only 5" to the left of me? I don't
want to hear myself think, feel myself move.
It's not that I want to be numb, I want to
slip under your skin: I will listen for the
sound you hear, feed on your thought, wear
your clothes.
Now I have your attitude and you're not
comfortable anymore. Making them yours
you relieved me of my opinions, habits,
impulses. I should be grateful but instead
... you're beginning to irritate me: I am
not going to live with myself inside your
body, and I would rather practice being
new on someone else.

*I Want you to Feel the
Way I Do... (Electric Dress)
(1984)*



more violently the fire began
to blaze twice as fiercely.
Overcome by agony she falls
on the ground, and none but
her father could have recognised
her. The position of her eyes
could not be distinguished, nor
the beauty of her face. The
blood, clotted with fire, dripped
from the crown of her head,
and the flesh melted from
her bones like resin from a
pine tree, as the poisons
ate their unseen way. It was
a fearful sight. All were afraid
to touch the corpse, taught by
what had happened to her.

(Paglia, 1990,p.173)

Medea whose reactions to her rival can be termed sadistic stand in stark contrast to the Anorexic's masochistic qualities that are turned inwards, on the self. These opposing factors in which the female reacts to a given situation is related to the Oedipus Complex, and Freud's interpretation of the little girl's development into sexuality. Her development is seen by Freud as being only slightly different from that of the boys. The girl becomes aware of her inferior clitoris when she sees her father's penis which in turn gives rise to 'penis-envy'. The little girl will react in three possible ways : the first is frigidity or neurosis, the second is the adoption of a masculine position and the denial of her inferiority. The third is the feminine Oedipal movement towards the father, disrupting the dyadic union with her mother who is also deficient. Freud asserts that the reason for the girl turning to the father, is to seek a penis substitute in the form of a baby.

According to Freud the feminine (passive) position chosen by the little girl is that of a masochistic one. Feminine masochism is due to: (I) a death wish turned inwards; (ii) a feminine Oedipal position and the attachment to the father, and; (iii) guilt. The difference between the erotic and the life drive on the one hand and the death drive on the other is not a distinctive

one but one of the same direction, self-preservation and narcissism. On realising her 'lack' the little girl becomes disappointed and contemptuous towards her mother (who is presumed to deserve it). Because the child relies on her mother's protection, she does not direct this rage on her mother, but turns it inwards. Therefore the female masochist is seen to endanger herself in order to preserve the valued object - the mother.

Feminine masochism occurs only in fantasy or masturbation, in which an obvious sexual form of being gagged bound and whipped is described. Freud believes these images to be a conscious or "manifest fantasy" for an underlying desire to be whipped by the all-powerful father. This stands very close to the other wish of having a passive sexual relation with him, but it is only a slight distortion of it. Generally masochistic fantasies insist that, the subject is positioned in a 'typically female situation' of helplessness that usually describes castration, copulation or child birth. This desire to be punished, Freud believes, is due to guilty feelings surrounding infantile masturbation.

The ego Freud writes : "*Is a passive victim, a libidinally satisfied one that pervades feminine masochism*" (Brennan, 1992, p.197). The ego is administered by the pleasure principle that involves itself in no other event other than fantasy or masturbation. Because the Father is viewed as the superior being, no strong super-ego is established within the female masochist. But if these fantasies are acted out, they are no longer passive. In other words when they become a perversion the pleasure is gained by constructing a real-life sado-masochistic encounter. This results in a more masculine form of masochistic behaviour, an attitude Freud terms 'Moral Masochism'. This is evident in the actions of Medea. Moral masochism is a libidinal relationship between the ego and the super-ego. In this situation the super-ego becomes murderous, in that it has become governed by the death drive, while the ego is the masochistic victim. The reason for this behaviour is the result of the super-ego's detachment from both parents. This separation occurs during the masculine Oedipal phase.

PENIS

Weight = 0.2 kg

Size = 12 × 6 × 5 cm

Material: solidified carbon dioxide (CO₂), -65°C,
Also known as dry ice



Penis (1979)



Freud believes that the elements of aggression and sadism are the dominant factors in masculine sexuality. Aggression and rage are directed outward towards the object it seeks to possess, and towards which the death drive is also re-directed. The moral masochist receives pleasure from real life disasters or failures in which these disasters are unconsciously contrived.

Initially Sterbak's soliloquy is resigned to an attitude of powerlessness and forgiveness : 'I will listen for the sound you hear, feed on your thought, wear your clothes'. But her mood changes in the second verse when she refuses to submit herself to change : 'I am not going to live, with myself inside your body'. A transformation that subverts Freud's interpretations of 'normal female behaviour'. Sterbak's dress is a feminine garment that expresses rage and sado-masochistic reactions usually accepted as the norm for male behaviour. Her dress achieves empowerment through a dionysian rejection of all restraint evident in the actions of the Greek Mythical Figure, Medea, and her cruel and callous actions of slaughter.

CONCLUSION

Through research a connection between Sterbak's work and Freudian theory became apparent. This connection was not discussed in any of the magazine articles relevant to her three garments.

A knowledge of Sterbak's up-bringing in Czechoslovakia and Canada was essential for a basic understanding of her ideas and intentions in the work. These notions dealt with a colonised identity and the dress used in Sterbak's work stood as a metaphor, expressing these feelings of colonisation.

Sterbak's meticulous use of materials depict an ambivalence that is closely related to identity. Remote Control Dress deals with the ambivalence of power, Flesh Dress with decay and self-preservation, Electric Dress with sadism and self-destruction. These issues have been discussed by Freud as a fundamental aspect associated with the development of every individual and his arguments lead to a fuller comprehension of Sterbak's three dresses.

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