

131. *Tongue* (1990). Bronze,  
glass, text. Collection of Dr. Pei-Yuan Han,  
Montreal

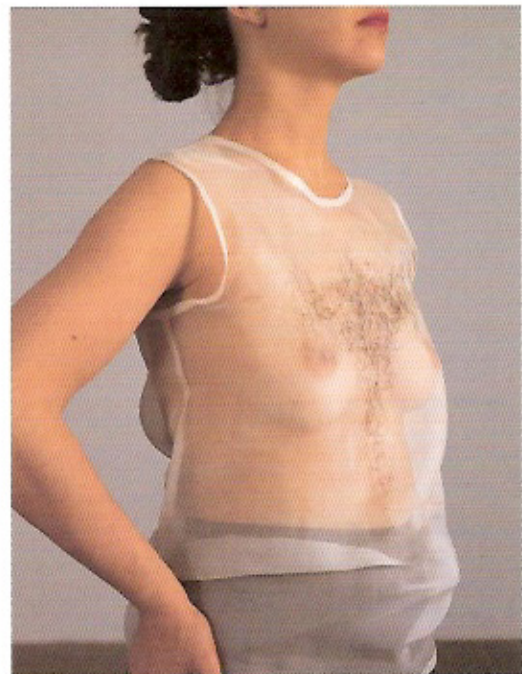


*And on the morning of the 21st of June, 1621, while drums rolled incessantly to drown any sound of protest, twenty seven of the foremost citizens of Prague were executed in the marketplace. Three were hanged, the rest beheaded. Before the head of Dr. Jessenius, the Rector of the University, was struck off, his tongue was cut out of his mouth.*

*Their property, as well as that of the many who had fled, was declared forfeit, and more than six hundred estates thus fell to the Crown. The old Bohemian nobility, with all that it represented of culture and national institutions, was wiped out as from a slate.... The expulsion of all Protestants was finally decreed in 1626, and it is said that 30,000 families emigrated. They were replaced for the most part by Catholics brought in from Germany....*

J. WATSON; WALLENSTEIN

132. *Hairshirt (clothing for a performance)* (1992),  
part of *Distraction*. Silk organza and  
human hair. Size 38. Musée d'art contemporain  
de Montréal



130. *Condition* (1995), stills from  
the video. Object for  
performance and video. Wire,  
casters, leather straps

One of Jana Sterbak's most minimal works is a small, sinewy bronze artefact that rests mutely on a shelf. Through a reference to the seventeenth-century maiming, execution, and expulsion of members of the Protestant nobility of Prague, *Tongue* (1990) stands for the injustices borne by a people deprived of home. Like the rest of Sterbak's work, this simple object reminds us that the body is the site upon which political struggles and social processes are realized, and ultimately the place where we will or will not be at home.

Sterbak's work incarnates a concept made familiar by Freudian theory: the *unheimlich*, variously understood as *unhomely* or *uncanny*, which refers to a sense of estrangement based in the loss of the familiar and secure. With Freud's borrowed description of the *unheimlich*, "everything that ought to have remained ... secret and hidden but has come to light,"<sup>1</sup> one can understand why the term "uncanny" has come to be used in everyday parlance primarily to denote a psychic discomfort. However, Jana Sterbak's work reintroduces the physical dimension of "home," locating this in the individual body, and associating its loss with uneasy states of embodied mind.

In Sterbak's work the "unhomely" is tied to corporeal experience. Often this is rooted in conflicts between longing and exclusion. *Hairshirt* (1992) uses simple means – a woman's sheer tank-top tufted with chest hair – to suggest acts of self-estrangement based in a longing to be someone else. *Hairshirt* might produce something like the mindset of the Kafka character who believed himself metamorphosed into a beetle, acutely conscious of his alienation



from his own body. In fact, Sterbak evokes the insectlike task of assuming foreign bodies or bearing burdens in several works, most literally *Absorption* (1995), in which she proposes to digest certain art-historical icons (Joseph Beuys's felt suits), transforming these symbols of shamanistic artistic power into her own cocoonlike dwelling.

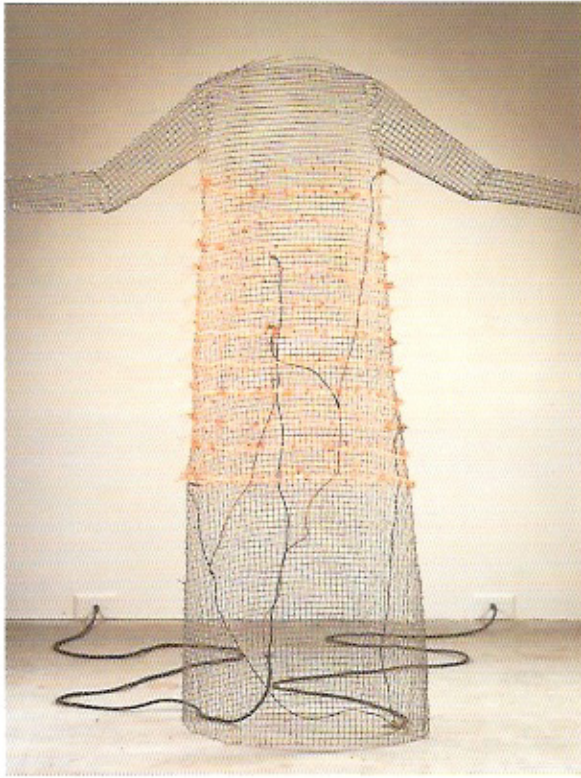
Other works draw out a bodily unease, an oscillation between seduction and repulsion, abiding in the most intimate objects. *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic* (1987) turns the revulsion roused by a dress made of raw steak, drying gradually into a hardened shell, towards a meditation on both carnal mortality and societal ideals. The indication that this abject flesh is intended for an anorectic is a disquieting reminder of the futility of the anorectic's denial of her body, of the mortality that awaits all. Animating the classic philosophical dualism between mind and body, Sterbak's work implies that in this mortal battle the mind remains irrevocably tied to and influenced by the body it perpetually seeks to transcend. *I Want You to Feel the Way I Do... (The Dress)* (1984-85), a steel-mesh dress encircled with live heating coils, glows dangerously when approached. Like the dress itself, a text projected nearby entices threateningly: "... I want to slip under your skin: I will listen for the sound you hear, feed on your thought, wear your clothes..." This *uncanny* alternation of identification and estrangement, of affinity and misrecognition, makes strange the fundamental activities of inhabiting a body and forming identity.

With economical and measured irony, Sterbak emphasizes that subjectivity

*In 1970, nine years before my first wearable pieces, Joseph Beuys created the first of his felt suits. I became aware of this in 1986 and its existence has bothered me ever since.... At the beginning of the nineties I conceived of a solution: the absorption of the suit.*

*To this end I have metamorphosed myself into a moth, and proceeded systematically to eat, one after another, the 100 suits Beuys sold to private and public collections around the world. In some cases my activity was temporarily disrupted by misguided conservation efforts....*

*Nevertheless, it would not be immodest or inaccurate to state that I have already put more than one suit out of its exhibition condition. My work is not easy, but it's not without reward, and, what is most important, it continues.*



134. *Want You to Feel the Way I Do... (The Dress)* (1984-85). Live uninsulated nickel-chrome wire mounted on wire mesh, electrical cord and power, with slide projected text. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa



135. *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic* (1987). Flank steak. Dimensions vary daily

is both enabled and constrained by embodiment. She develops a dialogue between restraint and liberty by pointing to the stark fact that our experiences are defined by the limits, both natural and social, that bear upon our bodies and manifest themselves in the intimate objects that surround and support them. Her early *Measuring Tape Cones* (1979), standard dress-maker's tapes wrapped into clawlike appendages, hint at an ominous transformation of internalized systems of measurement and limitation. Works like this propose that there is a voluntary – or at least ambivalent – aspect to containment, that the process of self-realization also involves accepting limitations.

The oscillation between freedom and constraint may also be characterized in terms of a dialectic between ideals and their realization, as in Sterbak's video installation *Declaration* (1993). Its quasi-domestic arrangement includes an ordinary television set on a simple stand and two paradigmatically modernist chairs: Arne Jacobsen's organic *Egg* and *Swan* models from 1957 (a 1994 version of *Declaration* uses the unitary forms of two *Cone* chairs designed by Jacobsen's associate Verner Panton in 1958). On the TV screen a young man, stuttering uncomfortably, reads in reverse order the articles of France's 1789 *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen*, arguably the foundational document of modern democratic ideals. The speaker's arduous completion of the task metaphorically testifies to the difficulty with which the utopian modern ideals of equality, democracy, and security – as represented respectively by the legal document, television, and the organic capsules of the chairs – are actually realized.



136. *Declaration* (Jacobsen version, 1993).  
Two armchairs, wood and aluminum table,  
television, 9:43 minute videotape.  
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

#### Notes

1. Friedrich Schelling quoted by Sigmund Freud in "The Uncanny," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), vol. XVII, p. 224.

2. Artist statement in *The Impossible Self* (Winnipeg: Winnipeg Art Gallery, 1988), p. 70.



137. *Sisyphus II* (1991). Aluminum, chrome, steel, mirror, paint,  
16 mm projector and film loop. Vancouver Art Gallery

Sterbak's work demonstrates a dark sense of absurdity, akin to that of the modern European writers – Kafka, Camus, Milan Kundera, Italo Calvino – to whom she sometimes refers. *Sisyphus* (1991) is a hemispherical metal cage that alludes, via Camus's book, to the original Greek myth of Sisyphus, forever condemned to rolling a stone up a hill. The bowl-shaped cage has a natural balance when empty, but combats the athletic man who inhabits it in the accompanying film projection. There is a kind of self-fulfilling futility to his energetic struggle for balance, which might summarize the sense of alienation or unhomely restlessness at the heart of Sterbak's works.

Perhaps Sterbak's affinity for the absurd is related to her own experience of having one world view overturned and replaced with another. Born in Prague, a historic centre of cultural and intellectual activity, she was an adolescent when her family emigrated to Canada at the time of the 1968 Soviet takeover. Leaving behind the old Czech culture, steeped in Catholic tradition and, more recently, Marxist thought, she faced a new language and a comparatively young Canadian society governed by Protestantism and an unfamiliar political system. "It was amusing," she has (under)stated, "to watch the complete reversal of the values which were the foundations of my childhood."<sup>3</sup> In her work she has continued to forsake the assurance of any particular polemical world view, substituting a devastating play of human impulses for any reassuring sense of being at home in the world. G. K.