



Jana Sterbak: *Dimensions of Intimacy*

Exhibition Guide

List of Works & Exhibition Text



SOUTHWEST GALLERY

1) ***I 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 text
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Purchased 1986.

This freestanding transparent garment, with arms outstretched as if welcoming an embrace, is a contemporary retelling of Medea's revenge on the unfaithful Jason. Euripides' tragic play *Medea* offers a compelling narrative of love, betrayal, and revenge, highlighting the devastating consequences of broken oaths and the destructive power of a woman scorned. When Medea learned of Jason's betrayal, she began to plot her revenge, and sent his new bride-to-be, Glauce, a beautiful dress as a wedding present. Unbeknownst to Glauce, the inside of the dress was covered in poison, and when she put the garment on was burnt alive.

Medea's anguish is often compared to the pain of fire, which both illustrates her intense personal pain but

also the potential for widespread destruction. Sterbak's reinterpretation of Medea mocks the conventional assumption that a woman's desire is all-consuming and, when frustrated, utterly vindictive.

SOUTHEAST GALLERY

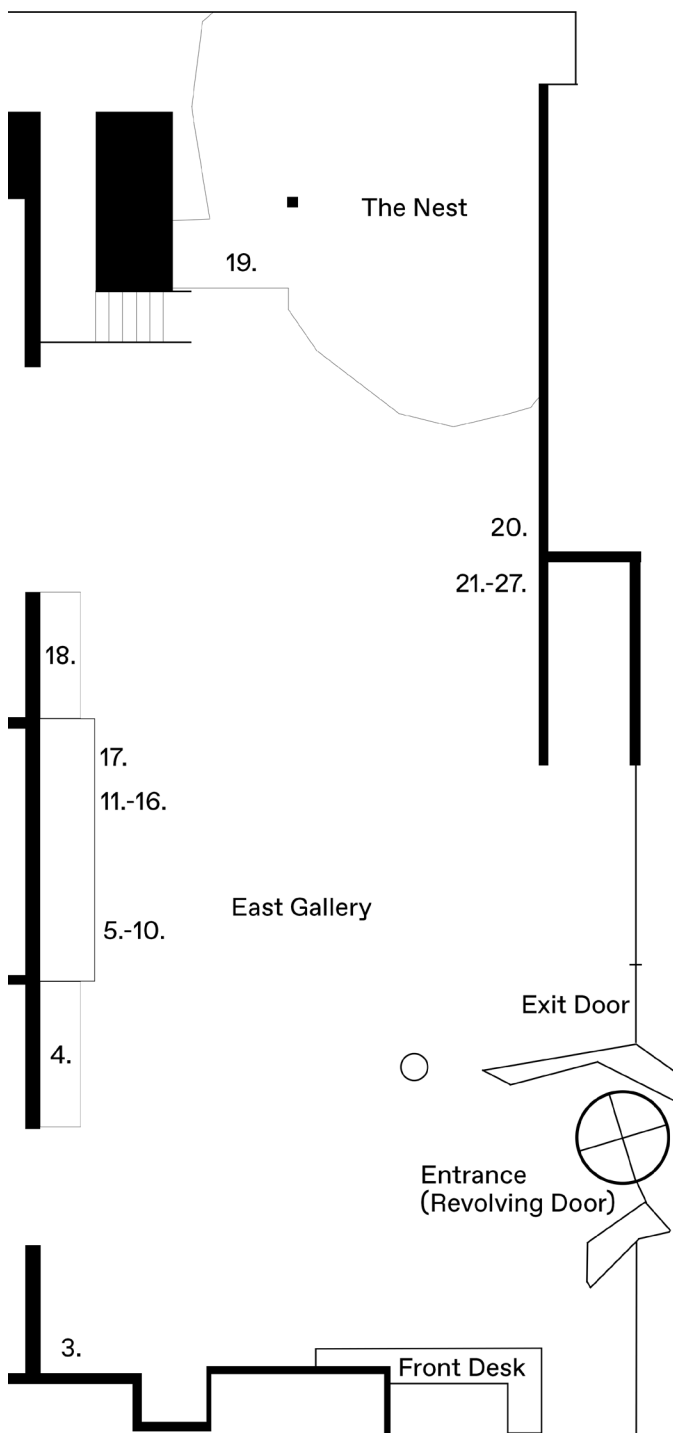
2) ***Sisyphus II*** 1991

16 mm film and mixed media

Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Acquisition Fund

At the beginning, Sisyphus was to be called Condition...When the piece was finished and just as it was being photographed for the first time, the new name surfaced. The first performer had laboured so hard to keep his balance while giving movement to the object, that he truly invited the title: all the effort expended only prevented him from falling out; he was going nowhere. Every movement made was to be counteracted by similar motion in the opposite direction so that he could stay upright and on the inside of his mythical cradle. Several men auditioned for the film. The winner turned out to be a Russian acrobat. In order to give some indication of rhythm and subject, and because we had very limited means of communication, I sang to him a tune that I remembered from school. It was the song of the Volga Oarsmen.

Jana Sterbak, "Sisyphus," *Jana Sterbak* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 1998), 18.



EAST GALLERY

- 3) **Condensed** 1979 (reissued 1996)
Painted lead ball
- 4) **Equisetum (Horse Tails)** 2002
Handblown glass

VITRINES N°s 5-17 (Top to bottom, left to right)

- 5) ***I Can Hear How You Think (clay model for metal cast)*** 1984-85
Clay and wire
- 6) **Measuring Tape Cones** 1979
Measuring tapes
- 7) **Combat Cricket Compartment** 1993-97
Mammoth bone

I wanted to make a small portable case in which I could transport the cricket song with me wherever I went. The first case, made with Providence jeweler Klaus Burgel, was in metal. In order to provide a "warmer" environment where the cricket would feel more at ease and therefore inclined to sing, the little box was later carved out of wood. The final version is made of mammoth tusk. It is the male cricket who sings to attract the female. There are three types of song: one sung to attract the female, one may be sung during the coupling, and yet another after the completion. Another type of song accompanies the fight between two rivalrous male crickets, and after the fight is over the winner almost always announces

his triumph by singing.

Jana Sterbak, "Combat Cricket Compartment," *Jana Sterbak* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 1998), 24.

8) ***Dicey*** 2023
Granite

9) ***Spare Parts (from Golem)*** 1979-82
Cast lead and iron

10) ***Perspiration: Olfactory Portrait*** 1995
Glass, chemically reconstituted sweat

Perspiration: Olfactory Portrait is an attempt to keep the personal smell of a specific being in a jar. I have always thought the scent of certain human sweat to be reassuring, and now scientific findings seem to bear me out. In the early eighties, following the first group of sensory and conceptual pieces, I resolved to make artificial replica of sweat of my liking, so that it would be at hand even when its owner and producer was not. At first, investigating the now largely historic process of "enfleurage," I considered processing worn shirts in this manner. It was explained that, human sweat being [an] ever changeable and perishable product of a living organism, nothing good would come of this lengthy process. Next came the introduction to two Parisian perfume creators. One did not share my enthusiasm for the project, the other synthesized a smell from available plant and chemical ingredients. The smell proved to be far from the personal perfume I had in mind; it was only an approximation of generic human sweat.

*The container was ready well before the liquid.
Realized at the Pilchuck Glass School near Seattle, the*

heavy solid glass form with its small spherical cavity stood ready to receive the synthesized fluid. It was not until the generous help I received at the occasion of an exhibition at the Fundacio Tapies that through the good offices of its director I was able to undertake the final step of the project: the analysis and recreation of a smell of a specific human subject in the laboratories of Unilever in Kent.

Jana Sterbak, "Perspiration: Olfactory Portrait," in *Jana Sterbak* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 1998), 34.

- 11) ***I Made It*** 2011
Cloth ribbon
- 12) ***Cones on Hand*** 1979
Measuring tape cones, plastic hand
- 13) ***Pomodoro*** 2013
Bronze, gold plated
- 14) ***Standard Lives (Vie Sur Mesure)*** 1988
Laser print on vinyl, metal
- 15) ***Trichotillomania (Fouet de cheveux / Hair Whip)*** 1993
Handcrafted glass and human hair

Trichotillomania (Greek, trix = hair + tillo = pull out + mania = insanity): A compulsion to pull out one's own hair, popularly associated with the excess of worry.

In its form Trichotillomania resembles a fly whisk. Used in China since the fifth century these whisks, called hossu, were used by sages engaged in quing-tan (seidan), pure conversation. In time these implements came to symbolize the brushing away of the flies of

care, or worry. Hanging one nearby signaled you were adept at pure conversation.

Jana Sterbak, "Trichotillomania," *Jana Sterbak* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 1998), 38.

16) ***Sylvanus*** 2019
Pewter

17) ***Catacombes (Catacombs)*** 1992
Chocolate

18) ***Hard Entry*** 2003
Handblown glass
Hydro Quebec Collection

Sterbak has been drawn to glass as a material for many years. Inspired by the bowls of Buddhist monks and by nesting bowls, *Hard Entry* consists of several glass vessels nested one inside the other. The vessels are so heavy and fit together so precisely that they can only be taken apart at great risk of breakage. The work showcases the unique qualities of glass that Sterbak finds most interesting: its weight, fragility, transparency, and impenetrability.

19) ***Masque (Mask)*** 2014
Knitted and crocheted cotton, clothing, mannequin

20) ***Manifesto*** 2018
Knitting, text, ink drawing

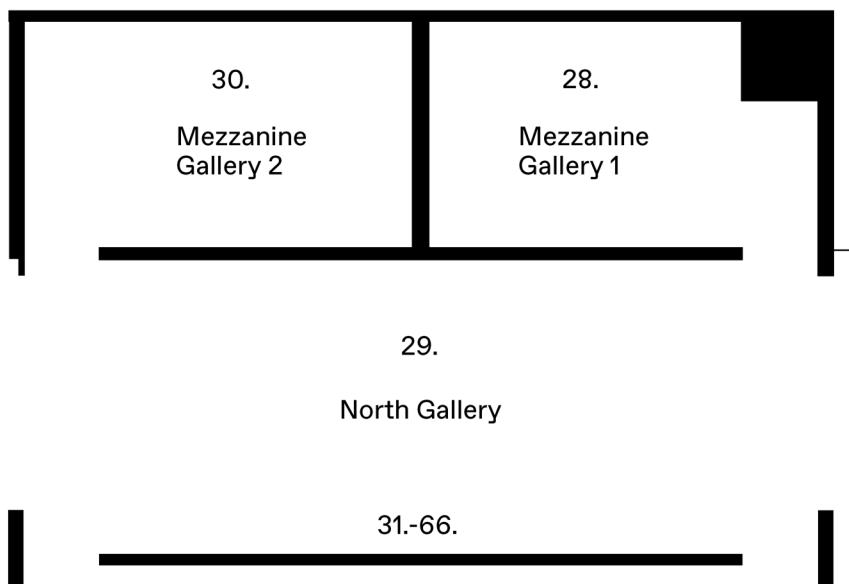
Manifesto was a performance produced for the Paris School of Fine Arts in 2018. The performer was Jean-Marc Bustamante when he was the director of the school. The performance was done in the context

of *Marche forcée de l'art* conferences. Here is the translated text of *Manifesto*.



EAST GALLERY WALL

- 21) ***House of Pain: A Relationship*** 1987
Drawing
- 22) ***Actaeon At Home*** 2005
Colour photograph
- 23) ***Untitled (Proto-Condition - sequence)*** 1994
Black and white photograph
- 24) ***Cones on Fingers*** 1979
Black and white photograph
- 25) ***Voltaire*** 2019
Embroidered cloth
- 26) ***Sylvanus*** 2003
Colour photograph
- 27) ***Proto-Sisyphus*** 1990-96
Gelatin silver print



NORTH AND MEZZANINE GALLERIES

28) ***Seduction Couch*** 1986-87

Perforated steel, Van de Graaff generator, electrostatic charge, stained wood, floodlamp
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Gift of Ydessa Hendeles, Toronto, 1993.

***NOTE:** The Van de Graaff generator used in this work can have serious consequences for anyone with pacemakers, insulin pumps, and other medical implants. These individuals should maintain a 12 ft. distance from discharge points (generator and metal couch).

If you touch this work you will receive a shock.

29) **Bread Bed** version 2025

Metal, bread

Bread Bed brings together two key themes in Sterbak's work: the ordinary domestic object and the organic and perishable properties of food. The bed, an important "object-place" where many of our daily activities occur, is realized with a common steel base and an unusual mattress made from bread, a crucial staple of many diets. The work was made after Sterbak stayed in a Shaker community at Sabbathday Lake in rural Maine. For Sterbak, the bed and the bread evoke the Shaker community's emphasis on minimalism and serve as metaphors for our basic human needs; that of sustenance and sleep.

For this version of *Bread Bed*, Esker Foundation worked with Sidewalk Citizen baker Oleg Kim to create the recipe for the bread, and with Top Gun Coatings who had an oven large enough to bake this extra-large loaf.

Thanks to Larry Carlson and the team at Top Gun Coatings, Michal Levi, Hannah Anson, and Oleg Kim at Sidewalk Citizen bakery, and to Kathryn Dobbins and Alex Caldwell for fabricating the custom twin bed frame and bread pan.

30) **Declaration** 1993

Two armchairs, wood and aluminum table, video 9:43 minutes

National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Purchased 1995.

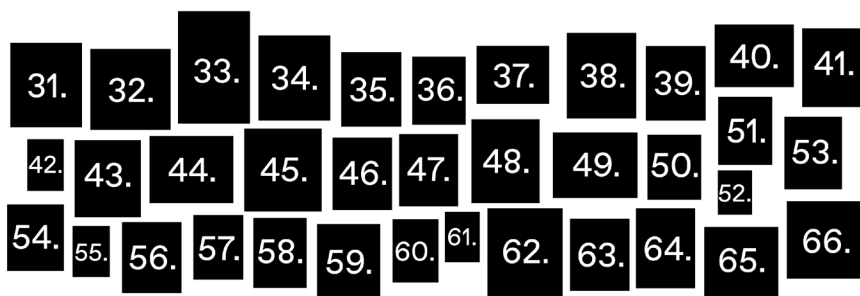
In 1992, when installing DESORDRES at the Jeu de Paume, I was startled to find hundreds of individuals pouring into the galleries temporarily closed to the public. The well-dressed people with festive attitude turned out to be "les producteurs agricoles" out to protest the EEC-imposed quota. The museum director advised the staff and myself to leave, but

since there remained a lot to do before the opening on the following day, I managed to obtain a special permission to stay behind in the company of one assistant. During the course of this rather eventful day, we got to talk to some of the farmers, who proved to be good humored and interested in our endeavors. We were curious to find out how it was that they selected the relatively sleepy Jeu de Paume. Would not the Louvre, for example, do much better for the visibility of the problems they wished to address? The farmers impressed us with their sense of historical precedent: they came here, one of them explained, because it was here that the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen was signed at the end of the eighteenth century. They were sure their action would not pass unnoticed.

Back to work in the basement of the museum, largely oblivious to the events that were to follow, it was not until we were ready to leave that it became clear that the farmers' protest was noticed indeed. In trying to exit, we found ourselves imprisoned in the Jeu de Paume by the anti-riot squad, which had meanwhile sealed off the building from the rest of Paris. It was only after much negotiation that the two of us were allowed to leave.

While waiting for the metro to return home, the idea for the video of DECLARATION presented itself. In the tiles that decorate the vault of the Metro Concorde, spelled out in capitals and without spacing or punctuation, letter per tile, the entire text of 17 articles that comprise the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen. Afflicted by a sudden stutter while trying to enunciate the words for my assistant I resolved to put this spontaneous occurrence to good use.

Jana Sterbak, "Declaration," *Jana Sterbak* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 1998), 44.



NORTH GALLERY WALL

Row 1

- 31) **[*Giant Clam (Palourde géante)*]** 1984-87
Watercolour and graphite on paper
- 32) **[*Sisyphus n° 1 (Sisyphe n° 1)*]** 1990-91
Ink on paper
- 33) **[*Les Béquilles / Prothèse n° 1*]** 1994
Ink on paper
- 34) **[*Artist as Combustible (L'artiste-combustible)*]** 1985
Watercolour, ink and colour pencil on paper
- 35) **[*D'après Shakespeare n° 2 (After Shakespeare n° 2)*]**
Projet / Project 1983-87
Watercolour and graphite on paper
- 36) **[*I Want You to Feel the Way I Do... (The Dress) n° 1 (Je veux que te éprouves ce que je ressens... (la robe) n° 1)*]** 1984-85
Ink on paper
- 37) **[*NEVERMORE*]** 1983-87
Watercolour and graphite on paper

38) **[I Want You to Feel the Way I Do...(The Dress) n° 2
(Je veux que te éprouves ce que je ressens...(la robe)
n° 2)]** 1984-85
Ink on paper

39) **[D'après Shakespeare n° 2 (After Shakespeare n° 2)]
Projet / Project** 1983-87
Watercolour and graphite on paper

40) **[Silhouettes]** n.d.
Watercolour and ink on paper

41) **[Chair Apollinaire (Chaise Apollinaire)]** 1984-87
Watercolour and ink on paper

Row 2

42) **[Ouroboros n° 3]** 1979
Ink on cardboard

43) **[I Can Hear You Think (Je peux t'entendre penser)]**
1983
Ink on paper

44) **[Projet pour Rio (Project for Rio)]** 1983-87
Watercolour and collage on paper

45) **[Sisyphus n° 2 (Sisyphe n° 2)]** 1990-91
Ink on paper

46) **[Red Spit Chopin]** 1983-87
Watercolour and graphite on paper

47) **[Dwarf Laugh (Rire de lutin)]** 1983-87
Ink on paper

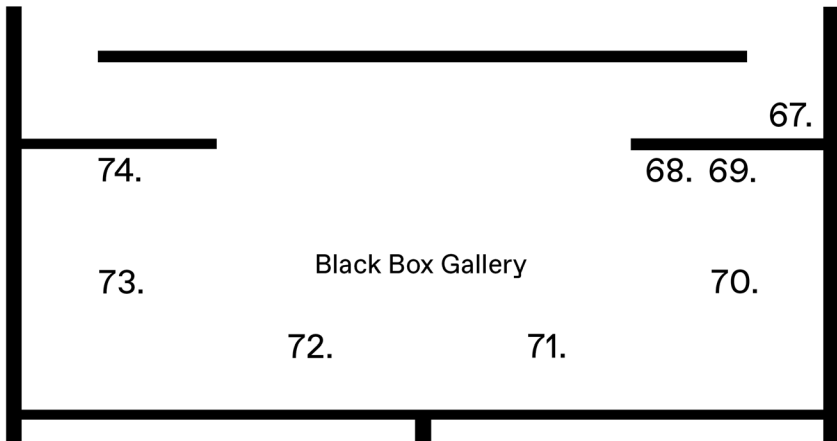
48) **[I Want You to Feel the Way I Do...(The Dress) n° 3
(Je veux que te éprouves ce que je ressens...(la robe)
n° 3)]** 1984-85
Ink and coloured pencil on paper

- 49) **[Olfactory Portrait (Portrait olfactif)]** 1994-95
Ink on paper
- 50) **[ACKE]** 1992
Ink on paper
- 51) **[Cubes with Four bisected Sides Rotated along both Axes (Cubes à quatre côtés bissectés en pivot le long des deux axes)]** 1979
Graphite on paper
- 52) **[Snake Head (Tête de serpent)]** 1979
Ink on paper
- 53) **[Espace / Temps n° 2 (Time-Space n° 2)] Projet / Project** 1983-87
Watercolour, ink, and graphite on paper

Row 3

- 54) **[Tree of the Flaming Fruit n° 1] Projet / Project** 1984
Watercolour, ink, and coloured pencil on paper
- 55) **[Ouroboros n° 1]** 1979
Ink on cardboard
- 56) **[Corona Laurea (noli me tangere)]** 1982
Ink on paper
- 57) **[Silhouette n° 2]** 1998
Watercolour on paper
- 58) **[Espace / Temps n° 3 (Time-Space n° 3)] Projet / Project** 1983-87
Graphite on paper
- 59) **[Tree of the Flaming Fruit n° 2] Projet / Project** 1984
Ink, graphite, colour pencil and watercolour on paper
- 60) **[Baldacchino]** 1996-98
Ink on paper

- 61) **[Ouroboros n° 2]** 1979
Ink on cardboard
- 62) **[Silhouette n° 1]** 1983-97
Graphite, coloured pencil, and watercolour on paper
- 63) **[Les Béquilles / Prothèse n° 2]** 1994
Ink on paper
- 64) **[Espace / Temps n° 1 (Time-Space n° 1)] Projet / Project** 1983-87
Watercolour and ink on paper
- 65) **[Snakes (Serpents)]** n.d.
Ink on paper
- 66) **[I Want You to Feel the Way I Do...(The Dress) n° 4 (Je veux que te éprouves ce que je ressens...(la robe) n° 4)]** 1984-85
Ink on paper



BLACK BOX GALLERY

67) ***Monumental*** 2002 Painted wood

Monumental offers a giant pair of crutches that have been left tucked in a corner. Their installation evokes the stacks of crutches often seen at shrines and sites of religious pilgrimage which have been left behind by people who—suddenly and miraculously—were able to walk without assistance.

This work was inspired by Édouard Beupré (1881–1904), who was born in Willow Bunch, Saskatchewan, and was widely known as “The Willow Bunch Giant.” With a reported height of 2.52 m, or 8’ 3”, Beupré remains one of the tallest men in recorded history—*Monumental’s* crutches are scaled such that Beupré could have made use of them. He used his great height to perform in sideshows as a wrestler and strong man, eventually signing a contract with the Barnum and Bailey circus to appear at the St. Louis World’s Fair in Missouri. However, just two days after signing Beupré passed away after suffering a pulmonary hemorrhage. He was only 23.

68) **Vanitas** 1987
Photograph

69) **Distraction** 1992
C-print

70) **Distraction** 1992
Cloth, Silk organza, buttons, human body hair

Two couples reserve a table in a renowned and ostentatious restaurant (Grand Véfour). The two men are formally dressed. One woman wears a jacket with joined sleeves which make it impossible for her to use her hands. The second wears a transparent shirt into which body hair has been woven, in a copy of male chest hair pattern. During the meal one of the men feeds his partner – the one with imprisoned hands – as if nothing were amiss. The rarefied atmosphere of the restaurant discourages obvious reactions from the other clients, who remain innocent of the purpose of the action that is taking place in their midst.

Description of performance called *Distraction* (version 1995) that used these two garments.

71) **Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic** 1987
Flank steak, salt, thread, dressmaker's model

The term "vanitas" is used to describe a genre of allegorical images meant to remind viewers of the transience and futility of human life through the depiction of symbolic earthly objects. The most well-known examples are 16th and 17th century Dutch still-life paintings that depict lush arrangements of items like flowers, books, hourglasses, or musical instruments, and perhaps most compellingly, food.

Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic draws on this tradition with the visceral, realistic impact of raw meat. First exhibited in 1987, it was subsequently remounted at the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa, the Centre Pompidou in Paris, and the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, among other sites. Each time the work is shown, a fresh dress is sewn.

The Pompidou version will be shown at The Louvre in 2026.

72) ***Chemise de nuit (Nightgown)*** 1993

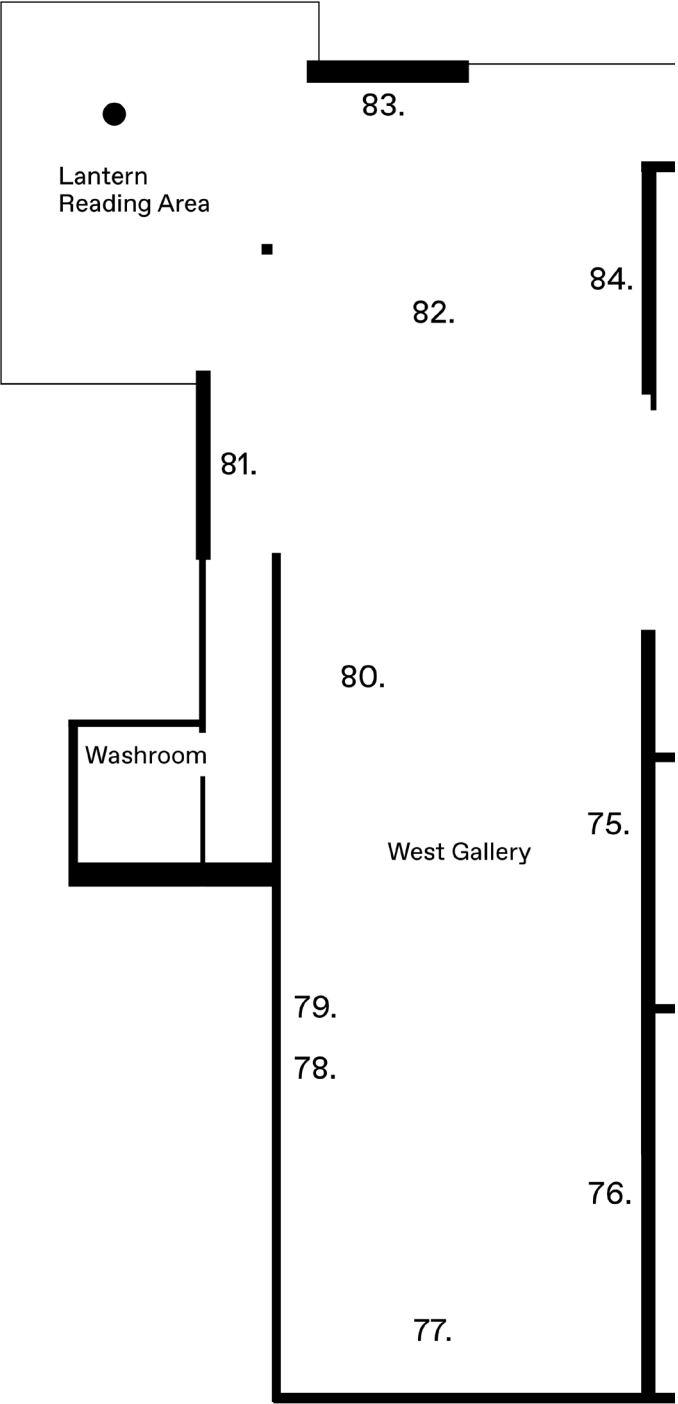
Silk organza, human body hair

73) ***Attitudes*** 1987

Six embroidered white cotton pillow shams
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Gift of an anonymous donor, 2010.

74) ***Sulking Room*** 1987

White embroidery on black felt
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Gift of Ydessa Hendeles, Toronto, 1993.



WEST GALLERY

- 75) ***Proto-Condition: Cage for Sound*** 1994
Bamboo, leather straps, wheels
Collection Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. Anonymous gift, 2021.

This cage was fabricated in Japan out of bamboo, after a form of crumpled newspaper resembling a giant larva.

Jana Sterbak, "Condition," *Jana Sterbak* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 1998), 22.

- 76) ***Artist as Combustible*** 1987
Video

- 77) ***Absorption: Work in progress*** 1995
Colour print and text, vinyl and paper on aluminum
Collection Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. Gift from The Peggy Lownsbrough Fund, 1999.

Absorption (Work in Progress) uses a felt suit and a cocoon-like structure to explore ideas of artistic influence and the physical process of absorption. The work references German artist Joseph Beuys who often employed unusual and sometimes volatile materials in his work, such as felt, wax, and fat. His 1970 artwork *Felt Suit* proved particularly susceptible to moth infestation. Sterbak took this story and subsequently centred herself in the tale, imagining herself metamorphosing into a moth and consuming Beuys's suits. This humorous conceit highlights Sterbak's own absorption of Beuys's artistic ideas and serves as an ironic comment on artistic legacy, professional competition, and artistic success.

78) ***Sisyphus Sport*** 1998
Black and white photograph

79) ***Sisyphus Sport*** 1998
Stone and leather straps

The mythical character of Sisyphus was damned by the gods to repeatedly haul a giant boulder up a hill, after which it would roll back down to the bottom: a cycle that Sisyphus would repeat for all eternity. His plight has become contemporary shorthand for futility and endless toil. By adding simple straps to a heavy stone, Sterbak sarcastically offers some help to make the moving of the stone up the hill easier, while simultaneously doing nothing to lessen the load.

80) ***Remote Control II*** 1989
Aluminium structure on wheels, remote control engine, cotton cloth and single-channel video, colour, silent, loop
MACBA Collection. MACBA Foundation.

Remote Control II, a crinoline made of aluminium with motorized wheels and a battery, is an artefact from a choreography first performed in 1989. The larger-than-life-sized mobile structure resembles a prison into which its wearer is lowered, suspended, and then transported by a radio-mechanism. Though the woman inside was able to operate the crinoline herself with a remote control, the structure's movements were also randomly manipulated by unseen hands, thus creating a "dialectic between freedom and constraint."¹

This mechanized garment speaks to the ways in which social control is enacted upon the body through fashionable clothing. The cage crinoline was invented 1856. As a monstrous, dome-shaped structure of concentric, calibrated hoops worn under a skirt,

it greatly exaggerated the hips of its wearer and rendered her relatively immobile, incapable of many independent gestures, and certainly unfit for physical labour.

¹ Clement Page, "Jana Sterbak: 'I Want You to Feel the Way I Do'", *Third Text* 35 (Summer 1996), p. 66.

81) **Generic Man** 1987-89
Black and white photograph on vinyl

Automation and robot-like figures play an important role in Sterbak's work. In keeping with this theme, *Generic Man* shows the back of a shaved head with a bar code emblazoned on the figure's neck. The numbers of the barcode effectively replace the figure's identity; he becomes an item to be purchased and consumed. Visually and compositionally, the work alludes to official state portraits of politicians, particularly those of the Communist leaders that Sterbak recalls from her youth in Prague. Sterbak was inspired to develop this image after walking behind a man in New York and thinking he had a barcode tattooed on his neck. While the tattoo was actually the label of the man's shirt, the idea nonetheless took hold.

82) ***Planetarium (Montserrat Version)*** 2000-02
Blown glass, aluminum tables
The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Purchase, through the generosity of Miriam Aaron Roland

Planetarium (Montserrat) was created in collaboration with a master glassmaker at the International Glass and Visual Arts Research Centre (CIRVA), Marseille. Glass is a recurrent material and source of fascination for Sterbak, who is drawn to its heaviness, its mineral quality, its transparency, and its extreme fragility.

The work's collection of mottled, colourful glass orbs evoke planets or other celestial bodies.

83) ***Altas*** 2002
Colour photograph

In Greek mythology, the figure of Atlas is doomed to carry the weight of the heavens on his shoulders. Sterbak's photograph documents a performance during the initial installation of *Planetarium (Montserrat Version)* in which the performer carried one of the mottled glass orbs from the work on their shoulders, their labour physically echoing Atlas' toil. The image becomes a contemporary reinterpretation of the ancient Greek myth, and gestures to the fragility of our world.

84) ***Dissolution (Auditorium)*** 2001
Video, 12 minutes

Dissolution is in the collection of the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec. The complete installation is comprised of up to 16 chairs. Under regular museum conditions the meltdown takes the whole museum day. This video was shortened to 12 minutes.

Jana Sterbak: Dimensions of Intimacy

One of Canada's most influential artists, Jana Sterbak has had a significant impact on contemporary art, artists, and audiences for almost 50 years. This large-scale retrospective presents a comprehensive overview of Sterbak's work, celebrating her pivotal contributions to art history and offering a rare opportunity to experience her work firsthand. *Dimensions of Intimacy* features innovative early work that pushes material and sculptural norms, wearable structures that merge object with performance, significant video and film work, as well as rarely exhibited artist editions, photographs, and drawings from Sterbak's own collection.

Born in Prague, Czechoslovakia (now known as Czechia), Sterbak left with her parents after the Soviet invasion, moving west and settling in Canada. Though she has maintained a home and studio in Montréal for many years, Sterbak remains connected to Europe, where most of her extensive exhibitions and professional life have taken place, and from where she draws her sense of skepticism, irony, and dark humour. Sterbak's biography provides a study of contrasts, most notably between the personal and the public or political, and between freedom and dependence—an existential foundation from which she scrutinizes the human condition.

Provocative material exploration is central to Sterbak's practice. Often noted as being difficult to classify by medium or style, it is precisely this resistance to conformity that makes her material choices so surprising and powerful. Influenced initially by minimalism, her unconventional materials are selected deliberately to express a direct relationship between material and idea. Granite, metal, or electrical wire speak to ideas of weight, permanence, or restriction. In contrast, chocolate, bread, or meat, offer an immediate association with food, and speak to value, tradition, and decomposition. Her materials are often ephemeral, intangible, or transformative, like the ice that forms the slowly melting chairs of *Dissolution (Auditorium)* (2001); the electricity that powers the Van de Graaff generator producing an electrostatic shock to anyone that touches *Seduction Couch* (1986-1987); or the raw flank steak that is stitched into a dress that over time dehydrates into a leathery skin in the much discussed and often copied *Vanitas*:

Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic (1987).

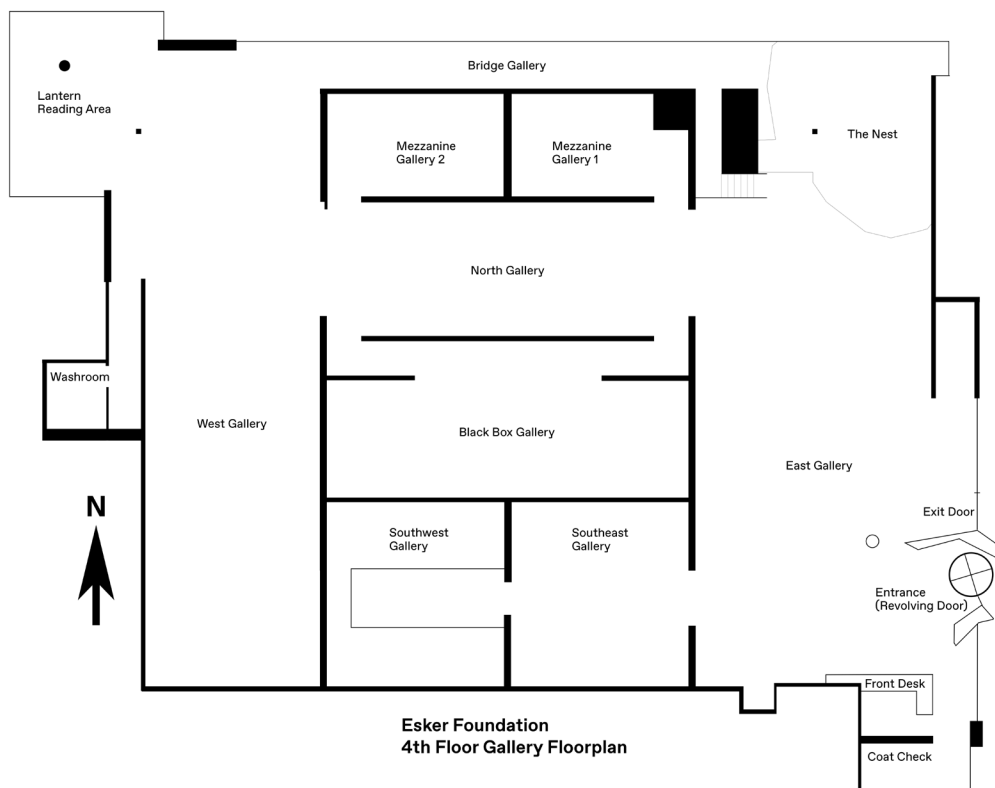
Sterbak's materials are the stuff of everyday life; familiar objects so ordinary that we rarely give them any notice. This material approach grounds her work in the world, making it more relatable. As Sterbak has stated, "I prefer to call my work 'objects' or 'situations', rather than 'sculpture'. To relegate an object to the rarefied world of art negates its power to disturb and the potential for discovery. A really successful work of art has the ability to make us reconsider our perceptions – not only inside the museum, but also out in the world." For example, the standard dressmaker's measuring tape used in *Cones on Fingers* (1979) and *Cones on Hand* (1979) ironically transforms this simple tool of the domestic and fashion worlds into an eccentric prosthetic device for fingers or hands. These works propose a dual reading, critically addressing the unrealistic proportions imposed on the female body, while also serving as a reminder that life is measured, an ever-decreasing sum that cannot be escaped.

At the heart of Sterbak's scrutiny is the struggle for freedom. Her frequent references to the body are intended to remind us that we inhabit a corporeal envelope that, regardless of our histories or actions, both conditions and limits our freedom. She also strategically addresses the political systems, power dynamics, and social norms that influence and control bodies and bodily experiences. Sterbak suggests that structures of confinement not only manifest via these external pressures, but also—possibly more crushingly—via their internalization, which impacts our sense of self and our relationships with others. These tensions are given physical form in work that literally contains the body or physically limits its movement. *Sisyphus Sport* (1997) and *Sisyphus II* (1991), as the titles clearly imply, reference the well-known Greek myth of Sisyphus and slyly reduce this tale to its essential thematic and material components. The weight, struggle, and futility of life are represented in a simple granite backpack and aluminum cage structure with a rounded bottom that makes balance impossible. The installation of the work includes a looping film depicting a man in this cage attempting to remain upright; his struggle to balance always fails, yet his need to succeed is endless. *I Want You to Feel the Way I Do. . . (The Dress)* (1984-85), evokes the damaging effects of love in the hands of characters who play out narratives of

suffering and revenge. The work includes a text that reads like a poison letter which is made even more sinister by the outstretched arms of an ominous electrified dress seeking an embrace that, if given, will only cause more harm. The larger-than-life-size mechanized crinoline in *Remote Control II* (1989), the male chest hair sewn into the transparent fabric of *Distraction* (1991) and *Nightgown (Chemise de Nuit)* (1993-2014) draw attention to social expectations with regard to appearance and behaviour, how policies and laws limit or control sexuality or gender expression, and remind us of the ways in which certain bodies continue to be privileged, marginalized, or controlled.

The bed is the one place that is inextricably connected to the cycle of life—it is the place of sleep, but also of birth, sex, sickness, and death. *Bread Bed* (1996-2025) highlights most precisely the ways in which Sterbak entwines the conventional with the visceral. The mattress is a single loaf of golden-brown bread, a gesture reminiscent of fairy tales or folklore. In this work, the common becomes extraordinary, not because the mattress has metamorphized into something more valuable like gold, but because its material replacement is equally as common. Sterbak's substitutions are not magical transformations; they simply underline the absurdity of the ordinary. This bread bed is uncomfortable because we think about bread as something nourishing we consume and digest, not as something to receive and hold our bodies in all of their leaking, sweating, fetid states.

Sterbak celebrates the productive friction inherent in the tension of opposites. As she has stated, "I think attraction/repulsion is inherent in the most successful works of art – if it's all repulsion, nobody would engage with it; if it's all happy and positive and attractive, it can easily fall into the realm of decoration or sentimentality. The push and pull recalls our daily existence. The great thing about an artwork is that one can present mutually exclusive propositions – not sequentially, but all at once." Sterbak understands the human condition as an ongoing narrative of provocative contrasts: absurd and rational, flawed yet perfect, fragile but strong, and her material and thematic scope reflects this. The incongruous impulse to both resist and accept contradiction is itself a paradox, and it is in this place of struggle that Sterbak's work is most at home.



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