

# **Projects 38 : Jana Sterbák : the Museum of Modern Art, New York, November 20, 1992-January 5, 1993**

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jana štěrβάk

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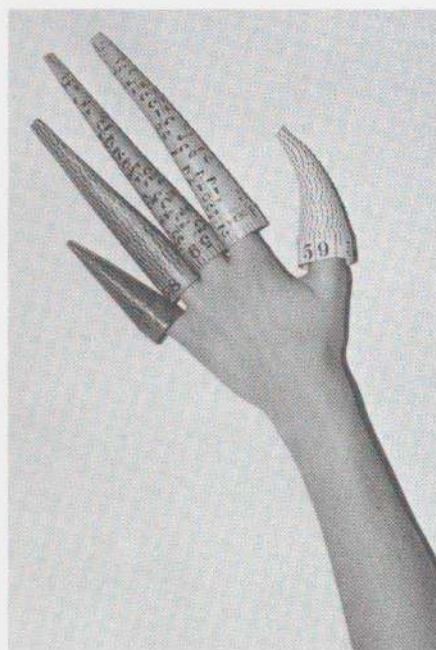
**The Museum of Modern Art**  
**New York**

**November 20, 1992 – January 5, 1993**



1638 **J**ana Štěrbák is a Montreal-based artist whose distinctive voice articulates the experiences of an Eastern European mind. She grew up in the distinguished but run-down city of Prague, a suppressed environment characterized by critical wit and strong mysticism. The child of reformist intellectuals who supported the politician Alexander Dubček, she was inspired by such guides as Franz Kafka and Karel Čapek. Literature was a fertile resource in her home: writers like Milan Kundera taught with her father. She developed an interest in ritual and dogma and—living near Faust's house—in the ways in which an imaginary figure can become an integral part of everyday life. With the Russian takeover in 1968, Štěrbák was uprooted abruptly and brought to the Arcadian environment of modern Vancouver.

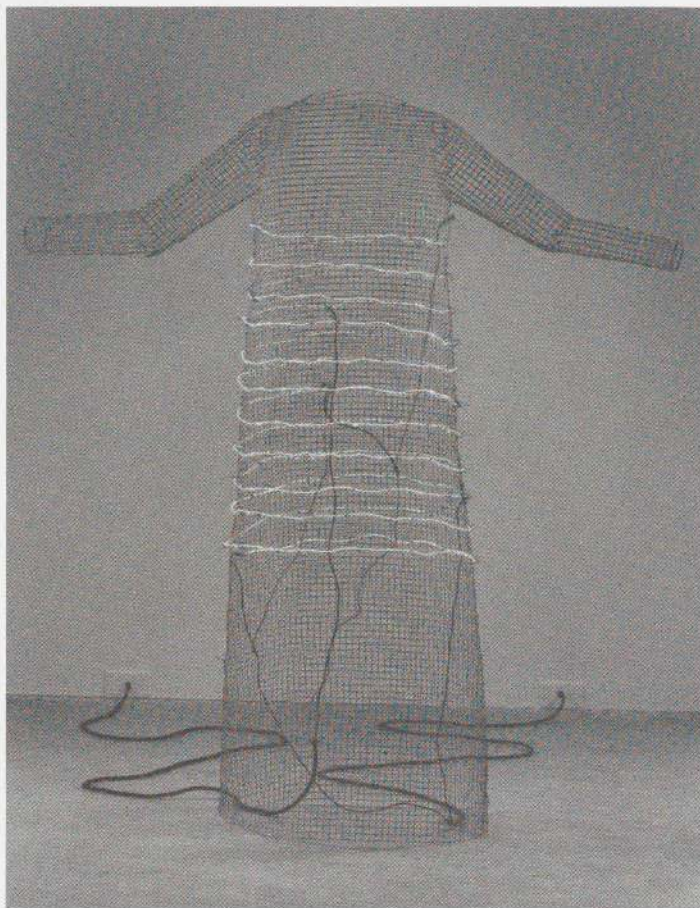
Completing art school in the late 1970s, Štěrbák was influenced by the activities of Joseph Beuys, as well as by those of Robert Smithson and other minimalist and performance artists. Sol LeWitt's elegant reduction of form to its essentials, and Dennis Oppenheim's and Jackie Windsor's command of space and physical manipulation of materials also shaped her investigations.



*Measuring Tape Cones.* 1979.  
Measuring tapes.  
Photo: Louis Lussier,  
courtesy Galerie  
René Blouin,  
Montreal

Štěrbák's work often refers to the body, either through shape or implied function. Her spare yet sensual objects, in human scale, pique the viewer's attention. The artifacts of *Measuring Tape Cones* (1979) look as if they might be displayed on the shelf of a natural history museum. The sections, made out of the cloth measuring tapes used in sewing, are coiled to resemble trophylike horns and menacing claws.

**C**oming from a cultivated Austro-Hungarian capital that was pulled into the Eastern bloc, Štěrbák grew up in an environment where myth was a guarded means of saying one thing but implying another, a twentieth-century application of the ancient mediation between our deep-seated desires and armorlike defenses. At first glance her



*I Want You to Feel the Way I Do . . . (The Dress).* 1984–85. Wire mesh, filaments, electrical cords, and plugs. Photo: Robert Keziere, courtesy The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

dynamic installations feel accessible and appear simple. But after one considers them and then reads the titles—some of which come from the Greco-Latin tradition—many different layers start to unfold.

From her earliest work she has been using the literal to get at the hidden. *Golem: Objects as Sensations* (1979–82) is such an installation, with eviscerated body parts coherently arranged. Spread out across the floor are a rubber stomach, bronze spleen, lead penis, and seven handmade lead hearts. These last start out looking fairly conventional, but by the end are completely squeezed and twisted out of shape. Hung on the wall is a cast-metal ear penetrated by a crudely fashioned bent rod. Štěrbák's

*Hearts Series.* 1979. Lead. Photo: Isaac Applebaum, courtesy Galerie René Blouin, Montreal





title refers to a well-known Jewish legend that belonged to her childhood. According to a sixteenth-century version of this tale, Rabbi Low—whose famous tombstone in Prague still receives crowds of visitors—molded an automatonlike protector in clay and endowed his golem with life. Eventually his creation went out of control, and the rabbi was forced to destroy it. Štěrbák's metaphor seems to be about rediscovering the metaphysical elements missing from high-tech urban life.

The simple materials of Štěrbák's unpretentious projects can take the viewer by surprise. For example, *I Want You to Feel the Way I Do . . . (The Dress)* (1984–85), created after several years in New York, is a dress made out of wire mesh that stands alone. A projected text reads in part "I want to slip under your skin: I will listen for the sound you hear, feed on your thought, wear your clothes." Even though the arms of this headless figure are outstretched in a beckoning embrace, we step back because woven into the bodice of this updated Medea-gift are red-hot heating filaments.

Pleasure versus pain, attraction versus repulsion—Štěrbák's most pronounced themes are the dualities we experience every day. In *Seduction Couch* (1986–87) viewers are seduced by the apparent comfort of a sleek, dramatically lit Empire-style chaise longue made of perforated metal. They are warned, however, that the couch transmits a slight electric charge. The temptation to sit down amid this material elegance is as strong as the anticipation of a shock.

Vitality and degeneration are contrasted in *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic* (1987). Made of pieces of raw meat stitched together, this intriguing dress ages and eventually darkens, evoking the common fear of confronting mortality. The exposed flesh also compels us to consider the ways in which we hide our own flesh beneath clothes (symbols of protection, status, and individuality), treating our bodies simultaneously as desirable and as untouchable.



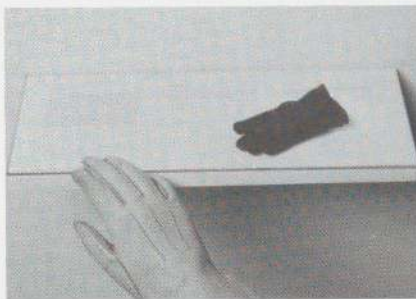
*Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic.* 1987. Meat. Photo: Louis Lussier, courtesy Galerie René Blouin, Montreal



*Remote Control II.* 1989. Aluminum, motorized wheel, remote control devices, batteries, and cotton cloth. Courtesy The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

Štěrbák's clothing metaphors can be seen as a way of responding to the anxieties we have about our own carnal nature. Štěrbák is attentive to the conflicts many have faced in leaving behind the 1960s, a dynamic period when sexual taboos were challenged, and equal rights became a national ideal. She appreciates how arduous it is to enter the 1990s, a conservative era marked by the resurgence of taboos and by new dangers, most notably the AIDS epidemic. Štěrbák addresses this confrontation and our profound yearnings through images that are both raw and highly refined; in this she recalls such pivotal artists as the French-born American sculptor Louise Bourgeois and the Canadian draftsman and installation artist Betty Goodwin.

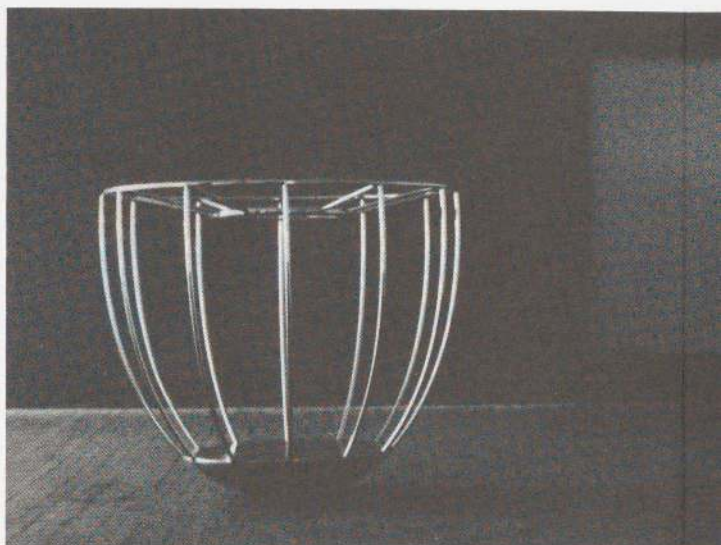
In response to our push-button, overly mechanized life, Štěrbák has added motion to her clothing apparatus. *Remote Control II* (1989) is a hoopskirtlike structure, complete with panties and motorized wheels. The object sits idle, until, as depicted in its accompanying videotape, it is activated by a performer inside. Then it zips through the gallery.



*Shrinking Lenin.* 1991. Glove and text. Photo: Louis Lussier, courtesy Galerie René Blouin, Montreal

For Štěrbák, clothing also makes a forceful political statement. *Shrinking Lenin* (1991) consists of a display case, with—as identified in one of three labels—a shrunk, size-7, white-kid lady's glove. Once an integral aspect of genteel attire (connoting refinement and exclusivity), this miniature relic is a symbol of social conformity and of burdens left over from old stereotypes. The second adjacent label, entitled "The Method," describes the purported body of a Portuguese sailor miniaturized in the





*Sisyphus II*. 1991. Chrome, aluminum, and film projection. Photo: Louis Lussier, courtesy of the artist.

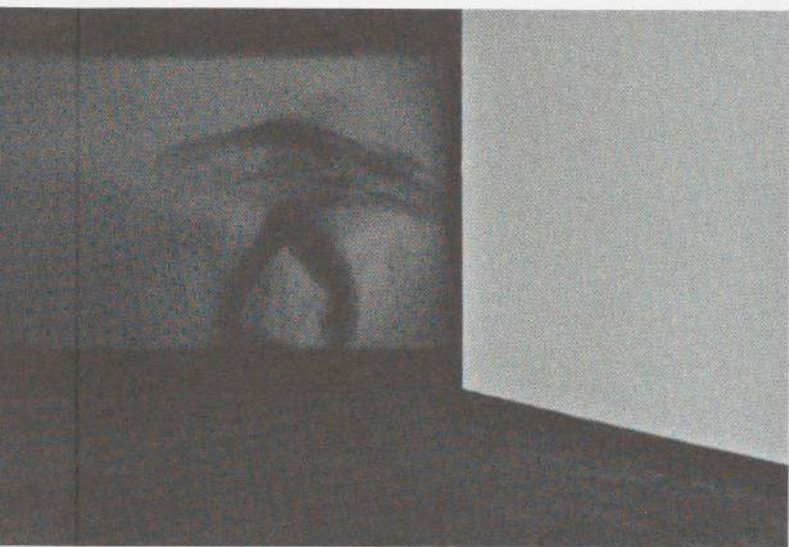
manner of the Shuara Indians' shrunken heads, on display in the Museum of the American Indian. "But this particular example does not conform to the Shuara ritual practices and is thought to have been made for the non-Indian market in the 1920s–30s." The final label, entitled "The Object," states: "Inside a glass case, in the Lenin mausoleum on Red Square, lies the embalmed body of Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov."

The reverse of *Remote Control II*, egg-shaped *Sisyphus II* (1991) consists of a shiny chrome structure whose circular frame oddly resembles the stays of an upside-down crinoline. In perfect equilibrium when unoccupied, *Sisyphus II* precariously tilts on the floor when a performer steps in. Projected onto an adjacent wall is a large grainy film depicting a muscular man who endlessly and laboriously pivots around within the sculpture. At one point he grins.

A beguiling physical object, *Sisyphus II* touches deep-seated emotions and demands a response. Confronted with an elusive depiction, many will experience a desire that is aroused but unsatisfied, and therefore feels out of control. Like Štěrbák's other work, *Sisyphus II* is physical but exists as much in the imagination as in the world.

According to Greek mythology, Sisyphus was an ancient king of Corinth, celebrated for his ingenuity, his guile, and his disrespect for Zeus. Condemned to eternal punishment in Tartarus, he was forced to push a large boulder up a steep hill. But every time he reached the top, the boulder would slip from his hands and fall down to the bottom, and Sisyphus had to begin his ascent all over again. Whereas Humpty-Dumpty's fall was final, Sisyphus' tale stands for the monotonous struggle with futile routines. But also with repetition come accumulated experience and insights. In fact, Štěrbák offers a positive interpretation, suggesting that Sisyphus could have been happy.

Jana Štěrbák is a "baby boomer." Brought up by traditional parents, she did not engage in the politics of feminism until she was an adult. Like many of her



is Lussier, courtesy Galerie René Blouin, Montreal. Collection Vancouver Art Gallery

generation, she finds the past and present in dramatic opposition. This is implied in *Magic Shoes* (1992), a pair of Paris designer shoes that stylistically recall the oppressive 1950s. The shoes are set in a formidable stance, their severe metal heels fastened by simple ball-chains to a distant column.

Craving the spiritual, Štěrbák notes that rationality gets in the way. She feels that we are hungry for connections and meaning, yet are caught up in our own routines—which may include going to the gym much more often than to a house of worship. Štěrbák laments the limitations of the body. Disturbed that she cannot fly or disappear at will, she explores our concepts of power and aspiration, drawing from intuition much more than from reason. In her work, the physical opens up the metaphysical, in a contemporary discourse that will ultimately yield new solutions.

— Barbara London





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Jana Štěrbák was born in 1955 in Prague, Czechoslovakia, and moved to Canada in 1968. She studied at the Vancouver School of Art (1973–74), the University of British Columbia, Vancouver (1974–75), Concordia University, Montreal (B.F.A., 1977), and the University of Toronto (1980–82). She lives and works in Montreal.

Previous panel: *Magic Shoes*. 1992. Leather, and metal chain. Photo: Konstantinos Ignatiadis, courtesy Galerie Nationale du Jeu de Paume, Paris

Cover: *Sisyphus II* (sequence). 1991. Chrome, aluminum, and film projection. Photo: Louis Lussier, courtesy Galerie René Blouin, Montreal. Collection Vancouver Art Gallery

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