

JANA

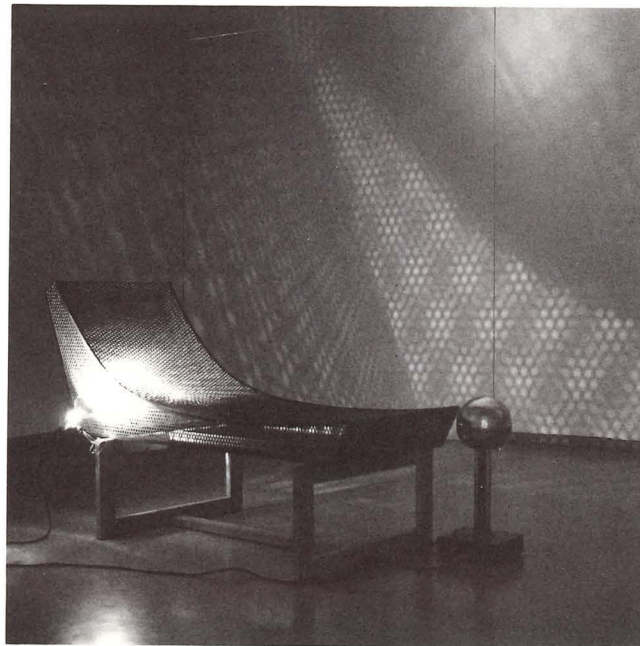
*Jana Štěrbová*

STERBAK

**TheNewMuseum**  
OF CONTEMPORARY ART

**Works by Jana Sterbak is on view at The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, from February 16 through April 8, 1990.**

**Works by Jana Sterbak has been undertaken with the assistance of the Government of Canada, the Ministère des Affaires Culturelles du Québec, and the Jerome Foundation.**



***Seduction Couch,***

**1986, perforated steel,**

**Van der Graaf generator,**

**and electrostatic charge.**

**Photo: Sheila Spence,**

**the Winnipeg Art Gallery.**



**Measuring Tape Cones,**

**1979,**

**measuring tapes.**

**Photo: Louis Lussier.**

Jana Sterbak's work to date can be seen as a kind of depraved fashion show. It is a show which should include the replicas of human organs she had cast in metal and rubber and laid in a careful line on a gallery floor; the dress made of flank steaks she displayed—and let rot—on a mannequin in Montreal for a month; and the pillows she stitched with, among others, the words *dis-ease*, *sexual fantasies*, and *greed*: an embroidery from the language of anxious dreams.

There is a wicked message running through these works but its resonance is more than a crude effect produced by the shock of the unexpected. One of the psychotic doctors in fellow Canadian David Cronenberg's recent film *Dead Ringers* is

possessed by the idea of a "beauty contest for organs." Echoes of similarly strange cravings can be found in many of Sterbak's objects. On one level, her work is an eccentric interrogation of the values implicit in fashion industry theatrics. She

mocks its imposition of photographic images of idealized anorexic silhouettes on authentic bodies and authentic flesh.

More to the point, the valorization of these attenuated figures pre-

pares the ground for a more

thoroughgoing transformation. Elaborately wrapped female bodies can now be made to disappear into the commodity on display. It is the sleight of hand of misogynist designers who treat women as so many disengageable parts—as so many

## WORKS

BY

**JANA STERBAK**

“cuts.” Style, in this view, becomes the hocus-pocus of a particularly insidious form of transfiguration, a re-fashioning on the order of those routinely effected in an abattoir’s magic.

But, for Sterbak, to merely criticize this process would be too easy, too self-serving and comforting. As she well understands, if there is a pathology necessary to fashion—even fashion dressed as art—there is also a seductive, pornographic attraction to its promise of fame, to the immolation it offers through conformity. No desire is without danger, she knows, no danger outside an economy of desire. Sterbak’s work, therefore, also recounts the contradictory nature of desire—its conflict of irreconcilable tensions within the ever renewable cycle of seduction and consumption—which promises to unify what it threatens simultaneously to undo: the apparent coherence of all its subjects.

Understanding this, Sterbak recognizes that she too is a subject of powers beyond her control, a condition she actively counters through her aesthetic interventions. She positions her work in and through a series of interconnected practices, including, of course, feminism itself, and the debates spawned by its recent self-evaluation. In the visual arts, feminists initially sought a body of irreducible differences that would distinguish an emerging female iconography from the predominant male vision. These were

*Attitudes,*  
1987,  
embroidery on  
cotton cloth.  
Photo: Louis Lussier.

to be represented in the universal body of a collective feminist imagination, through which actual and individual histories could be opposed to the naturalized perspective of masculine superiority. This body, acting as a symbolic inscription, would be graphic, as Judy Chicago’s *Dinner Party* testifies. Essentialism, as it has come to be called, was subsequently reviewed in light of theories of reading derived from a psychoanalytic interpretation of power. This second wave of feminist thought resulted in a more theorized



aesthetic, one in which language as an organizing principle and the foundry of authority is key. Each of these forceful perspectives on feminist aesthetics developed a corresponding style in its preferred media—performance art and video for the first, photography and typographic representations of language for the second—which has contributed to the shape of its continuing arguments, and the political power of its representations.

Importantly for Jana Sterbak’s work, these aesthetic positions have

been framed within the dialectic procedure, a process which controls available choices in yes/no, either/or schemes. It is this idea of binary opposition that characterizes dialectical thinking within modernist ideologies, and limits,

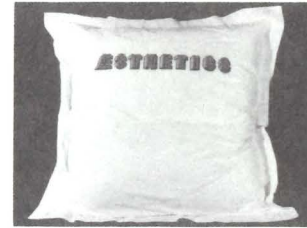
example. The narrowness of confining choice to opposing terms forecloses surprise: the viewer of an artwork made within such a system will be positioned in an exclusive equation. There is a growing dissatisfaction with the idea of an art whose goal is to impose overdetermined meanings on the public. Restricted choice has a history of injustices, even atrocities, to its credit, and seems increasingly questionable in the complex political and moral environment of today. The schematic of right

versus wrong (or right versus left) adopted by earlier artistic positions has become untenable for Sterbak and other contemporary women artists (Rebecca Horn, Jenny Holzer, and Rosemarie Trockel, for example). For them, the questions raised by their work are beyond a certain theory of the body and outside a body of certain theory, significant as these have been, and continue to be, for this stage in feminist political and aesthetic development.

Sterbak, in particular, rejects earlier efforts by

feminist artists to concentrate specifically on issues of gender bias. Neither can she agree to the replacement of one set of values with another, as though the question of power had somehow, and mysteriously, been extinguished. Instead, Ster-

bak wants to dislodge the fundamental asymmetry central to modernist constructions of power within aesthetic productions. To do so, she uses multiple and simultaneous strategies—a practice whose very heterogeneity disrupts the cohe-

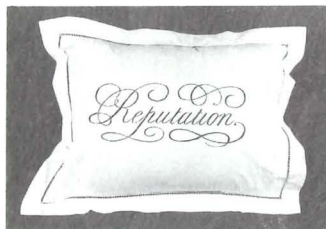


*Attitudes,*  
1987,  
embroidery on  
cotton cloth.  
Photo: Louis Lussier.

*Attitudes,*  
1987,  
embroidery on  
cotton cloth.  
Photo: Patrick Close.

structurally, their capacity for response. Like the structuralist philosophy of dualism underpinning all modernist activity, any program ordered by binary opposition holds the number of allowable responses to two: I agree or I don't, for

sion of faithful choices. By not limiting its focus to power's abusive opportunities in the domain of production, her work can concern itself with the split subject in every person who encounters an artwork, the subject whose very capacity for contradictory interpretations she wishes to recognize. Sterbak avoids direct structural polarization by dis-organizing her work so that clear physical or intellectual positions are made difficult to achieve. She frustrates explanation, which is always intellectual, favoring instead direct



emotions. Her works are a celebration of contradiction, a utilization of material excess which willfully refuses to settle into received wisdom's large lap.

But if Sterbak is reaching beyond the space created by binary opposites, as I am arguing, it is by manipulating and amplifying the binarisms, not by attempting to negate or ignore them. *Remote Control I*, 1989 is a singular example. A hand-held device allows either the person riding in the

structure's metal skirt or an audience member to operate the unit. Alternatively, Sterbak's crinoline machine can be programmed to follow its own relentless cybernetic choreography. The exchange of power is not cerebral, but actual. A woman may control a woman, a woman control a man, a man control a man, a man control a woman. Then again, anyone can operate the empty machine, or it can run itself.

All configurations of power, in symmetrical or asymmetrical geometries, become possible within the physical limits of the crinoline. Oppositions in circuits of control and loss; technophilia and technophobia; art and entertainment; culture and nature; and so on are *simultaneously* engaged, blurring distinctions between them. The permutations available in this strange dance do not allow binary terms to be pried apart to form a hierarchy where one term is privileged over another. The work conscientiously denies determined meanings, encouraging, instead, a series of decentered significances. Its psychic and physical space is in the hands of the person in control. As a result, aggression, co-

operation, generosity, and passivity are the states of desire Sterbak is able to unpack in *Remote Control*.

Sterbak's work is staking new claims. Hers is a shifting and unnamed territory beyond the reach of simple reversals, whether of terms or categories. She does not abandon, however, either the political agenda of feminist discourses, or their hard-earned assets. But Sterbak is

*Attitudes,*

1987,

embroidery on

cotton cloth.

Photo: Louis Lussier.

clearly more interested in the problems presented by the asymmetry of power itself, however manifest or disguised, than she is in the fundamental inequality of gender relations. This is necessarily so as she is personally suspicious of all idealisms and all fundamentalisms. As a young woman, she moved from Czechoslovakia to Canada, a move which she says led her to consider the idea of ideologies as being "funny" for the first time. This observation tempered her ability to accept what she now calls "the reductivism essential to any good theoretical proposition." For Sterbak, power's extraordinary ability to camouflage and recoup itself, even in its own reversals, militates against her being able to trust any definitive position. Her integrity, therefore, demands that her work function to critique

fashionable ideologies of the day: modernisms, in this case.

Sterbak is obviously fluent in both recent critical theory and received art history. This being the case, she must act deliberately to counter the power of what she already knows. She consciously arranges her objects to work against language's overdetermined status as knowledge. Using an "emotional materiality," she aims to tease out the reticent information hidden in experience. She employs the desire

**Bruce  
W.  
Ferguson**

to manifest desires in her pieces to avoid an erudition which too easily categorizes, too easily is categorizable. Her works act to re-embolden fervent viscerality, and so demote the vicious circularity of conservative binarism. Sterbak believes in the potential of art too much to limit its faith to one system of belief only.



**Remote Control I,  
1989, aluminum,  
motorized wheel,  
remote control device,  
batteries, and cotton cloth.  
Photo: Louis Lussier.**

**Jana Sterbak was born in Prague, Czechoslovakia in 1955. Now living in Montreal, her work has been shown in Canada and the United States.**

**Bruce W. Ferguson lives in New York where he works as a freelance curator and critic. He is also the adjunct curator to the Winnipeg Art Gallery in Canada.**

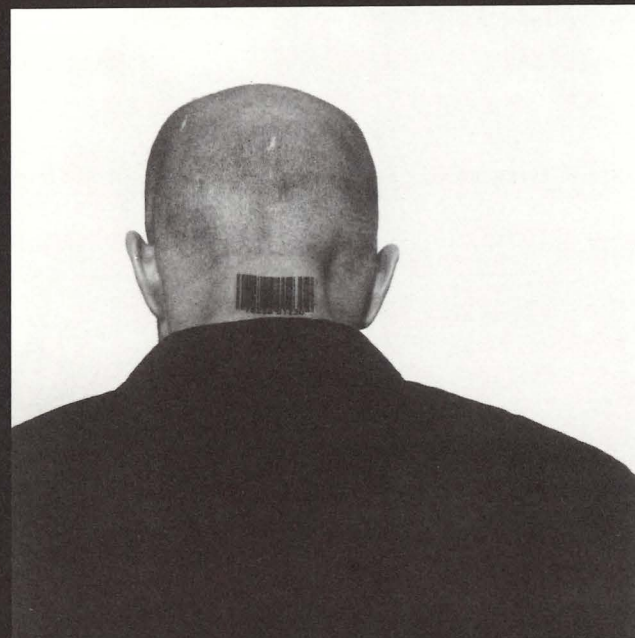
**Works in the Exhibition:**

***Remote Control I, 1989*, aluminum, motorized wheel, remote control device, batteries, and cotton cloth. Courtesy Galerie René Blouin, Montreal.**

***Generic Man, 1987-89*, duratrans. Courtesy Galerie René Blouin, Montreal.**

***Seduction Couch, 1986*, perforated steel, Van der Graaf generator, and electrostatic charge. Collection Ydessa Hendeles Art Foundation, Toronto.**

The individual views expressed in the exhibitions and publications are not necessarily those of the Museum. Edited by Deirdre Summerbell. Designed by Bureau, New York.



*Generic Man,*

1987-89,

black-and-white

photograph.

Photo: Paul Orenstein.



