On Dresses and Diadems: Female Discourse and the Politicized Body in Jana Sterbak's Thread Drawings and Artworks

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis investigates the motivations and manifestations of female discourse and body politic in Czech-Canadian artist Jana Sterbak's preparatory drawings and artworks from the 1980s.The analysis focuses on four artworks: *Corona Laurea* (1983), *Hot Crown* (1983-98), *I Want You to Feel the Way I Do… (The Dress*) (1984-85) and *Standard Lives* (1988). I argue that by analyzing the preparatory drawing as a separate entity and then in juxtaposition to the artwork, one can grasp the deeper, concealed meanings which Sterbak has hidden through the use of subversive text, imagery and material substance. This usually has to do with the traditionally feminine forms of clothing and adornment, specifically dresses and crowns in what are some of the artist's most recognizable artworks. In this thesis, supported by the concepts of narratology developed by Mieke Bal and the relationship between language and the female body as Lesley Jeffries and Jane Ussher have explored in their research, I will examine Sterbak's on-going reflections on the politics of the women's body that begin with the artist's initial conception in the process of what she calls her "thread drawings."

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DEDICATION

For Sam –

"Yes, Siddhartha," he spoke. "It is this what you mean, isn't it: that *the river is everywhere* at once, at the source and at the mouth, at the waterfall, at the ferry, at the rapids, in the sea, in the mountains, everywhere at once, and that there is only the present time for it, not the shadow of the past, not the shadow of the future?"[1]

[1] Herman Hesse, *Siddharta*. 94.

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INTRODUCTION

"If only Apollo,
Prince of the lyric, had put
in our hearts the invention
Of music and songs for the lyre
Wouldn't I then have raised
up a feminine paean
To answer the epic of men?"[2]

In myth and in fairytale, women's clothing has been given chimerical and transformative powers as a pervasive ever-after motif. For female characters happiness and freedom from oppression and treachery is achieved after they don *the dress*, find their prince and are crowned his princess. This thesis investigates the opposite of this story.

Over the course of her career, Jana Sterbak has explored her own interpretation of the ways female garments and language can tell binary stories about life and death, good and evil, love and hate, male and female. Born in 1955, Sterbak is a Canadian artist who emigrated from Prague, Czechoslovakia (now the Czech Republic), to Edmonton, Alberta as a teenager in 1968. From Edmonton, she moved to Vancouver in 1970 and attended the University of British Columbia in 1974 before finally settling for an extended period of time in Montreal. Sterbak acquired her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in 1977 at Concordia University and her MFA at the University of Toronto in 1982.

Much of Sterbak's artworks are concerned with issues of power, sexuality, and control. A self proclaimed multidisciplinary artist, Sterbak works in different media, including sculpture, installation, photography, video and performance. Yet, all of her

[2] Euripides and Michael Collier, ed., *Medea* (London: 2006) 58.

artworks remain inextricably connected through her artist's process, wherein the artworks are born through preliminary drawing. The term 'born' is used consciously here, as Sterbak has alluded to the act of 'birthing' many times in her work and its connection to the feminine and the womb.[3] This includes her works which relate to the Czech author Kafka's reinterpretation of the golem myth, originating in the Talmud, about an animated anthropomorphic being formed out of clay. These stories connect with the most famous of the golem stories told by Judah Loew ben Bezalel, the late 16th century chief rabbi of Prague who was able to call forth the golem in times of crisis and persecution.[4]

This thesis concentrates on the wide variety of folk, mythological and classical literature that Sterbak reveals as sources of inspiration through her preparatory drawings. Often these references appear as words or phrases inserted into these drawings. As well the artist file on Jana Sterbak at the National Gallery of Canada which includes both published and unpublished material and the exhibition catalogue for *Thinking Out Loud,* Sterbak's only show that revolves around her drawings, held at the Université de Quebec à Montreal and curated by Louise Déry in 2001 are key references. This project differs significantly from the *Thinking Out Loud* exhibition catalogue largely focuses on the exhibition as a whole, similar to the way in which the exhibition is installed, whereas this thesis examines the drawings individually, in relation to the art works, and in relation to

[3] These include *Snakes (n.d.), Nevermore (1983-87)*, etc.

[4] Dan Bilefsky, "Hard Times Give New Life to Prague's Golem" *New York Times,* 2009: A10.

one another. Within this framework specific methodologies guide my approach, in particular narrative and female discourse analysis.[5]

Jana Sterbak calls her drawings "thread drawings", to mean that these sketches are connective threads that link to her finished works which are often creative reinterpretations of women's garments.[6] These drawings are linear sketches that resemble rough notations, quickly and spontaneously rendered in the process of the artist's creative thinking. Often painted over with shapes of different colors the works have a distinctive graphic quality and contain a highly specific syntax. This includes: adaptations or paraphrasing of quotes from artists such as Alberto Giacometti and philosophers; descriptive, canonically loaded words; and, in the case of one drawing, a moralistic address reminiscent of traditional "folk" tales.[7] These words which can be understood as the artist talking to herself as well as addressing the viewer are verbal manifestations of Sterbak's inner thoughts and feelings.

Clearly, these words reveal the personal and intellectual side of the artist. Sterbak's philosophical and literary interests become evident when analyzing the sources. These include Kafka's writings about golems and alienation, already noted, and a wide variety of myths and legends. References to fairy tales in both the thread drawings and artworks about the triumphs of heroines over unimaginable evil forces, wicked relatives,

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[5] The concept of a comprehensive female discourse was conceived by Virginia Woolf and comprises of sets of traditions and physical and psychological characteristics that are essentially 'female'. For more on this, please see: Elizabeth Abel, Virginia Woolf and the Fictions of Psychoanalysis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989)

[6] Louise Déry, *Thinking Out Loud* (Montreal: UQAM, 2001) 81.

[7] Edwin Smith, "The Function of Folk-Tales," *(Journal of the Royal African Society*: Jan. 1940) 64.

monsters, dragons, and the recurring motif of humankind's intrinsic connection to nature also surface frequently in Sterbak's drawings.[8]

Further, Sterbak reveals in these drawings a connection with other artists, most importantly her appreciation of Alberto Giacometti.[9] Sterbak has also included literary references in her past photographic work; in *Generic Man*, the artist pairs the image of the man with the barcode on his neck with a poem by the Anglo-American poet W. H. Auden entitled *The Unknown Citizen*; this is not only a brilliant choice as the work makes reference to the anonymity of the individual in a digital age, but once again calls on inspiration from past literary works. In the instances where the drawings do not allude to literary works, the notes often imply knowledge of physics, geometry, advanced math, quantum mechanics, electrochemistry and theories of time and space travel, etc.[10] All of these references become evident through an extended reading of the artworks.

In these drawings Sterbak initiates her exploration of different forms of texts as communicative devices. In the arrangement of words, phrases and sentences to form meanings, Sterbak offers an explanation for or justification of her drawings. As the original source of her artworks these thread drawings are where her thinking, visualizing and conceiving begins. It is here in these drawings that Sterbak is most directly, immediately and privately the first person "I".

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[8] Namely, *I Want You to Feel the Way I Do… (The Dress)*, 1984-85, *Hot Crown,* 1998, *Corona Laurea,* 1983-84, *Golem: Objects as Sensation*, 1979, *Ouroboros*, 1979, *Proto Sisyphus*, 1998, among others. All artworks have thread drawings which have either been exhibited in *Thinking Out Loud* or have otherwise been provided by the artist through her website.

[9] These works include *Dwarf Laugh*, 1983-87, *NEVERMORE*, 1983-87*, Snake Head*, 1979, *Giant Clam*, 1984-87, etc.

[10] Mathematical and scientific languages and formulas appear in many of Sterbak's drawings from the 1970s and 1980s, specifically in *Cubes with Four* [sic] *bisected Sides Rotated along both Axes*, 1979, *Time-Space n1, n2* and *n3*, 1983-1987, etc.

This examination is largely based on four artworks; *Corona Laurea* (1982) (fig. 8-14), *Hot Crown* (1982-1998) (figs. 7 & 15), *I Want You to Feel the Way I Do… (...The Dress)* (1984-85) (figs. 1-6),) and *Standard Lives* (1988) (figs. 16-17). Existing scholarship for these artworks contain little to no information on the sketches or preparatory processes for these artworks, so it is here that this project will begin to assert itself as an area of new research. The particular methodological approach of this thesis, the exploration of Sterbak's drawings from the 1980s in relation to feminine language is in my view another important contribution. Third-wave feminist discourse, the female body politic as non-verbal language, dialogism and narratology are the different approaches I will use to investigate Sterbak's interest in the women's physical form in relation to gendered or "feminized" discourse. A wide range of recent books and articles are devoted to this subject. The concept of body politic has been addressed by Roy Porter, a history of medicine historian and Jane Ussher, a women's health psychologist. Within the context of their respective disciplines these scholars discuss shifting perceptions of gender and how women are theoretically and scientifically categorized and treated. Porter reveals the ways that the body historically has been dependent on different sets of circumstances and realities of the physical lives experienced by different types of bodies. Likewise, in her writings, Ussher examines how the feminine body is perceived and treated in the media and to what extent this can physically imprint the body. The findings of these scholars are excellent segues into a discussion of the concepts of Mieke Bal, an art historian and visual studies scholar who has written extensively about narratology, myth, and the construction of identity through speech.

Narratology, a methodology which presents a "systematic account of a theory of narrative for use in the study of literary and other narrative texts" is explored in Bal's *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* first published in 1985, and now in its third 2009 edition[11]. By analyzing the independent parts of the narrative and taking into account the individual and unique components such as naming, terms and arguments, the theory as a "whole" presents a more complete and qualitative understanding of the narrative. Bal challenges the reader to "ask meaningful questions" with regards to the complexities of narratology and storytelling in order to avoid the oversimplification of such narratives. To assist in this process she develops "a set of tools" to allow one to express and specify one's interpretations of the progression of a narrative. For example, according to Bal, when whole characters or descriptions are not present in a narratological text, it is still possible to interpret that missing part because "the presence of some elements denotes the absence of others."[12] This is relevant in analyzing Sterbak's art works as a form of narratology because often the woman's voice appears to have been suppressed or thwarted in the artist's presentation of the female character. This type of subjugation relates to feminine language, what Barbara Godard, a specialist in social and political thought and women's studies calls the "Mother Tongue" in her analysis of words and their relationship to other words specific to gender. Godard's ideas about gender and language manifest throughout her publication, entitled *Collaboration in the Feminine: Writings on Women and Culture from Tessera*, and specifically in Quebec poet and scholar Madeleine Gagnon's essay on how women are excluded from many forms of oral

[11] Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of the Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997) ix.
[12] Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of the Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997) 46.

tradition, to be discussed in relation to *Standard Lives*. This will be considered in conjunction with Lesley Jeffries' work on female syntax in order to understand why and how women communicate with one another and the ways in which women are communicated to at different stages of their life.

The exhibition *Thinking Out Loud* and its relationship to various kinds of theoretical bodies will be explored in great depth in the first section. Legend and lore surrounding the myth of Medea will be explored in section two in conjunction with the social and historical significance of dresses and crowns. Finally, in section three, visual narrative and the role of aesthetics will be used to flesh out the political significance of Standard Lives which will culminate in a concluding discussion of narratology and "the normative".

SECTION ONE

Thinking Out Loud/Penser tout haut: Thread Drawings and the Body's Social Condition

As previously mentioned, the exhibition of Jana Sterbak's drawings, *Thinking Out Loud/Penser tout haut* in 2001 at the Université du Québec à Montréal's art gallery was the only exhibition completely devoted to Sterbak's drawings. The exhibition was relatively small with almost all of her thread drawings framed separately and hung together as a single entity and forming a strong visual link (fig. 5). Since then, the drawings have dispersed, save for *Standard Lives* which I was given the opportunity to view at the National Gallery of Canada.[13] The other drawings may now be in private collections. Quite possibly Sterbak still has the drawings since she has stated in the past that she does not want her drawings to be considered as artworks unto themselves despite agreeing to exhibit these sketches in the 2001 exhibition.[14] Yet, Sterbak did allow the National Gallery of Canada to acquire etchings based on the same drawings for the artwork exhibited in *Thinking Out Loud*. According to Canadian art historian and curator, Diana Nemiroff, who was the head curator for contemporary Canadian art at the National Gallery and a key member responsible for the purchase of *I Want You to Feel the Way I Do… (The Dress),* Sterbak's etchings based on the drawings are a desirable acquisition because of their importance in determining the artist's process and relation to this and other works, and because they were included in the original exhibition.[15] Moreover,

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[13] At the time of this project's publication, no certifiably true information could be obtained as to the current location of these drawings; however, given their personal nature and the artist's opinion of her drawings, it is likely that the drawings are in Jana Sterbak's private collection.
[14] Louise Déry, *Thinking Out Loud* (Montreal: 2001) 16.
[15] According to the document, dated September 12th, 1994, the original drawings [for *...The Dress*) were exhibited with the sculptural installation in Sterbak's first solo-exhibition in 1991,

Nemiroff suggests that "these etchings, framed together and considered as a single work" should be considered "finished artworks".[16] The etchings reveal details of the drawings they derive from, such as a large grain of paper, the torn edges from a sketch ripped out of a notebook, etc. This is to say that despite their status as etchings, they still have the obvious appearance that they are drawings. The etchings which Nemiroff describes in her text appear in the original drawn form in *Thinking Out Loud* (fig. 5).

With this in mind, the exhibition catalogue for Jana Sterbak's *Thinking Out Loud,* because it includes reproductions of the sketches in the exhibition, articles by Déry and Sterbak that provide pertinent information about Sterbak's art practice, Sterbak's attitudes towards her drawings as both standalone and preparatory works, and the nature of the collaboration between the artist and curator is a point of entry in my discussion of Sterbak's work.[17] Déry writes:

> "We [Déry et al.] have found a few other examples of exhibitions or reproductions of Sterbak's drawings scattered in articles and catalogues over a twenty-year period, again without evidence, on the part of the authors, of any wish to document or analyze them. One can only rely on scarce notes written by the artist on the subject…In 1988 she commented on the role of reading in her work: "A lot of the work is inspired by reading… I write down my ideas as I conceive them. If I feel, half a year later, the necessity to produce them, I do so. Most of the time I don't." But then she added: "I prefer to give form to my thought through physical means.""[18]

Clearly, Sterbak considers thinking and drawing as interrelated activities that go hand in hand in her creative process

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Jana Sterbak: States of Being, which Diana Nemiroff curated while she was still at the National Gallery.

[16] Louise Déry, *Thinking Out Loud* (Montreal: 2001) 16.

[17] Given the focus of this thesis on the dynamics and layers of meaning found through textual analysis and its implications for feminine discourse, it is then important to include the artist's own voice.

[18] Déry, 79.

The exhibition deals exclusively with Sterbak's sketches to show the manner in which her initial ideas eventually give way to more fully formed concepts that in turn become the finished artworks. Sterbak confirms the intentionality of her drawings in her own words: "these pages included here are working drawings that do not presume to be anything more than note taking, a visual representation of my thinking process in its initial stages."[19] Yet it is precisely that form of "note taking" which reveals the original conception of themes and ideas that inevitably shift with the passage of time and changes of heart. Fragmented yet coherent, the artworks are conduits: created out of inspiration that is based on reading, writing, interpretation and reflection.

Sterbak consistently combines these elements through the process of drawing and writing. As she stated earlier sometime between 1979 and 1982: "I retract into myself, from the periphery of my body towards the inside. I condense my vital organs: soon they will be but a thin thread placed in the centre."[20] In this significant quote exhibited alongside the artworks from *Golem: Objects as Sensations* in 1982, Sterbak likens her body to thread, as an extension of herself. Both as language in the literal act of extending oneself like thread from a spool and metaphorically in the ability to manipulate one's own body, as well as in the linear visualization of thought the sketches as "thread drawings" are also a part of Sterbak's corporeal essence. Often only revisited as potential artwork contenders months or even years after their initial creation these drawings have only rarely been exhibited alongside finished artworks as in the exhibition, already noted: *Jana Sterbak: States of Being* from 1991 held at the National Gallery of Canada.

[19] Déry, 79.
[20] Déry, 82.

Sterbak has commented on the placement and inclusion of drawings in her exhibitions before, stating that "the text occupies a parallel position [to the artwork] and can be considered as an independent entity, especially if it contains a thematic link to the object, both complete one another".[21] Arguably, the two declarative statements in this quotation are in critical opposition to one another. In terms of the artist as maker this text can be considered an independent entity. Yet the text and the artwork also complete one another – so which is the truer statement? Independence from the object means that the text should be allotted theoretical analysis, yet whatever observations are made must be considered in relation to the object itself, therefore this "independence" is conditional and incomplete. Here, the reader / viewer bears witness to the calculative artistic decisions and subversive issues of language which persist throughout Sterbak's oeuvres and most definitely in her thread drawings which act as an outlet for her ideas expressed through note taking. Given the lucidity that accompanies free thought processes in the context of creation, it most certainly can be argued that Sterbak's drawings originate from a more personal and private place in contrast to the finished works which are the physically complete constructions of the artist.

Questions regarding reading and writing have challenged scholars who have written about Sterbak, such as Diana Nemiroff, Amanda Cruz, Irena Zantovská Murray, Jessica Bradley and John Latour. The feminist discursive analysis of Sterbak's work has been given little attention. Critical analyses have focused instead on mythology, allegory and dark humor. Diana Nemiroff has contributed significantly to critical analyses of Sterbak. Her publications include *Songs of Experience* (written with Jessica Bradley,

[21] Diana Nemiroff, *States of Being* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1994) 76.

1989), *Jana Sterbak: States of Being* (1991) and *Jana Sterbak: Photopractice* (2003). Cruz's 1998 exhibition catalogue, titled *Jana Sterbak* is especially interesting as it both documents the exhibition and also pays special attention to the biological materiality of the works presented in the show, such as insects, meat [particularly flesh], food and mechanical limbs. The author also makes mention of some of literary influences present in the works, such as the Greek myth of Sisyphus in the video work *Sisyphus* (1991), Samuel Beckett's absurdist play *Waiting for Godot* (1949) which inspired *Waiting for High Water* (2005), and finally, *The Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen of 1789* written by Thomas Paine, which appears in the video work *Declaration (1993)*. This work is by far the most overtly political work of the exhibition, given the man who stutters through a reading of the Declaration of Independence. According to Cruz, the articles of the Declaration are reversed "so the video ends with the most famous line, which asserts that "all men are created equal" as the speaker, who suffers from a severe stutter, attempts to finish the script.[22] Zantovská Murray has explored Sterbak's literal metamorphosis through time in her catalogue for the 1997 exhibition of the same title, engaging with the fleeting nature of time and the various states of the self. Finally, John Latour recently explored notions of the absent body in his thesis project written in 2005 titled *Manifestations of the Absent Figure in Canadian Sculpture since the Seventies.*

Given these areas of concentration in discussing Sterbak's works, the content of the drawings selected by the artist and curator for *Thinking Out Loud* further complicates what scholars already know of Sterbak and begets new ideas not yet considered. At the same time what these scholars offer is the confirmation of a strong connection to

[22] Jana Sterbak and Amada Cruz, *Jana Sterbak* (Chicago: 1998) 20.

literature that exists throughout Sterbak's artworks. Thus, it is logical to explore a literary approach for the analysis of Sterbak's artworks together with a narrative analysis grounded in feminine language already introduced above. Before embarking on this analysis, however it is important to consider the specific characteristics of the drawing and what one must look for in describing and analyzing the drawn image.

Methodologies such as formalism and semiotics reveal different methods of analyzing a work of art, as well as teaching one how to interpret and read such artworks based on a set of criterion in the form of questions. However, since it is the aim of this thesis to link evidence based on a reading of the presuppositions in Jana Sterbak's thread drawings in conjunction with the finished artwork, it is crucial to employ methodologies which do not rest on one facet of artistic production. Strong connections to literature exist throughout Sterbak's artworks, so it is then logical to explore a semiotic methodology for analyzing the artworks, coupled with an analysis of feminine language and its method of deliverance. As such, theories of narrative and voice relate most directly. This includes initial questions of subject matter, specifically the identification of occurring events and specific peoples (characters) that form the first and most crucial tools for reading these drawings. At the same time, from a formal perspective, Sterbak's thread drawings, specifically the ones to be discussed in this thesis fit into the category of preparatory figure drawing and (arguably) portraiture with conditions that allow the drawing to expand and evolve into other media in Sterbak's finished works.

First of all, Sylvan Barnet reminds us that no matter what the medium we must learn to meditate on the relationship between the viewer and the artist's gaze (since the

artist's view is necessarily the viewer's view) as well as the subject's gaze, as they are not necessarily the same. Barnet writes:

> "It has been argued, for instance, that in his pictures of his family and friends, [Edward] Degas gives his subjects a level stare, effectively placing them on the same social level as the viewer; in his pictures of working women (laundresses, dancers) he adopts this high viewpoint, literally looking down on his subjects; in his pictures of prostitutes, he looks either from below or from above, as a spy or a voyeur might do".[23]

Moreover, this inter-relative dynamic is dependent not only upon social hierarchical levels, but on the relationship between the figures exclusive of the artist/viewer gaze. On the topic of portraits, as Jacques Baudelaire famously said, portraiture is "a model complicated by the artist"[24]; given what historians now know of the political and social conditions of the times in which many had their portraits painted, it is now commonplace to question the motivations for the depicting (and revealing) of likenesses. Unquestionably, artists have taken aesthetic liberties to please the patron. As well, we recognize that portraits have the tendency to reveal less about the true and accurate aesthetic of an individual and more about the person's condition towards others. Artistic approaches to the figure as in the portrait occur in how the artist draws the bodily image, such as the stance and posture, size of body, spatial occupancy, clothing, furnishings, sense of personality and interrelationship to other figures. This relationship between the artist and object can be observed in Sterbak's preparatory drawings from her sketchbook in how she draws her subjects, or in some cases not at all. Bodies factor into her works very little, and when they do they are drawn half-hazardly. This is seen in *Corona Laurea (figs. 8 & 9)* where the "body" consists of one continuous line with no detail whatsoever.

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[23] Sylan Barnet, *A Short Guide to Writing About Art* (1997) 20.
[24] Barnet, 26.

I Want You to Feel the Way I Do… (The Dress) (figs. 1-3) implies the presence of an arm in the gesturing of the arms, however no hand or body is attached to the limb.

As for the medium of drawing itself, its inherent characteristics are compatible with the psychological nature of Sterbak's drawings. Dry mediums (pencil, charcoal, etc.) enhance the texture and the whiteness of the paper, as well as any color used, to give the work vibrancy, whole wet mediums (ink) may be slightly absorbed into the paper, changing its color or giving the artwork "heaviness".[25] Shaping of lines also act as indicators, conveying different tactility or sensibility dependent on uniformity and density of lines, pressure and motion of substance (ink, carbon) and pressure of instrument (pen, pencil). In turn these lines will have their own characteristics such as sharpness or blurriness, all converging to make one single image which, as a whole, takes on its own aura (light, dark, imposing, subdued, etc.). This is observed in a drawing for *…The Dress* (fig. 1), where the artist employs all of these strategies, including the symbolic color red, to convey the potential threat the artwork theoretically imposes.

[25] Barnet, 26.

SECTION TWO

The Legend of Medea's Rage: On Dresses and Deadly Diadems

Characteristic of both I Want You to Feel the Way I Do… (...The Dress) and Corona Laurea is the presence of the murderous Medea and her weapon-like dress and crown, intended to inflict death on its wearer. ...*The Dress*, a contraption intended to inflict violence upon its female user, is the physical incarnation of Medea's rage, the Greek mythological enchantress who seeks out revenge against her husband Jason for his betrayal of leaving her for the King of Corinth's daughter, Glauce. According to the myth, Medea exacts her revenge by sending Jason's mistress a golden coronet and a dress covered in poison, as well as killing her children whom she bore with Jason.[26] In the preparatory drawings for *Untitled (I Want You to Feel the Way I Do)*; later retitled *I Want You to Feel the Way I Do… (...The Dress),* Sterbak sketches out ...*The Dress* in parts. Different positions and inclinations of the arms are rendered (figs. 1, 2 & 3), the metal wiring coiled tightly along its length, like a metallic prosthetic. A wire mesh running horizontally along the body indicates the bust. Judging by its size as well as the type of tightly knit garment, the wearer is quite petite. The wire skeleton is also depicted in two versions of the bodice (both in fig. 1 & 2). The first one is wire mesh; the other is chainmail, an extremely heavy form of armament consisting of small metal rings linked together to form a protective garment, traditionally worn in battle. For both drawings Sterbak notes the material, junctions and cording. As well the name 'Medea' is scrawled onto the drawing in ink, next to the noted materiality (fig. 1).

[26] Euripides and Michael Collier, ed. *Medea* (2006) 66.

Mieke Bal defines this coupling of image and text as a double focalization. The image and text operate on two levels with separate meanings that are combined in this drawing. The unifying feature is the gesture of the arm which characterizes a feminine presence. Bal writes that "[such] a part of the story might be called a hinge, a fragment with a double, or at any rate ambiguous focalization in between two levels".[27] In comparison, the final sculptural form of *...The Dress* while marking a process of reflection for Sterbak on the feminine form introduces a new aspect not seen in these drawings. Mounted into the electric chords located at the back of the garment is an electrical eye, which detects the proximity of the viewer and asserts its superiority and power over them. When the viewer approaches, the eye switches *...The Dress* on and it begins to glow red with heat. This heat is noticeable to the viewer, since the wires are not insulated. Coiled in a circular motion around the bust, the wires evoke a visual warning. In addition, *...The Dress* is accompanied by the following side-projected text that interrogates the viewer:

> "I want you to feel the way I do: There's 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 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".[28]

Furthermore, enhancing this interpretation, in drawn form *...The Dress* is ghostly, its limbs reaching out to the viewer. Two dimensionally as a small drawing the artwork

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[27] Bal, 163.
[28] This text is a side-projected panel which accompanies the artwork (see fig. 9).

still looms large visually. Its tightly coiled arms reach out, for whom or what is not known. The electricity is represented by harsh zigzags and the figure is seemingly missing a head. Sterbak scrawls across the top of the drawing: "That, which is my dream does not exist. I am so sad". Here, in the drawing ...*The Dress* is a symbol of both a heartbroken and tortured body. This is obvious both in Stebak's words and in the connection of this drawing to the legend of Medea.

In a separate but related piece, *Corona Laurea* (1983), Sterbak revisits Medea's pain and torment through her diadem. The diadem is traditionally a type of crown. It is meant to be worn in the same fashion a headband is worn, across the crown of one's head. Eastern monarchs and women of high royal class (queens, princesses, etc.) are among the most commonly depicted wearers of diadems; however women of royal rank have worn diadems for thousands of years, dating back to the times of ancient Egypt.[29] Women of such rank were also buried with their diadems to signify their royalty in the afterlife, and so such possessions have great historical meaning. To change or alter that meaning in such a violent way is significant to the discussion of feminine adornment or fashion. Originally titled *Corona Laurea*, this version of Medea's gifted crown to Glauce was destroyed and repurposed to construct *Hot Crown* (1998). For a complete analysis of this project, the two artworks will be examined in tandem to one another and then separately, since one necessarily constitutes the other and their meanings are thematically linked (figs. 7-15).

[29] Bruce G. Trigger, "The Social Significance of the Diadems in the Royal Tombs at Ballana," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* (1969) 258.

In drawn form as it appears in *Thinking Out Loud*, the crown is presented rather simply. The general visual outline of a generic crown and the wiring with a spark plug on the end are the only indicators found in the artwork, whereas with *...The Dress*, the details refer to a work that is materially complicated, heavy and quite large given the materials noted alongside the drawing. The only exception are the undulating lines found in the outline of the wiring meant to denote the passage of electrical currents, further indicating that the artwork is indeed quite dangerous. In the thread drawings recovered for Corona Laurea not included in Thinking Out Loud from 1983, the artist returns to her detailed note-taking. Sterbak notes various materials and colors including quicksilver, likely for its use in electricity and ultraviolet light (fig. 8). Sterbak also sketches out the mathematical equations for making the artwork and the suitable wiring and voltage work.

As for the finished installation Corona Laurea has the appearance of mobility. This is because the wiring is strewn in such a way that it seems half-hazardly constructed while still dependent on its connection to an outlet. Hot Crown in contrast gives the impression of being an inert obelisk. Quite literally a "hot crown", the artwork is supported by a vertical transformer (see fig. 9). An electrical sensory eye detects the viewer's presence, and upon their approach of the artwork, the crown glows and becomes red hot. Allegorically, Sterbak once again calls on the myth of Medea's rage, connecting it with her previous works of the past decade.

In Amanda Cruz's publication, Jana Sterbak offers her commentary on the subject matter and inspiration for the artwork. In her own words, she explains that "the crown refers to temporal power and status…the piece was later disassembled to produce the dress of I Want You to Feel… to which it gave rise not only in material terms, but also

thematically, in its relation to the Medea legend. In the Greek myth, the heroine, Medea, gives the princess of Corinth, her rival for the affections of Jason, a diadem and a dress that, once she wears them, consume the unfortunate girl in flames."[30] Here Sterbak recalls the Medea and provides a hint of herself that connects the allegorically drawn representation of the Medea story with the finished work.

In John Latour's discussion of *...The Dress* (and by extension, *Hot Crown*, since they both refer to the same legend as confirmed by the artist herself), the artworks are posited at the center of an identity crisis. From this perspective Stebak can be seen to be attempting to engage with multiple personalities or voices whose narratives can be allegorically examined in juxtaposition to one another. What Latour suggests is that the understanding of the individual layers of story can explain the absent figure's character that is at the core of the artwork. While he does not relate this to narrative theory as his discussion of Sterbak is firmly planted in the absence of the physical figure, Bal's concept of narratology as a methodological tool asserts that narrative artwork must be semantically deconstructed layer by layer to achieve a full understanding of the transmission and reception of valuable information through a narratological exchange. This is certainly the case with Jana Sterbak. The true meaning is concealed behind her artistic motivation and the literary origin of this work. Bal calls these layers "embedded narrative texts", to mean that these are texts hidden behind a primary narrative or rather these are multiple narratives that function together at once.[31] Latour writes:

[30] Jana Sterbak and Amada Cruz, *Jana Sterbak*, (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1998) 20.
[31] Bal, 167.

"...The Dress is a complex sculpture that raises more questions about the identity and intention of the absent figure it evokes than it seems prepared to answer. Is she the wearer of ...The Dress and the narrator, the victim of violence, of the one who causes harm? Is she Glauce, a creation of the Ego, or some other facet of the self? Sterbak's entity points to a breakdown in the traditional subject/other dichotomy. Close examination of the projected narrative shows that the boundaries between the subject positions of "I" and "you" are almost entirely obscured. The absent figure of the entity has no fixed subject or position. It appears to suffer a fundamental sense of lack, and it is engaged in narcissistic pursuits only to provide itself with a sense of wholeness".[32]

If embedded texts act as indicators of how a text should be read, it can also be assumed that they are also concealing another meaning, which Latour suggests in the quote presented above. Bal also comments on the narcissistic obsession with the self, stating that Ovid's Narcissus, who became so full with self-love that he did not recognize the boundary between reality and fiction and subsequently died, did not die because he did not recognize himself, but rather he is "destroyed by the sense of tragic hopelessness that he has inflicted so often upon others, he begins his slow descent into death".[33] Here, it must be asked, to whom is Sterbak talking to, and what are the true dynamics of this exchange? The gender dynamic is especially prevalent, it can be argued, due to the obscured hierarchical relationship between the "you" and "I", as Latour outlines. Bal also investigates these pronouns, stating that "they do not refer outside of the situation in which they are uttered", because they "are empty in themselves".[34] These exist only as potential, and can shift perspectives at any time.[35] Moreover, the second person "you" is most important for Bal, since it necessarily confirms who "I", the speaker, is.[36]

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[32] John Latour, *Manifestations of the Absent Figure in Canadian Sculpture Since the Seventies* (Montreal: Concordia University, 2005) 67.
[33] Bal, 124.
[34] Bal, 30.
[35] Bal, 30.
[36] Bal, 30.

According to linguistic theorist Lesley Jeffries, by using text which "[addresses] the reader [viewer] directly using the second-person pronoun, you, they just as often indicate that the referent of the pronoun is female".[37] Given that the artist of this work is female, it is a fair assumption that the exchange is occurring between two females. Much of the language used is confrontational and facetious. Here, Sterbak attempts to reframe social perceptions of the gendered garment (*...The Dress*) by attaching text meant for the gendered viewer – but does this artwork succeed in doing so? Arguably, *...The Dress* perpetuates needless stigmas of femininity and female lived experienced and alienation. Using Bal's notions of narratology, it can be argued that there exists here various forms of focalization, including forms of description which allude to the presence of a physical character in the absence of an actual narrator. This is called *referential description*, or its more formal name *Encyclopaedic Description*. In r*eferential description*, there are no figures of speech, [meaning that] the presence of some elements implies the absence of others. The missing details can be filled in by the reader. General characteristics imply specific characteristics, unless the latter represent the former. Ultimately, Bal says that "the objective is to convey knowledge" [38] however I would add that the object is rather to convey complete knowledge in that narratology seeks to flesh out detail to reveal comprehensively informed narratives.

Likewise, in the *Story: Aspects* chapter of her book, Bal introduces the theory of the *fabula*, where characters in any given story or narrative are "treated", manipulated into specific, semi-constructed characters. Though Bal hesitates to call it a construction, it

is, in its very nature, a fabrication of identity. By this logic, the female narrator and protagonist of *...The Dress* is then potentially speaking to a male subordinate, supplementary to the dominant feminine power and altogether challenging what Latour refers to as "the old physiology of woman as the 'outside-in' male".[39] Latour asks, is she Glauce? I would argue here that she is in fact a version of Medea incarnate, speaking to Jason, or symbolically simply a female presence exacting her dominance over the "other". Despite the feminist strategies that Sterbak uses throughout her practice such as the subversion of patriarchal or male "fatherly" figures in her work and the situation of female identity at the artwork's thematic core, it can be soundly argued that she is grappling with concepts of lack and phallocentricity by attempting to equalize the theoretical turf. These are ideas first introduced by Simone de Beauvoir in her seminal text *The Second Sex*.[40] The absent figure, both indicative through the absence of the body in the dress as well as the head in the diadem, the language both syntactical and metaphorical as interpreted through the act of drawing, contribute to a feminized narrative born out of experience. This is directly relating to women's lives within the historical context of Medea legend, as well as contemporary strategies regarding the artist's chosen use of materiality and technology in the artworks' sculptural forms).

Both *Corona Laurea* and *Hot Crown* are connected to one another in a way that *...The Dress* is not. As previously examined, all three artworks are thematically linked in inspiration with the Medea legend by Euripides. However, *Corona Laurea* and *Hot Crown* are all the more entwined since both use the connotative symbolism and imagery of the crown; moreover, *Corona Laurea* was disassembled to create *Hot Crown*. The title

[39] Latour, 67.
[40] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Alfred and Knopf, 1976).

alone reveals concealed meaning, uncovering yet another way that Sterbak utilizes text and language to conceal references. The full Latin title of *Corona Laurea (noli me tangere)* translates to Laurel Crown (don't touch me) which is significant on many levels. Laurel wreaths are made through the interlocking and weaving of branches and leaves of the bay laurel. Since Ancient Greece, a laurel crown signified victory, and was often awarded to Olympic champions or was emblematic of martial victory. Triumphant dictators and commanders would usually wear the half-crown, a horse-shoe shape which did not cover the forehead but instead a half-circle spanning the back of the skull towards the temple. However, modern day versions have adopted the full-circle, much like *Corona Laurea*. Laurel crowns are most often depicted on men, since women did not partake in events which would warrant it. But in one of the installation views for this artwork on Sterbak's website, a model is depicted wearing the crown (figs. 11 & 13) similar to the Medea legend, wherein Glauce is the unfortunate wearer and thus the victim.

Much like the thread drawings for both artworks which remain relatively simple, these completed artworks are conceptually minimalist vein. A major difference is how they communicate a more violent message. Sterbak's works evoke the hidden ties between notions of victory, women and violence. By utilizing a story which pits women in juxtaposition to one another and the artist expresses the extremes of these same notions, yet personalizes it through the appropriation of the object and title which make up the artwork.

Significantly, past exhibition practices for the Sterbak's artwork, now destroyed to form the subsequent work, affirm the artist's continued strategic use of disturbing or

violent stories. In the installation photographs featuring *Corona Laurea* at an exhibition held at the Ydessa Gallery in Toronto in 1983, the artwork is paired with a triptych of photographs on the right-side wall opposite to the sculpture which hangs from the wall (fig. 13). The first panel on the left reads "electricity and the dead sea, in ether be" (fig. 10). Located in the Mediterranean basin, the Dead Sea is 377 m (1,237 feet) deep, the deepest hyper-saline lake in the world with 33.7% salinity; it is 8.6 times saltier than the ocean.[41] This salinity makes for a harsh environment and ergo cannot sustain any type of marine life, which is where its name originates from. Sterbak remarks on electricity and the Dead Sea in her text, with this phrase that follows: "in ether be". At once clever and misleading, the full statement reads as a riddle of sorts since "in ether be" can also be interpreted as a play on words. For example, 'ether' can refer to the heavens above; space or ether can be pronounced as 'either'; ether can be also used as 'ethereal', as used in the second panel. The second panel is lengthy and references the thread drawings previously discussed through the mention of gaseous materials, metals, states of being and references to "the medium", and as already stated above, the concept of the ethereal (fig. 11). "ethereal [sic], or of relating to the regions beyond the earth; celestial, heavenly; unworldly, spiritual; lacking material substance; immaterial, intangible; marked by unusual delicacy or refinement; relating to, containing; or resembling a chemical ether".[42] By 'chemical ether' the artist is referring to ethers, a class of chemical which links a carbon containing group to an oxygen atom to another chemical group.[43] The phrasing is technically inaccurate. When she is referring to the term 'ether', it is that of a defunct

[41] *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Ed. P.W. Goetz. 15th ed. Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc, 1986. p. 937
[42] See fig. 11 for complete details.
[43] International Union of Pure and Applied Chemists, *Compendium of Chemical Terminology* (Blackwell Scientific Publications, 1997) 1334.

theory in physics from before 1900 in which empty space consisted of "the empty ether", in which all things existed.[44] This concept was proven inaccurate by Albert Einstein, among others.[45] The correct terminology used for chemical ether would refer to any chemical compound which consists of two organic components linked together by a single bond to an oxygen atom. The most basic ether was simply called "ether" and was used as an anesthetic, which Sterbak notes in the first paragraph of this panel. It can be argued that due to their year of production (1983), relatively early in Jana Sterbak career, these works belong to a period that is less-withheld, less calculated in the amount and type of detail Sterbak gives as compared to her later works, which are far more reserved in nature (*Hot Crown*, for example).

In the third and last panel, a female model is depicted wearing the electrified wreath, next to her the words: "T, blue tree, Daphnis & Chloe" (fig. 12). A pastoral and rhetorical story typical of similar Greek myths of the time, Daphnis and Chloe is the only known work by 2nd century AD novelist Longus. This text can be seen as yet another element in Bal's notions of the fabula in that it represents another facet of embedded text and meaning. Set on the Greek isle of Lesbos, the story follows a boy (Daphnis) and a girl (Chloe), both of whom had undergone the practice of exposure, common for the time and place in which the story was written.[46] Infant 'exposure' (now referred to as 'infanticide', the homicide of an infant), refers to the ancient Greek practice of leaving or abandoning an unwanted child. Though the ancient Greeks were opposed to any type of human sacrifice, they considered the practice of exposure to be less cruel due to the

[44] Paul A. Tipler, *Physics for Scientists and Engineers* 4th ed. (New York: WH Freeman, 2003) 1245.
[45] Tipler, 1245.
[46] Dennis Hughes, *Human Sacrifice in Ancient Greece* (London: Routledge, 1991) 187.

existence of the slim chance that the child would be found or saved by the gods.[47] Daphnis and Chloe are raised together after a goat herder and shepherd discover them in the woods and become their foster parents. Over time, Daphnis and Chloe fall in love with one another. Their love is tested by lengthy separations, abductions and through the misrepresentation of truth by many characters including Lycaenion, a woman who educates Daphnis in the acts of lovemaking but prevents him from coupling with Chloe by likening it to the act of murder. As a result, Daphnis withholds his true feelings from Chloe.[48] After many trials and near failures, Daphnis and Chloe marry in the end and live out their lives in the country.

This artwork considers the social traditions of two ancient legends, Medea and Daphnis and Chloe. Both contain resemblances, in part in the character of the malevolent or ill-willed female characters. In their very foundation, both stories are about the extremes of love and the morality and circumstances behind the love. That being said, the story's connection to *Corona Laurea* is in the presence of the crown which occurs towards the end of the story, when Chloe is freed from the pirates by the god Pan. Her ascension and liberation from torment are signified by the luminescence of her golden crown. This marks a crucial difference between the Daphnis and Chloe and Medea story. Where the golden coronet is a symbol of death bewitched by the enchantress Medea, the crown is Chloe's symbol of rebirth when she is magically transported to the woods where Daphnis is waiting for her in secret.

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[47] Hughes, 187.
[48] Longus; Xenophon of Ephesus (2009), Henderson, Jeffery, ed., Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, pp. 69 & 127.

Like *Corona Laurea, Hot Crown* is just that – an electrified crown except it is located on top of a steel transformer. *Corona Laurea* on the other hand is independent of the transformer and can be mounted on a human head. Unlike *Corona Laurea*, *Hot Crown* remains more of an omen, perched on top of its support and glows red hot when it is approached, as if the artist herself were in the room watching. Certainly, the argument can be made that in the dangerous materiality, in the carefully chosen words and through the personalized narratological aspects of the artwork, Sterbak is ever-present. Returning to the concepts of narrative theory, autobiographical elements as told by the feminine speaking subject, 'I', can only be determined as truth wherein the role of the participating voice is assured. Since the voice is not narrative, meaning that the first person is not narrating about "someone else such as a 'he' or 'she", the artworks according to Bal's approach thus contain the presence of a character-bound narrator.[49] A character-bound narrator is personified and talks about herself in the first person, "usually [proclaiming] that it recounts true facts about her- or him-self. 'It' pretends to be writing 'her' autobiography, even if the fibula is blatantly implausible, fantastic, absurd, metaphysical".[50]

On the subject of the role of the first-person feminine presence, Jane M. Ussher, the research director of the Women's Health Research Unit at the University College London offers important insights. Ussher argues in her essay written for the 1997 anthology she edited, titled *Body Talk: The Material and Discursive Regulation of Sexuality, Madness and Reproduction* that corporeality is subject to semiotic signs and signifiers especially when expressed through visual imagery. First proposed by Roland

[49] Bal, 21.
[50] Bal, 21.

Barthes, semiotics provides a visual approach to understanding the world: the signified is the object, and the signifier is one or a collection of elements which denote the signified. As Ussher states in her introduction, the word "woman" connotes so many "different and often contradictory things: beauty, desires, sexuality, emotion, fickleness, weakness, liability [sic]…"[51] Throughout the collection of essays, there is a focus on how media pressure affects bodies. The psychopathological makeup of individuals is heavily influenced by social and cultural sources. In Ussher's essay, she discusses how fashion and women's magazines unfairly place social pressure on young women to be fashionably thin. She points out that to what extent is not known, but also acknowledges that such magazines are not the only one to blame. Academics in the health fields are fascinated with diseases such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia due to the complicated relationship between the lone individual and whole society. This is seen both as the source and the cause of such disorders.

Issues concerning the female body are present in many of Sterbak's artworks. Most relevantly *...The Dress* grapples with the tortured, malevolent body. This provides a realistic comparison to the consequences of bulimia and/or anorexia, where shrunken organs, irregular heartbeat, kidney failure can all lead to death.[52] These social issues are crucial to a discussion of Jana Sterbak's artwork for its commentary on the reality of women's bodies. Moreover, where dress, fashion and different types of "problematic bodies" are considered in Ussher's writing, it can be argued here that in comparing these findings to Sterbak artworks, she contributes to the discourse of women's body politic.

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[51] Jane Ussher, ed., Body *Talk* (Oxfordshire: Taylor & Francis, 1997) 5.
[52] Sterbak has revisited these ideas in her subsequent dress artworks, including *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino, Remote Control, Remote Control II,* for the most part during the mid-to-late 1980s, among others.

Undoubtedly, Sterbak's subject is female and the protagonist is also female, both in terms of their slender figures and tiny waists, reflecting Ussher's discussion of the representation of female bodies in magazines. The female body in Sterbak's works is imprisoned, electrified and confined to the malevolent circumstances in which they appear in the artworks. It is obvious that Sterbak is not interested in bodily features, but rather the body is absent. The artist's notations are that of a fashion designer who notes materials, fabrics and measurements alongside mock-ups of the dress. This is true, both of the drawings and of the finished artworks. Sterbak's narrative is that of women's struggle with their bodily image.

According to Ussher, woman's bodies are qualitatively categorized and materially fixed, acting as signifiers to problems which are vested in their identities. This approach is especially useful when unpacking narrative-based artworks. Within this context we can assume that Sterbak's artwork is a construction therefore the meaning is in its intrinsic nature constructed. The critique of fashion and bodily identity is one way to comprehend Sterbak's work. Using Bal's narratological analysis, and given the artwork's connection to the legend of Medea, however, it is possible to infer yet a deeper meaning in relation to sexual identity and its complex history. The clinical scientist Peter Benson writes about the Freudian lack and the perspective of the feminine form:

"Freud himself implies a connection between fetishism and language in the principal example he uses to illustrate the formation of a fetish in his 1927 paper on the subject. Freud interprets a patient's desire for a "shine on the nose" (Gland auf deer Nose) of his sexual partner to be a displacement between languages from the English "glance at the nose" with which, as a child (living in England), he had sought the missing Phallus. Following this detour through language, however, the fetish had emerged completely into the visual field as the need for a specific shimmer of light over the skin. This is strikingly

different from such familiar, firmly physical fetishes as leather boots, lacy stockings, and so on. Freud's patient craved the visibility of light itself."[53]

This "visibility" that Benson explains is also present in Sterbak's works. This is expressed not only in the visual imagery already noted, but also in Sterbak's use of language.

For example, Sterbak's writes in one of her drawings (already discussed above in reference to the Medea legend) "[that], which is my dream does not exist. I am so sad". One may interpret Sterbak's words here as references to an alternative, imagined reality that is a happy story about ...*The Dress*. Furthermore, by referring to her own feelings and desires, the artist renders the work, at least in some way, autobiographical. As feminist theorist Liz Stanley has argued, "the way the autobiographical 'I' perceives itself is through the auto/biographical *eye*, thus complicating the truth value of the representation of *I"*.[54] Though motivated by anti-essentialist ideas of 'the self', autobiographical analysis is but one way of understanding 'I'.[55] Returning to Ussher's discussion of "woman" one finds another idea that helps to understand the context of Sterbak's words. She states that woman has been interpreted as a polar binary to man:

> "[semiotic] theorists would term 'woman as sign' the analysis of what 'woman' signifies or symbolizes at a mythical level – the representation of woman as object, or as fetish, and the splitting of 'woman' into Madonna or whore. These representations have been seen to maintain the position of woman as object or 'Other', in contrast to man who is subject or 'One', as representation plays a central role in the formation of subjectivity. As one critic commented, 'one becomes a woman in the very practice of signs by which

[53] Peter Benson, "Freud and the Visual," *Representations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994) 102.
[54] Liz Stanley, *The Auto-Biographical I: The Theory and Practice of Feminist Autobiography* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1992) 20.
[55] Stanley, 52.

we write, speak, see . . . This is neither an illusion nor a paradox. It is a real contradiction – women continue to become woman' ([sic, Benjamin Bloom]"[56]

As Ussher suggests, the problem in deconstructing gender binaries is how to posit male and female in relation to one another and as co-dependent upon one another. Further, the use of or implied use of an object to represent the female body as in a work of art is also problematic in the ways the representation becomes a replacement for the feminine form. This extends to language. Ussher explains that speech occupies a similar space to the body. In the context of Jana Sterbak's *I Want You to Feel the Way I Do (...The Dress*) and *Corona Laurea*, the former is a void-like female form and the latter is a crown. The character in this tragic legend of Medea is centered on one woman's revenge for the wrongdoings committed against her by her husband. As well this story adheres to the perpetual conflict between women over men. When quoting the psychologist Benjamin Bloom, "one becomes a woman in the very practice of signs by which we write, speak, see", Ussher touches on the forms of feminine identity as text, speech and vision. [57]

In a similar vein artworks such a*s Golem (Malevolent Heart)* (fig. 17, 18 & 19) and *Corona Laurea* may be read as visual narratives of the subjugated female body. With *Golem (Heart) (*fig. 19*)*, Sterbak describes the weight, size and scientific state of the heart, describing that it is both "radioactive" and a "gift". In this sense, she again sets up binaries that are ever present in her artworks. Her dress works offer excellent examples of such binaries: *I Want You to Feel the Way I Do (...The Dress*) simultaneously critiques the oppressive nature of women's fashion, but in order to do so the woman must first

[56] Jane Ussher, "Body Talk", (Oxfordshire: Taylor & Francis, 1997) 5.
[57] Ussher, 5.

become such a token itself. The wearer must climb into *...The Dress*, wearing it as a second skin, and is then electrocuted and murdered by the garment as she dons it. As for the accompanying text, the woman within the dress or as an object of the dress confidently demands answers from the viewer:

> "[how] can you be so comfortable only five feet 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".

Here one observes the ways in which the artist conflates notions of love and hatred. She interrogating the presence of the second person ("how can you be so comfortable only five feet to the left of me?"), expressing desire to live another's reality ("I will listen for the sound you hear, feed on your thought, wear your clothes"). Simultaneously she conflates the first person with the second through a reversal of 'I' and 'you', once again keeping the true nature of the exchange concealed ("[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"). *...The Dress* forces the wearer (and by extension any viewer) to come to terms with bodily identity and the horrifying reality of mortality.

The significance of the accompanying words in the drawings and the sculptural installations shed light on Sterbak's artistic motivations. Given the themes of the drawings, it can be deduced that during this time of work for the artist, she was perhaps experiencing a great deal of inner turmoil over the nature and evolution of intimate relationships. The personalization of the drawings allow for a different plane of creation

wherein the unconscious self manifests in a tangible and observable way. This is accomplished in two ways The first is the inclusion of words and parole which, while asserting itself through the usage of “me”, “my”, or “I”, necessarily constructs the reader in opposition through the usage of “you”; and secondly through the aesthetics of the drawing itself.

SECTION THREE

Narratological Evidence and Visual Language

Standard Lives (1988) consists of individual drawings combined into a collage. The drawings were enlarged when photocopied. The collage on wove paper includes letterset figures rendered in graphite and felt pen, and an adhesive tape.[58] Janice Seline, former Assistant Curator for Contemporary Art at the National Gallery of Canada's Prints and Drawings collection describes of this process. Seline writes that it was "realized with figures printed in black on a fairly wide clear plastic tape finished at either end with the metal clips of the measuring tape."[59] She explains that "Sterbak has shown these pieces singly or in groups, often partially rolled so that an end remains hidden, like childhood forgotten or the future yet to unfold, or scrunched in the middle, suggesting periods of our lives that might pass unnoticed or be better left forgotten. The figures were selected from generic letterset drawings of the type used to embellish commercial messages."[60] It should be noted that the finished work, completed in 1988, mainly uses the French translation of the title, *Vie Sur Mesure* (fig. 7). In my analysis I will deal exclusively with the preparatory drawing.[61]

Thus far this thesis has first dealt with Sterbak's thread drawings and related artworks. This artwork differs greatly from my discussion so far. Firstly, neither the

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[58] It was donated in 2006 to the Montreal Museum of Contemporary Art by Mr. Réal Lussier, according to its artwork file at the museum.
[59] Janice Seline, *Standard Lives*, (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, Prints and Drawings Collection, 1994) 2.
[60] Janice Seline, *Standard Lives*, (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, Prints and Drawings Collection, 1994) 2.
[61] According to the artwork file for *Standard Lives* at the National Gallery of Canada, the set of drawings of this collage has never been exhibited since its acquisition in 1988. The finished artwork of the same name as already noted usually with its French title has exhibited in North America and Europe.

preparatory drawing nor the final artworks are drawings in their totality, since they make use of stock, photocopied drawings, giving them a stiff and uniform look. Where previously discussed drawings were free form, gestural notations, these images purposefully look banal, boring and repetitive to further add to the aesthetic of the artwork.

Each drawing in *Standard Lives* is accompanied by its original measurement in millimeters which differs based on the image. This measurement has a particular significance as the original source of the drawing that was then enlarged by a photocopy machine to produce a sense of uniformity. The collage gives the impression that the numerous, hand-drawn images exist in relation to one another, forming a cohesive timeline, or measuring tape, of events. This type of timeline of events connects with narratological discourse. According to Bal, events revolve less around the passage of time and relate more to the "transition from one state to another state", that an event is more a "process, an alteration".[62]

In the first set, the viewer is presented with an image of an infant girl who evolves into a child, then a teenager. She is then paired separately with a boy of about the same age, who, as parallels to one another, smiles. In the next set, they fall in love, get married and procreate. In this narrative the transformative power of the dress, in this case, the wedding dress is once again an important motif. Seline writes "[are] we to read this fashion statement as aggressive, protective, dangerous (like some dresses), or as an

[62] Bal, 189.

absurd declaration of frustration born out of women's historical association with the domestic arts? Sterbak's work raises such questions."[63]

As in Sterbak's drawings and sculptural installations discussed thus far here too one discovers the interconnected threads which link the drawings with dress, body language the narrative and feminine discourse. Like *...The Dress* and *Hot Crown*, Sterbak the male (although he is not present as a physical entity but rather is a mental construct) is opposed to and is the opposite of the female. For example, Sterbak portrays the husband toiling away in an office environment, while the wife is on her knees, scrubbing the floor. The third set is more thematically complicated. Although the wife is initially content and holding her daughter, the husband is removed from the core storyline developing around the female. He is depicted, isolated, at his desk and then in front of his television while she appears to be exasperated. Years go by, and as the fourth set reveals the characters are aging. The husband is slower, less dynamic in his movements while the wife has short hair and is sitting at a typewriter, no longer scrubbing or raising a child. Finally, in the fifth set, their daughter is mature and displays the same complacent mannerisms that her mother had as a young woman. The timeline concludes with two important images. The man, now elderly and smoking a pipe, sits calmly with his newspaper. Finally in the last frame the husband and wife frame, have grown old together

[63] Seline, 1. Moreover, according to the Brooklyn Museum and the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, female artists have struggled with this standardized categorizations of women's art as part of the "domestic arts": "In the quest for a "female aesthetic" or artistic style specific to women, many 1970s feminist artists sought to elevate "women's craft" to the level of "high art," and away from its derogatory designation as "low art" or "kitsch" […] for fear of being labeled "feminine artists."" *Brooklyn Museum: The Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art: The Dinner Party*, ed. Brooklyn Museum, 2004-2011, Brooklyn, New York, 13 September 2011 < http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/copyright.php>.

and are happy and loving once more as demonstrated by their close posture and happy demeanor.

Even though Sterbak does not include any text in this piece, she creates her own visual narrative that is both clever and clear, if not pessimistic. According to Bal, visual narrative operates largely through composition or strategic placement of signs and signifiers in order to communicate a sequence of events. This is achieved through the characters (the focalizors) and through the storyline (the focalizer).[64] The possibility for tension and conflict is ever-present since "the same object or event can be differently interpreted according to different focalizors" which is the core theme of *Standard Lives*.[65] Her young characters are full of life, dynamic and happy, whereas all the years in between youth and old age are spent in isolation from one another. Following their daughter at a very young age, they are never depicted together in the same drawing. Only when they are at the end of their lives, are they shown together and harmonious once more. The drawing is, in a word, sad, lonely even, made even moreso by the presence of the woman's daughter, who is presumably experiencing the same emotional life cycle as her mother. [66] Evoking feelings of empathy and appealing to the female dispensation of 'connectedness', the artwork acts as a beacon for consciousness-raising as to the ways in which love and relationships can deteriorate.[67]In this narrative of love marriage, and motherhood, busy work schedules and the arrival of a baby contribute to the couple's

[64] Bal, 166.
[65] Bal, 166.
[66] Lorraine Code, "Sadness", *Encyclopaedia of Feminist Theories* (New York: Routledge, 2000) 164.
[67] According to Code, 'female connectedness' "came […] to be seen as a resource for transforming a depersonalized instrumental world into a less alienating place." Code, 164.

alienation from one another and the woman's determination to have a practice separate from being a mother and wife.

There are no words that accompany the artwork, but Sterbak is alluding to the presence of an essentially feminine language in and through this work; one that pertains to women's experiences of their lived realities as formulaic. As linguistic theorists Deborah Tannen, Lesley Jeffries and Barbara Godard have all suggested, constructions such as these signify a language which is based on a system of signals and interchange.[68] According to Tannen's research of primary sources on the politics of linguistics, all conversation is, more or less, a fight for power, where one seeks to dominate the "other". She contends that words have the power to objectify, lessen, silence, create power and to take it away. Jeffries has demonstrated the ways in which women communicate with one another and are communicated to literally imprint the body. Godard has written on the origin of language and the ways it has historically been used as an oppressive tool against women. In concert with the findings of these three scholars, we can see Sterbak's construction of this visual narrative as it specifically relates to the essentially 'female.' Further, Sterbak offers a commentary on domestic, lived experience and the female body as a vessel for others. The male figure in *Standard Lives* sits passively at his desk, stands statically as a waiter and stares at the television set. Meanwhile, the female figure is actively scrubbing the floor, tending to her baby in the stroller, engaging with her daughter and typing on a typewriter. By creating binaries based on gender experience, Sterbak reminds the viewer of the prevailing gender roles which continued into the 1980s

[68] Tannen, Jeffries and Godard have written extensively on women's lived experience and the connection to language.

in terms of child care, marriage, cohabitation, etc. More often than not, domesticity is still associated with women and women's work, whereas men are expected to be the breadwinners for their home and dependents. Given that in one of the final frames the mother is depicted at a typewriter, one might assume that the mother finds a creative outlet in her writing where she can experience a sense of her individuality. The man reads, a passive recipient; she writes, an active participant in creation, both as mother and author.

Despite the woman's creativity as a writer Sterbak's *Standard Lives* sustains the accepted norms of society. According to Seline, *Standard Lives* is emblematic of the industrial North American commerce in which products are created continuously in an assembly line. The photocopier is used in order to standardize the size and visual components of each square so that each one is similar to the other. Seline writes:

> "The very concept of applying standards to human life goes against the grain of individualism, and we are reminded here of the insidious nature of quantification, for example, in capitalist commerce where suppliers and consumers constantly probe each other to maintain some kind of balance. In Sterbak's maquette, we see her effort to further standardize the already standard images, with her use of the photocopier to achieve a sizing of the figures into an even alignment, as well as the little notations of measure under each one and the cutting and taping of the kind that a person making an advertising layout might do. The maquette is just that, the concept for the finished piece laid out, revealing the process of making and clearly delineating an aspect of its meaning".[69]

Standard Lives is born out of a frustration with such archetypes pertaining to types of women's work, perhaps revealing Sterbak's scruples with regards to such issues as demonstrated in her previous artworks, including but not limited to *Measuring Tape Cones* (1979) and *Cone on Hand* (1979). Certainly, the artwork might be read as a

[69] Seline, 1.

challenge to these paradigms, however how far does this criticism fully achieve its effectiveness before it becomes complacent with its fate? The title itself suggests a standardized model of how life unfolds; a rhetorical strategy of sorts which constructs the viewer and visually categorizes the female and presumably also the male viewer into lexical fields (by way of the title) and into pre-supposed life choices (by way of the artwork). In its final incarnation, *Standard Lives* is printed on clear measuring tape, like the kind a dress-maker might have, giving the artwork a potentially different and previously unobvious characteristic, especially when considering Sterbak's aptitude for math, geometry and materiality; *Standard Lives* becomes even more regulated, monitored, if that's possible – as the numbers increase on the tape, so do the characters age, change. Yet, as their qualification through measurement and the recording of it through the numbers, so do they become further away from the beginning of the tape, from the beginning of their lives. Visual language, here created through the observance of a passage of time, is a cruel mistress indeed and Sterbak does not hold back. Even in draft form, Sterbak handwrites the measurements at the bottom of each image, denoting the position on the tape. The absence of the tape but the inclusion of her own writing personalized the artwork in a way that its "final" version lacks. Furthermore it solidifies the connection between artist and artwork. In its unfinished version it can be read more as a story due to its familiarity of material. Paper is less tactically foreign in everyday lived reality than translucent plastic. The image is also framed (fig.15)[70], like a picture in a home might be. *Standard Lives* contains portrait-like drawings, such as the couple on their wedding day, the married couple with their new baby, mother and daughter, elderly married couple – photographs readily found in the everyday, average home. All of these

[70] Note that this is a mock-up and is now currently framed (not-pictured).

characteristics function in order to appeal to the feminine sense of familiarity and articulate yet another facet of women's lived reality through this work – the hegemonics of maternal relationships, or how mother and daughter relate to one another within a system of family values.[71] Women are born into their families and learn how to structure and effectively mediate their own lives. Moreover, the use of landmark events in the artwork such as a wedding or the birth of a new baby relate to its ability to identify with a specifically feminine audience.

This I suggest is done in through the practice of "projective drawing" which constitutes the act of drawing through living memory or experience, as opposed to something which is largely dependent on subjective viewing.[72] According to the semiotician Roland Barthes in his canonical text *The Rhetoric of the Image*, in order to understand semiosis, namely the activities, conducts and processes that involve signs and produce meaning, one must interpret the images as signs and signifiers. The sign can include words, oral or written, which our brain interprets in a way that it creates an image of the thing which it alludes to. The signified is what the signifier refers to. This is the connotative meaning that comes about by association in addition to the primary meaning. Together with the denotative meaning, that meaning that demarcates or limits, one can determine the correct sign which can discover the depth of meaning of a work. In applying the efforts of dialogical aesthetics to specific movements and epochs of art history in its entire cannon, it is possible to use dialogical scopics to uncover layers of meaning, in a process that is much like semiotics. According to professor of design at the

[71] Susan Lurie, *Unsettled Subjects: Restoring Feminist Politics to Poststructuralist Critique* (Durham: Duke UP, 1997) 142.
[72] Yuriko Saito, *Aesthetics of the Everyday* (Oxford: 2008) 284.

Rhode Island School of Design Yuriko Saito, the author of *Aesthetics of the Everyday*, the demarcation of aesthetics identifies specific pods of information on a microscopic level up to the higher macroscopic view, and moreover, there are different sets of aesthetics which deal with various processes of life or materiality.[73] Together they cohesively form a specific area of interest, and thus retain a syntax and aesthetic synonymous of their classification.[74] This analytic procedure that Saito proposes for 'reading' art begins with the understanding that in the "examination of the art matrix"(es) there are various artistic "layers.".[75] The layers to which this process refers to follow with the preliminary identification found in the semiotic theory of signifiers. These are symbolic elements like gesture, shape and color, to name a few, followed by the breakdown of artistic languages and its accompanying binaries of high or low brow, elite or popular, as well as styles and idiolects such as naturalism and surrealism, satire or picturesque;, specific types of genre, and codings such as abstractionism, realism, surrealism. Finally, and arguably at this point in this examination of Jana Sterbak artworks, the most important factor relating to the analysis of dialogic aesthetics is "the attitude in the relation between an author and its characters".[76] This applies to this discussion of *Standard Lives* through the significant presence of Sterbak's voice, communicated through a visual narrative as opposed to a textual one. The lack of a dominant character narrator allows for the sole, primary focus

[73] Saito, 284.
[74] For example, the aesthetics of existence inevitably lead to a set of criterion for the acquiring of a happy, harmonious and truly beautiful life. In that vein, there exists artistic lexics, an artistic methodology of language, and scopics, an artistic methodology of visual language, for addressing contemporary art.
[74] Strategies for the saving and claiming of objects due to their beauty, worth or meaning necessarily impacts on their artistic scope, adding and assembling a universal truth with regards to their specific classification.
[75] Saito, 284-85.
[76] Paraphrased; Yuriko Saito, *Aesthetics of the Everyday* (Oxford: 2008) 284.

of the true narrative. In this instance with *Standard Lives*, which differs greatly from the other thread drawings previously examined in this thesis, the artist's voice is heard independently from any character or object that might be attached to the voice in order to create the appearance of presence. Instead, the message is the only element observed, un-obscured by objectification in its permanent two dimensional form.

Without necessarily stating so, the aesthetics of dialogical inquiry have been largely used throughout this examination of Jana Sterbak's artworks, and in close order with the notion of bio-aesthetics and socio-aesthetics, proposed by professor of Aesthetics, Semiotics, Design and Theory of Culture at Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana in Mexico Katya Mandoki. For all of her use of contemporary electrical and stereotypically non-feminine materiality, Sterbak's artwork seems to encompass the exact opposite of what would have been expected a young female artistic on the receiving end of international artistic buzz in the 1980s. Firstly, Jana Sterbak's artworks as discussed in this thesis make extensive use of all kinds of language, both literary and scientific. Major sources of inspiration for her artworks are myths or stories. Despite the decidedly feminine language that she deploys and the female characters that she refers to in these stories there is something decidedly masculine in her approach. The materials she chooses for her finished works partake of an anti-feminine aesthetic in regard to the metal, electrical wiring and insulation. In the written notation of her drawing she refers to using chainmail, a heavy form of metal armament worn by men in battle. Sterbak's feminine form also suggests a coded body, one whose true nature is hidden and which is bound to the material for its existence, and is also therefore chained to or restrained by it,

yearning to be free[77] This sentiment is echoed in the panel text for *...The Dress*, and even in the title of *Corona Laurea* (*noli me tangere*), which translates to Laurel Crown (don't touch me).[78] Moreover, the panel text for *Corona Laurea* (fig. 10) lists various adjectives that are historically used to describe idealistic female bodies, such as heavenly, celestial, delicate. Sterbak also makes reference to the presence of organic compounds and carbon which relate directly to the human biological makeup. Yet the artist counteracts these soft, agreeable descriptions with the presence of alarming words such as volatile, flammable and anesthetic, words which have the power to evoke apprehension and perhaps unease. This menacing materiality obliterates the ideally feminine. These female bodies are sick, enslaved and unhappy. After all, *...The Dress* electrocutes its wearer (or is poisoned, as in *The Medea*), *Corona Laurea* melts its wearer's head, and the wedding dress in *Standard Lives* marks the beginning of a period lasting many decades where the female protagonist who is "chained" to a man, the obligations of being a wife and mother and is isolated and sad.

This brings one to question the relationship between the author (artist) and her characters (subjects/objects). Unquestionably, Sterbak is interested in the process of alterity, to be "the other" or to otherwise to encompass "otherness". Narratological analysis makes clear the position of "the other" by revealing how the narrative includes alternate narratives that may surface and compete with one another.[79] Connected to this notion of otherness is also the presence of Prosaics in Sterbak's artworks which are also suggestive of her Sterbak's interest in alterity and the possibilities of terror and death in real life and ectopically through art.

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[77] Katya Mandoki, *Everyday Aesthetics* (Hampshire, England: 2007) 3.
[78] The role of titles is discussed at length at the end of this section.
[79] Bal, 179.

Sterbak's subjects suffer under her unyielding hand. She has them endure her interpretation of the materiality of lived experience. With regards to how the female body is portrayed and operates, language in the form of the woman's voice for Sterbak is yet another material form that standardizes notions of sexuality. Whether in the myths and the stories of the past such as Medea or contemporary language the macro-hegemonic sexual narrative of female discourse continues to imprison the female person.

In these visual narratives Sterbak suggests the antithesis of a "standard life". The portrayal of a "normative", accepted and traditional lifestyle in *Standard Lives* raises questions of an antithetical life. Sterbak's portrayal of the discontented housewife and mother in effect rejects normative choices and is indicative of larger socio-political trends, namely the gender equality wars of the 1980s as well as the accompanying sexual identity politics.

In critiquing the practice of "normative", male-female relations in the works discussed, Sterbak questions the relevance and validity of relationships and married unions. Sterbak's discontent with such norms is informed by two sorts of histories; her own experienced, lived reality and the ones she has drawn, in her sketches. The aesthetic of the chosen medium (drawing) is also indicative of her unease with such sociologically accepted ideals, opting to firstly draw out with hard, dark and sharp lines, the confrontational nature of the language and then to execute the artworks with electrically charged materials, using dangerous heat and metal.

Physiologically, men and women differ very little from one another; and yet, gender differences are constructed as a way of separating the male and female. Though these differences are socially constructed, professor of English Language at the

University of Huddersfield Lesley Jeffries asserts that these differences are nonetheless very real and should be treated as such. This results in different world perspectives. Although Jeffries does not specifically call it this, in my view this is a "gender language".[80] The female body's ability to conceive, grow and nurture life within – and even sustaining it after she has birthed it – links her body to the outside world in such a way that a man cannot. Furthermore, menstruation and lactation processes also connect the feminine form to the life force of the world, as all life stems from such activities. All of these attributes of the female body contribute to the "code" of the physical form and a highly specific textual treatment of the body.[81]

Where "problematic bodies" appear in the artworks, it can be argued here that Sterbak contributes to the ever expanding discourse of women's body politic. Through the analyses of the artworks it is clear that Sterbak posits essentially female subjects in opposition to one another or she isolates the female body. Sterbak's narratives ultimately subscribe to women's struggle with their bodily image. For Bal, "[this] specification is of importance not only with regard to the subject, but also with regard to the helpers and opponents. Often they are only in appearance what they seem to be; in reality they prove the opposite. A traitor has the appearance of a helper, but reveals him or herself in the course of the story as the opponent."[82] Master figures who instigate another into complacency, bad decision making, etc., relate a typology in which fabulas reveal a predominating cipher throughout a narrative body – a trend observed in Sterbak's

[80] These notions are discussed at length throughout the book. Lesley Jeffries, *The Textual Construction of the Female Body* (Basingstoke, Hampshire, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) 83.
[81] Jeffries, 48.
[82] Bal, 211.

artworks through the relationship between the subject who is speaking and the one who is spoken to. All of the artworks in this thesis posit two voices, one which is narrative and present through the words, visual narrative, etc., and the other which is the implied "you" the master figure is speaking to.[83]

In *...The Dress*, dominance is achieved first through the text and then through the artist's control of the spectator, who must repeat the accompanying text in the first person 'I', effectively appropriating and rendering the viewer an active participant. *Corona Laurea* utilizes this same strategy, however, through 'me' as found in the *(noli me tangere)* portion of the title which translates in English to "don't touch me". The continual subjugation and isolation of the female subject in *Standard Lives* is also suggestive of this complication of the truth, since she is more often seen tending to her home and family while the male subject remains passive and voluntarily disconnected from his partner until the end of the narrative. The only artwork which does not *immediately* subscribe to this facet duplicity typical of the narratological model is *Hot Crown*. Here however, upon the viewer's approach to the sculpture, the electrical sensorial eye detects the viewer and then switches on, glowing red hot. Its true meaning initially concealed is discovered relatively early on in the viewer's experience.

In analyzing the title, whether the title of the book or chapter or work of art, can according to Bal be an important factor. This is also the case with Sterbak's artworks where it also relevant to examine the artist's titles for these works. In two instances of the four artworks discussed in this thesis, Sterbak uses non-English titles (in Latin, *Corona Laurea (noli me tangere)* and in French (*Vie Sur Mesure*). These titles are symbolic in

[83] Bal, 212.

their use of embedded meanings. The laurel wreath has traditionally been attached to notions of male victory and conquer in battle, and 2), the standardization of feminine lived experience through the "measuring" of a single life.[84] After Julius Caesar, the wearing of the laurel wreath became even more politicized as Caesar the dictator began wearing the wreath around his neck at all public events, whereas it was traditionally reserved only for days of triumph.[85] Moreover, the laurel bush became synonymous with the divinity and political supremacy for the Julio-Claudian family.[86]

Madeleine Gagnon, a Quebec poet and literary essayist, argues that there has been a heavy regression from where language originates to how it has progressed. As Gagnon states, "mother tongue" is the language which is spoken by all, yet most contemporary language breaks with its origin and subscribes to "law-of-the-father", where women are relegated to "potential" and the feminine voice is left out.[87] This is observed in Sterbak's choices of titling, where the feminine voice is marginalized through symbolism and language. *Corona Laurea* remains an artwork of and about Chloe's journey in the ancient Greek myth, yet the title refers to male dominance and victory, and by extension Julius Caesar, a dictator who perverted the Roman justice system by declaring himself dictator for life. As well, *Standard Lives* suggests a standardized model for living, effectively discounting any kind of individual decision making.

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[84] Marleen B. Flory, "The Symbolism of Laurel in Cameo Portraits of Livia," *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome,* 1995: 43.
[85] Flory, 45.
[86] Flory, 45.
[87] Madeleine Gagnon, "Mother Tongue and Women's Language," ed. Barbara Godard, *Collaboration in the Feminine: Writings on Women and Culture from Tessera*, 1994: 280.

CONCLUSION

Despite having sporadically exhibited her preparatory drawings alongside the finished artworks in the past, Sterbak's preparatory drawings have largely remained thematically separate from these works. Through the use of subversive text and imagery, as well as the menace of materiality, Sterbak's strong literary references from a variety of subjects and epochs appear throughout her works from the 1980s. These denote a consistent fascination with myths and the circumstances in which women appear in these tales. Interestingly, Sterbak also chooses highly feminized objects, specifically dresses and crowns, as markers of the stories from which she pulls inspiration. The language used is an amalgamation of both her professional artistic choices characteristic of the subversive and highly intelligent artist she is, and of her personal connection to the story themes she revisits again and again, both on paper and through the use of technology.

Sterbak's voice expresses the almost unperceivable divide between malice and love. Her creations communicating visually and in text a desire for violence, they are propelled by a strong desire to be seen and heard. Her artworks are narratologically complicated. Haunting, uncomfortable, imposing – the artworks represent the alterity made possible by the absent self. Narratologically and dialogically Sterbak presents figures informed by literary conventions and language. Language is consistently directed to the female viewer by a female voice, whereas the materiality of the sculptural forms occupies a state of visceral opposition in its possibility for harm or death. Sterbak's artworks make clear a long list of frustrations with social practices, such as the construct of the normative in general, but also the expectation of a heterosexual relationship and thus procreation, the institution of marriage, and stereotypical views of women's bodies.

All of these subjects Sterbak has investigated through her finished sculptural works, however these subjects initially existed solely as "thread drawings." In these drawings as I have argued in this thesis we can discover the beginnings of Sterbak's personal voice. This voice is not only revealing Sterbak's artist's process and how she plans and constructs her artwork, but also her continued fascination with the representation of women in myth, legend and lore in stories that have informed many cultural traditions and biases.

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FIGURES

Figure 1 *I Want You to Feel the Way I Do (…The Dress)*
Jana Sterbak
1984-85
Etchings on wove paper
Image courtesy of www.gallery.ca

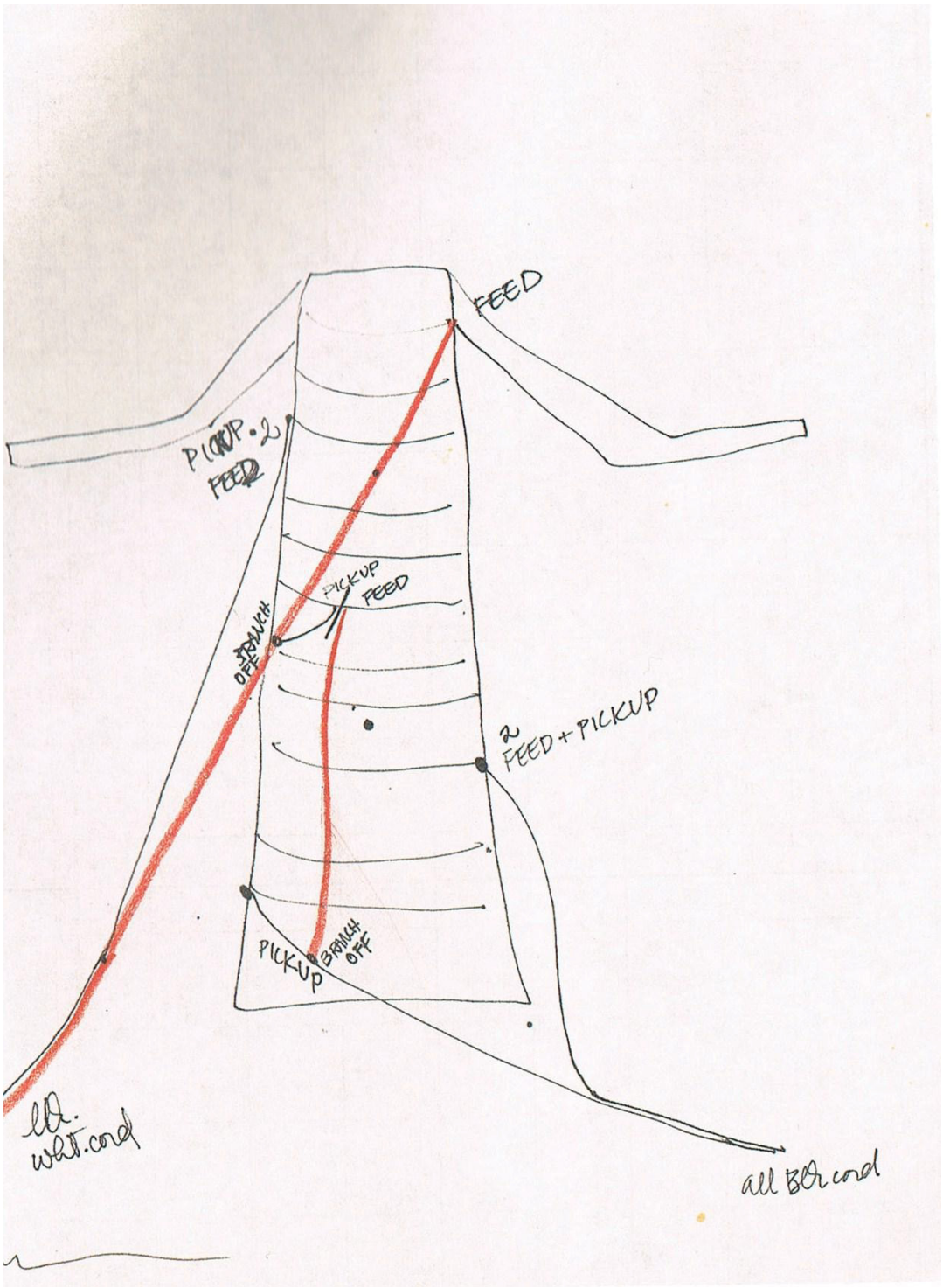

Figure 2 *I Want You to Feel the Way I Do (...The Dress)*
Jana Sterbak
1984-85
Etchings on wove paper
Image courtesy of Galerie de l'UQAM

Figure 3 *I Want You to Feel the Way I Do (...The Dress)*
Jana Sterbak
1984-85
Etchings on wove paper
Image courtesy of Galerie de l'UQAM

Figure 4 *Thinking Out Loud/Penser tout haut*
Installation detail
Louise Déry, curator
2001
Image courtesy of Galerie de l'UQAM

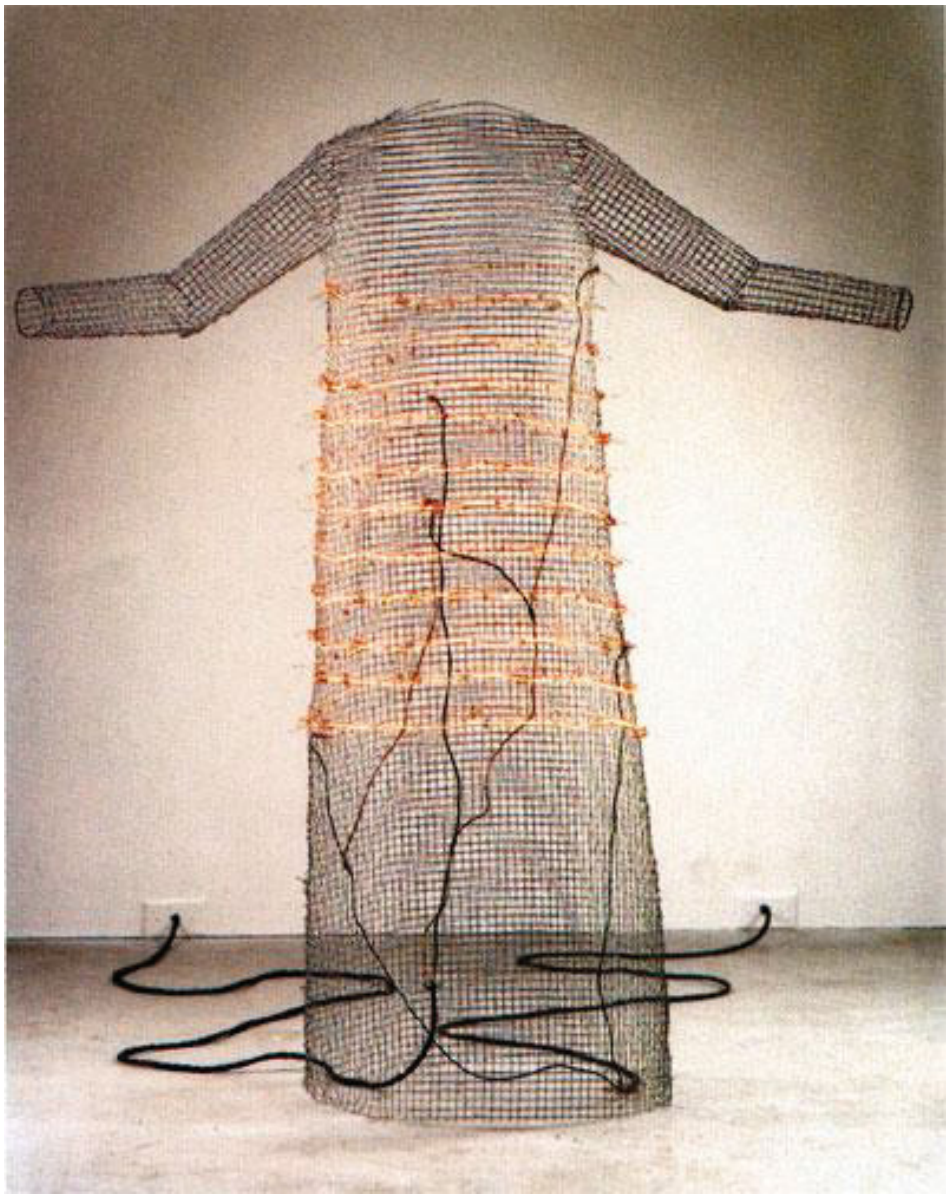

Figure 5 *I Want You to Feel the Way I Do (…The Dress)*
Jana Sterbak
1984-85
Live, un-insulated nickel chrome wire mounted on wire mesh, electrical cord and power, with side projected text. Dress size: 144.8 x 121.9 x 45.7 cm. Installation size variable
Image courtesy of the artist's website, www.janasterbak.com

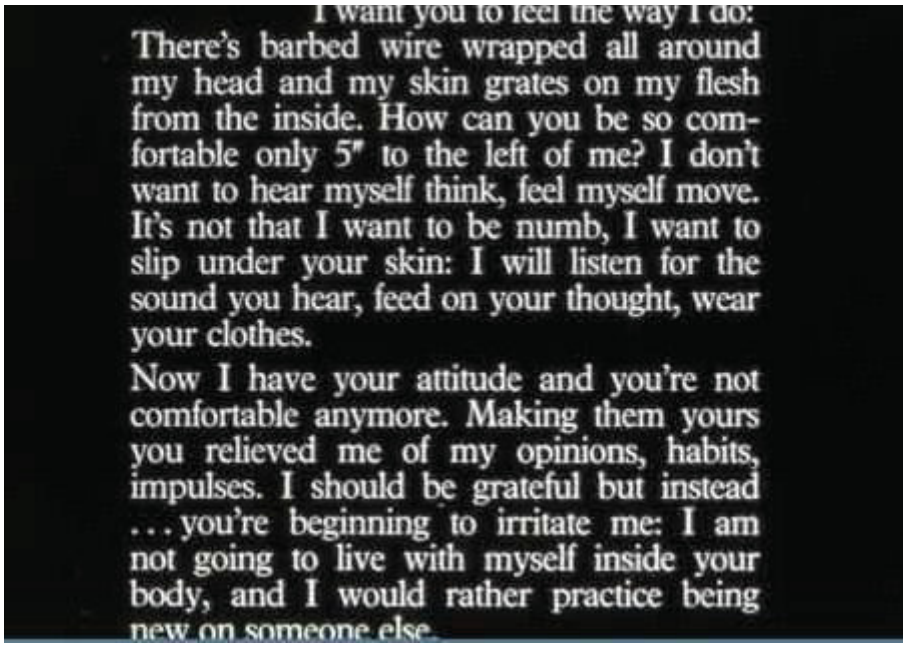

Figure 6 *I Want You to Feel the Way I Do (...The Dress)*
Jana Sterbak
1984-85
Detail; side projected text
Live, un-insulated nickel chrome wire mounted on wire mesh, electrical cord and power, with side projected text
Dress size: 144.8 x 121.9 x 45.7 cm
Installation size variable
Image courtesy of the artist's website, www.janasterbak.com

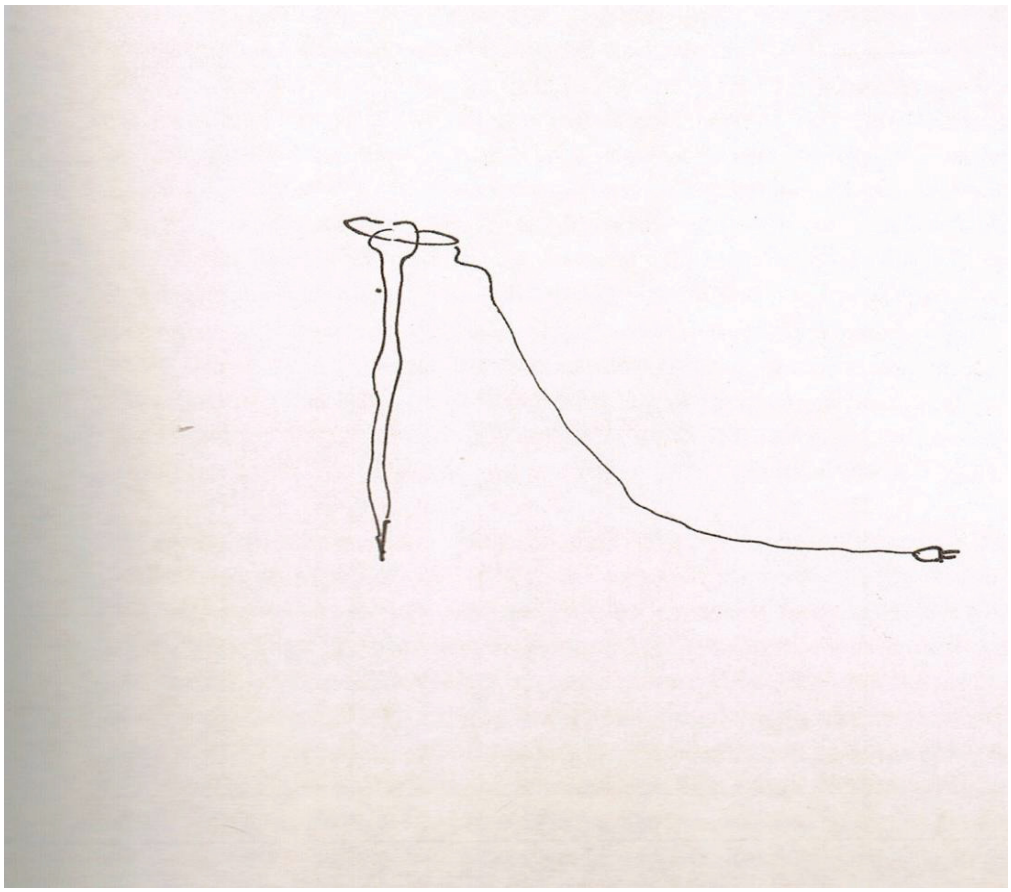

Figure 7 *Hot Crown*
Jana Sterbak
1982
Ink on Paper
Image courtesy of Galerie de l'UQAM

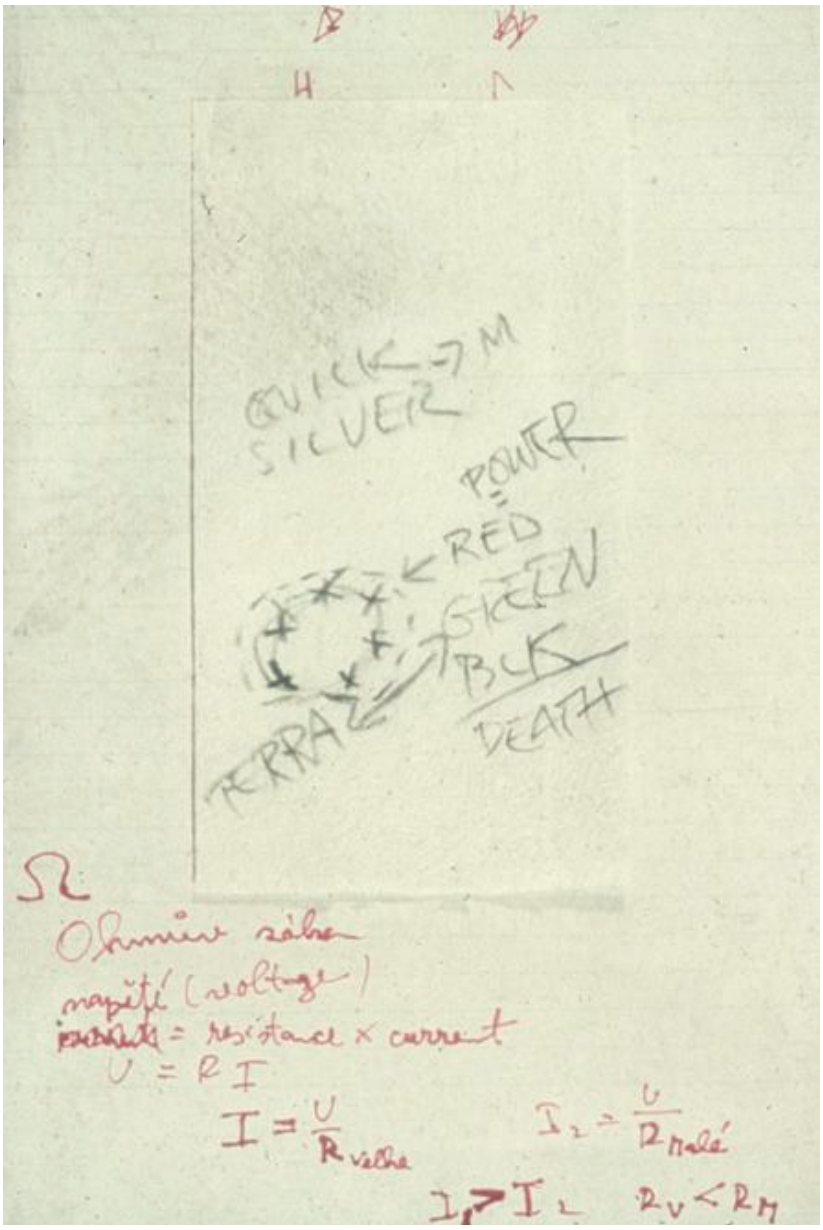

Figure 8 *Corona Laurea (noli me tangere)* (notes)
Jana Sterbak
1982
Ink on Paper
Image courtesy of the Digital Image and Slide Collection, Concordia University

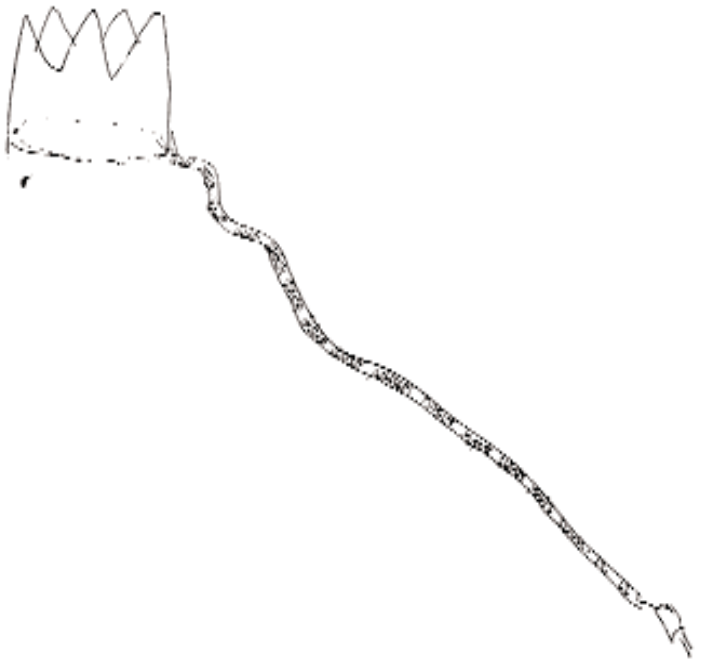

Figure 9 *Corona Laurea (noli me tangere)* (notes)
Jana Sterbak
1982
Ink on Paper
Image courtesy of Galerie de l'UQAM

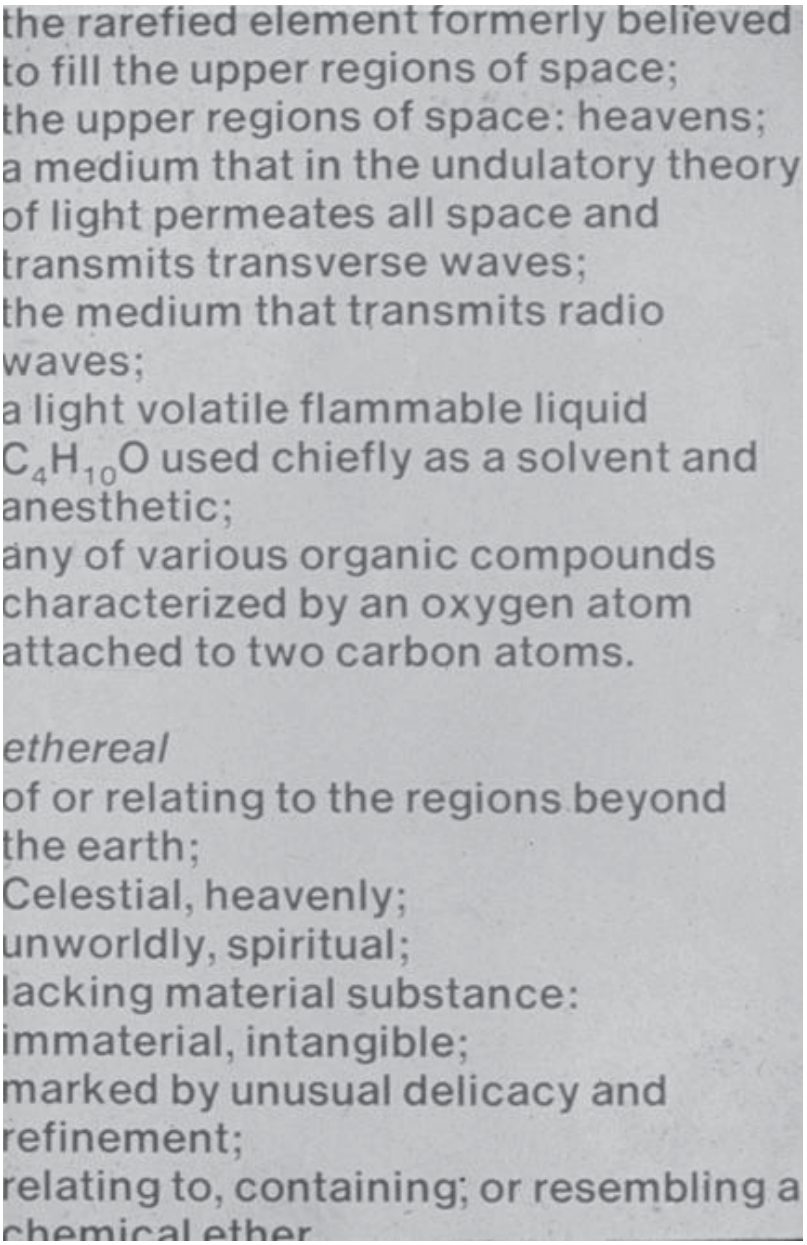

Figure 10 *Corona Laurea (noli me tangere)* (Installation detail)
Jana Sterbak
1982
Ink on Paper
Image courtesy of the Digital Image and Slide Collection, Concordia University

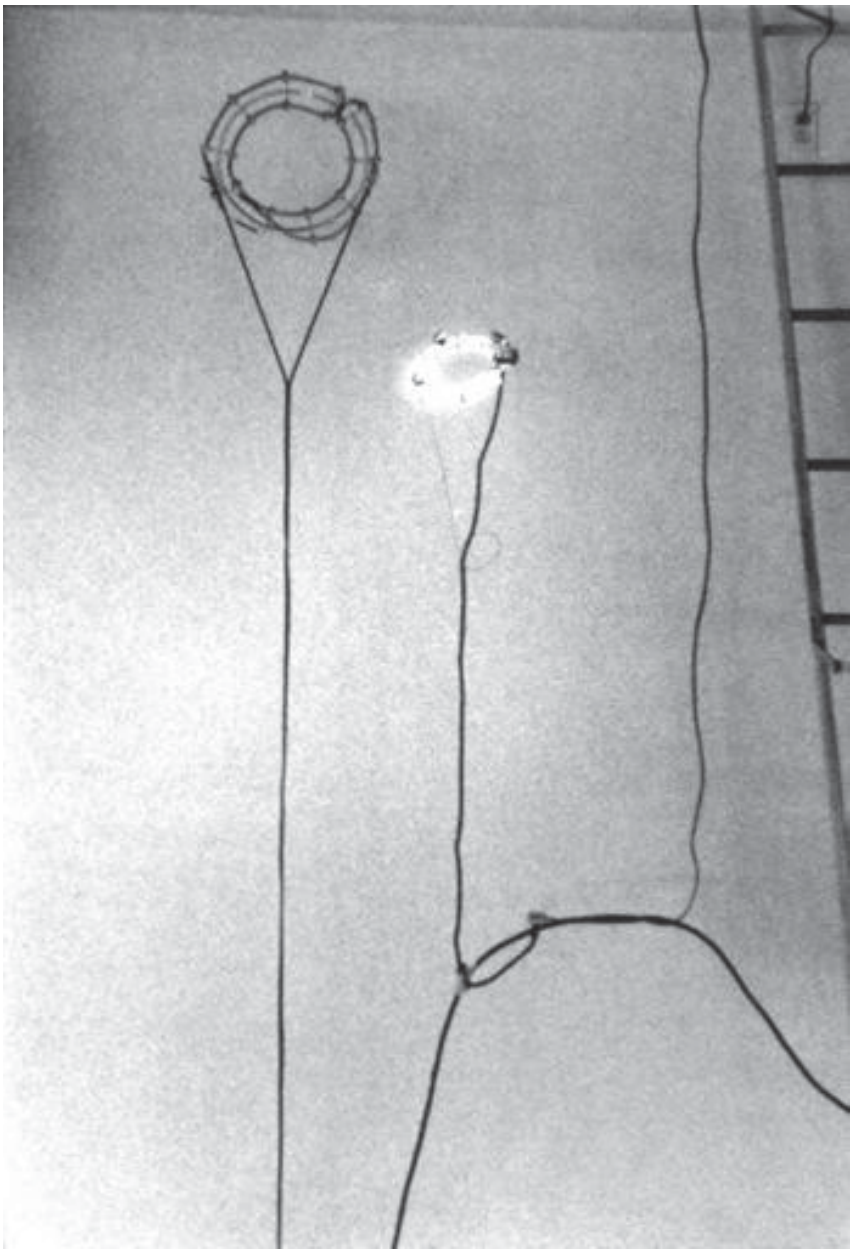

Figure 11

Corona Laurea (noli me tangere)
Jana Sterbak
1983-84
Nickel chrome wire, electrical cord and power, silver gelatin print
Artwork destroyed
Image courtesy of the Digital Image and Slide Collection, Concordia University

Figure 12 *Corona Laurea (noli me tangere)* (Installation detail)
Jana Sterbak
1983-84
Nickel chrome wire, electrical cord and power, silver gelatin print
Artwork destroyed
Image courtesy of the Digital Image and Slide Collection, Concordia University

Figure 13 *Corona Laurea (noli me tangere)* (Installation detail)
Jana Sterbak
1983-84
Nickel chrome wire, electrical cord and power, silver gelatin print
Artwork destroyed
Image courtesy of the Digital Image and Slide Collection,
Concordia University

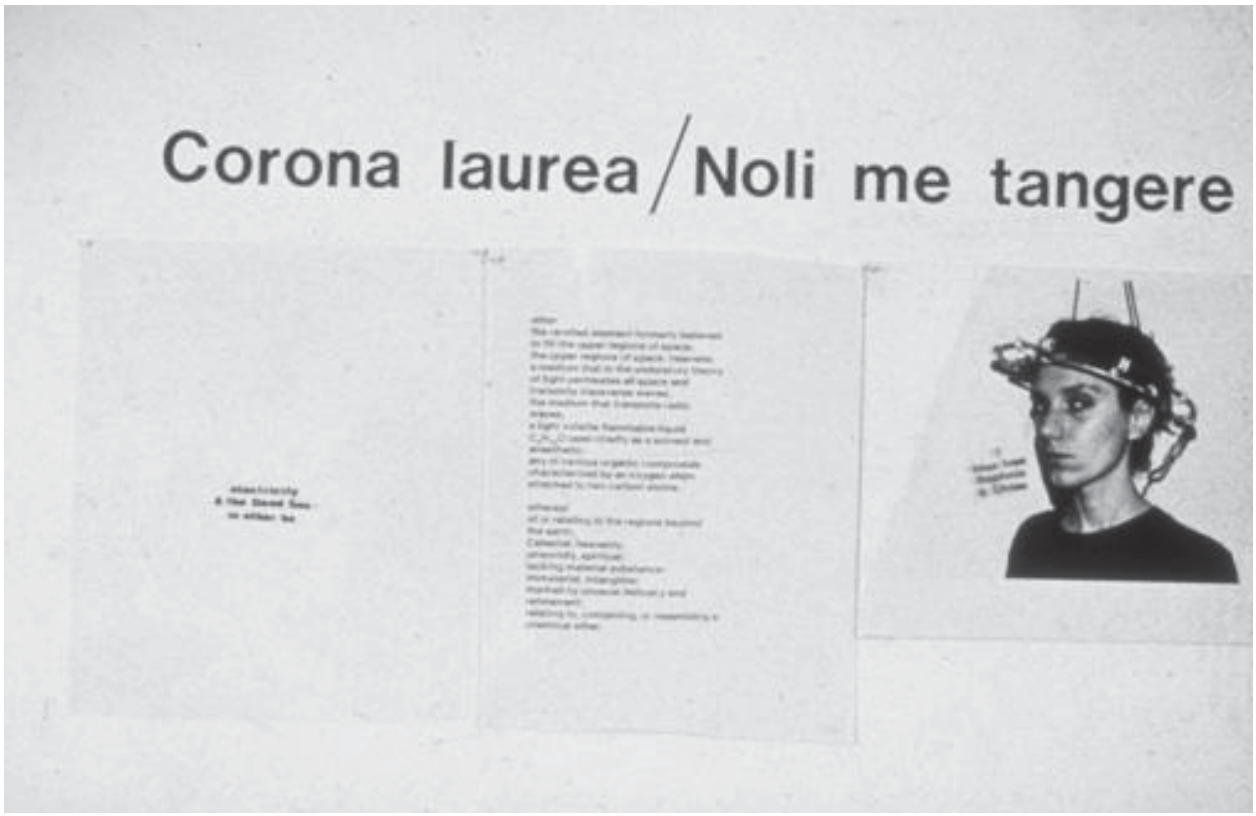

Figure 14 *Corona Laurea (noli me tangere)* (Side-projected text, installation view)
Jana Sterbak
1983-84
Nickel chrome wire, electrical cord and power, silver gelatin print
Artwork destroyed
Image courtesy of the Digital Image and Slide Collection, Concordia University

Figure 15 *Hot Crown*
Jana Sterbak
1998
Copper, steel, transformer, electrical wire & power
214 x 36 x 34 cm
Image courtesy of the artist's website,
www.janasterbak.com

Figure 16 *Standard Lives*
Jana Sterbak
1988
Photocopied enlargements of letterset figures, graphite, felt pen, and adhesive tape on wove paper
Image courtesy of the www.gallery.ca

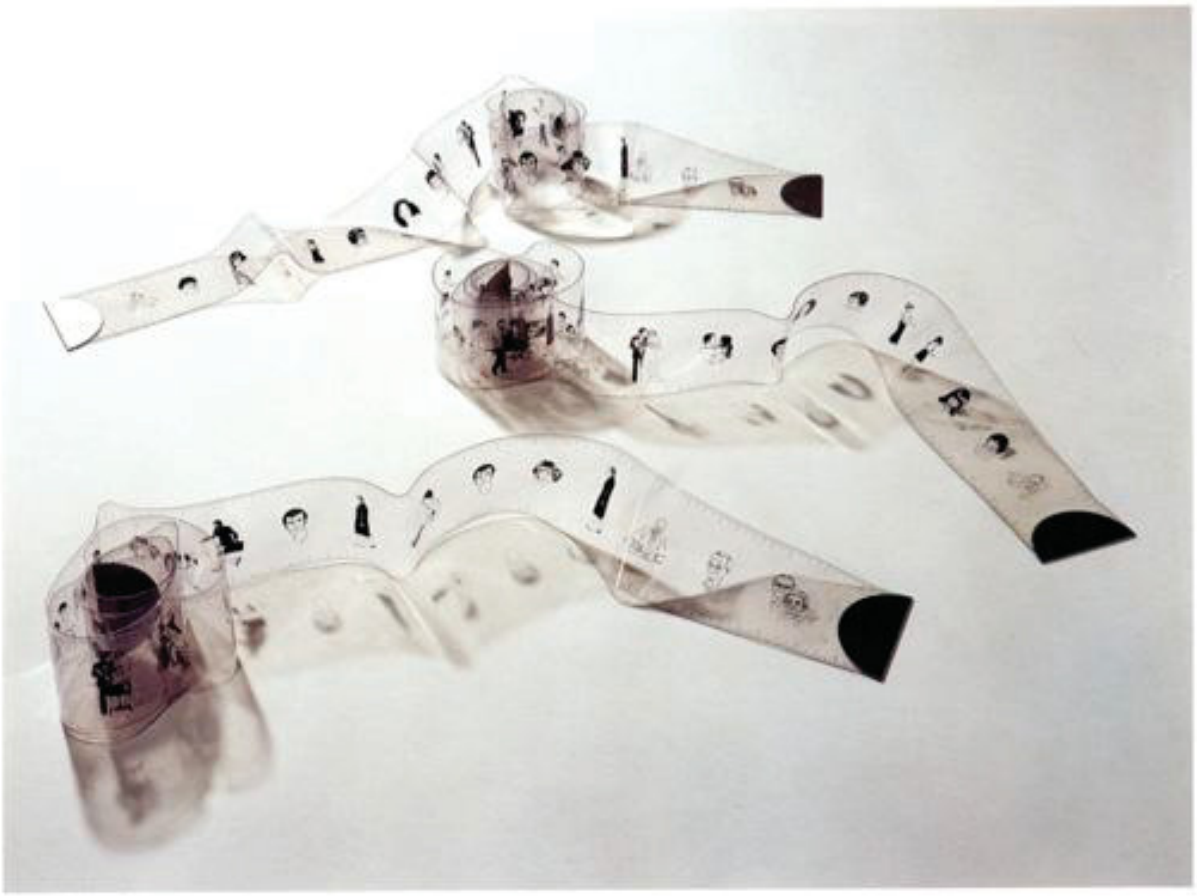

Figure 17 *Standard Lives (Vie sur mesure)*
Jana Sterbak
1988
Laser print on vinyl and metal, eight tapes.
Image courtesy of the Digital Image and Slide Collection, Concordia University

Figure 18 *Golem: Objects as Sensations (Stomach (Venom))*
Jana Sterbak
1979-82
Eight lead hearts, bronze spleen painted red, lead throat, bronze stomach, rubber stomach, lead hand, bronze tongue, lead penis, bronze ear and three lead gelatine prints
Image courtesy of the Digital Image and Slide Collection, Concordia University

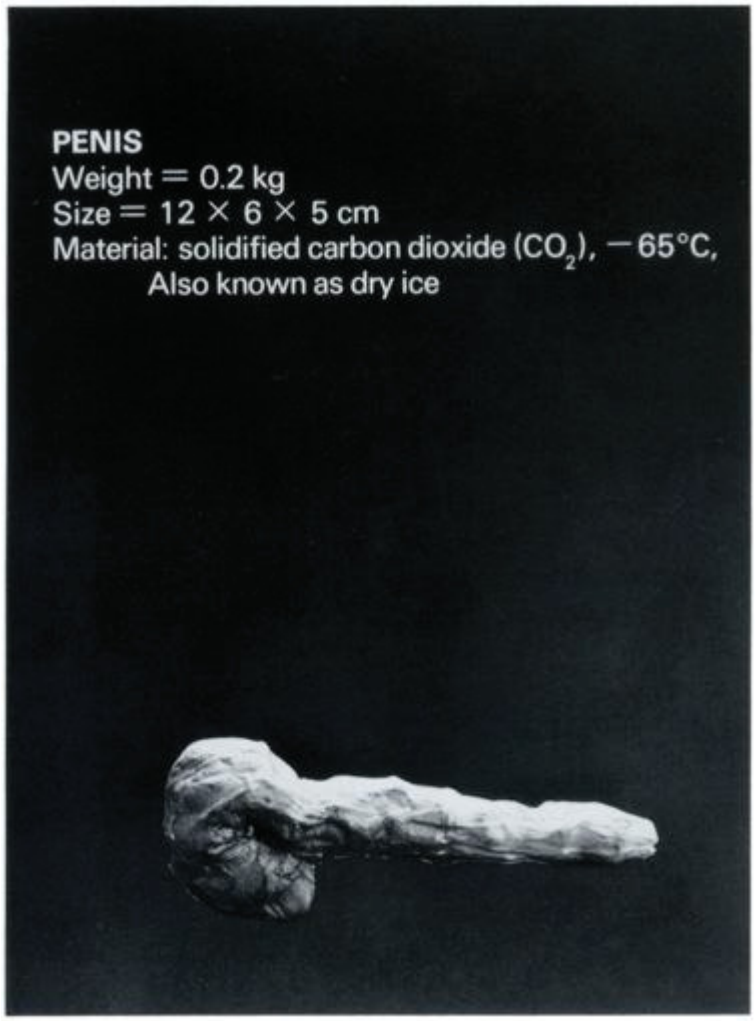

Figure 19 *Golem: Objects as Sensations (Penis)*
Jana Sterbak
1979-82
Eight lead hearts, bronze spleen painted red, lead throat, bronze stomach, rubber stomach, lead hand, bronze tongue, lead penis, bronze ear and three lead gelatine prints
Image courtesy of the Digital Image and Slide Collection, Concordia University

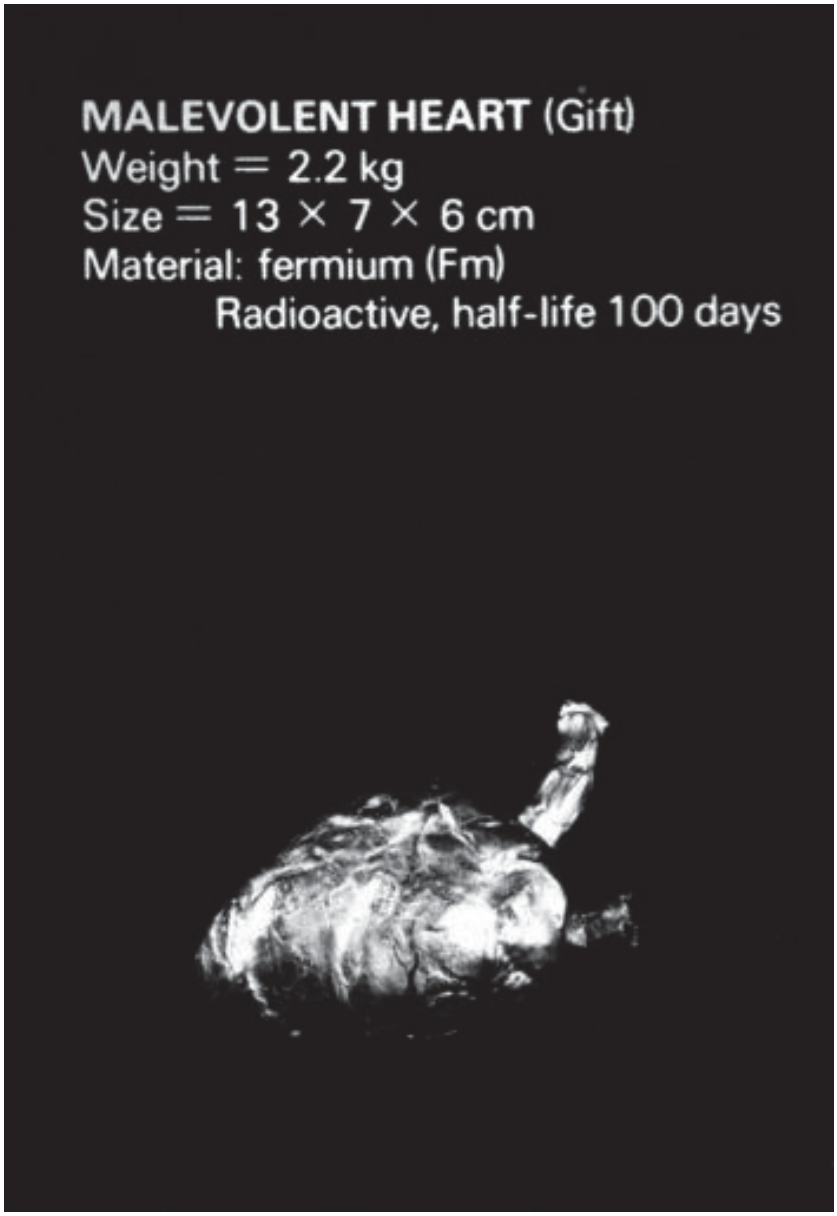

Figure 20 *Golem: Objects as Sensations (Malevolent Heart)*
Jana Sterbak
1979-82
Eight lead hearts, bronze spleen painted red, lead throat, bronze stomach, rubber stomach, lead hand, bronze tongue, lead penis, bronze ear and three lead gelatine prints
Image courtesy of the Digital Image and Slide Collection, Concordia University