

FOR CENTURIES

Venice was the site of artistic pilgrimages by musicians, poets, novelists and painters from distant lands. What Venice had to offer them—an otherworldly setting like no other, an abundance of history, superb monuments, isolation, slow rhythms, no night life and a monopoly on tourism—is less attractive to today's artists. However, their followers flock there in annual waves for the renowned film festival, the architecture biennial and the mother of them all, the venerable visual arts Biennale di Venezia, the grande dame of international biennials, established in 1895. For a few days the international art world enjoys unparalleled networking and partying amidst the national pavilions in the public gardens and at other spectacular sites throughout the city, its spirit buoyed by this gentle fantasyland devoid of the urban chaos of rush-hour traffic and schedules geared to the speed of the internet. Venice prevails in all her unhurried glory. The art pilgrims make necessary noises about fetid canals, the outrageous price of a hotel room the size of a Japanese businessman's

sleeping capsule and the inconveniences of an infernal labyrinth of dead-end streets overcome only by slow boats, safe in the knowledge that when they leave *la Serenissima*, a less serene world awaits them.

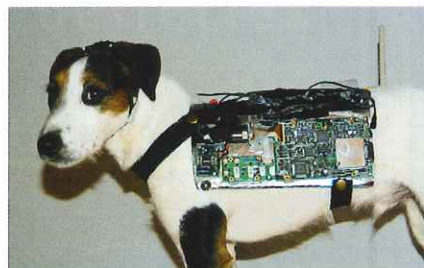
This summer Jana Sterbak will represent Canada at the 50th Venice Biennale with a new multi-screen projection entitled *From Here to There*, produced for the Canadian pavilion. Stanley, a canine cameraman, is the invisible star of this project organized by Montreal's Musée d'art contemporain with help from the National Gallery and the Canada Council for the Arts.

When Jana Sterbak arrived in Canada from Prague in 1968, her passage through adolescence was compounded with adjustment not only to a new culture and language but also, she suggests, to an unsettling absence of discernible political conviction. After a childhood under Communist rule, she found North American consumer capitalism less liberating than bland, without depth or form compared to the complexity of the history of Europe and the richness of the culture she left behind. Over the

next two decades, living in Vancouver, Toronto and New York, and eventually settling in Montreal, she became an accomplished artist known for work that provocatively combines the carnal and the conceptual, drawing on ancient myth and modern technology alike.

Sterbak is no stranger to the Venice Biennale; in 1990 she was invited to participate in the Aperto section, for the up-and-coming generation of artists under forty. During the opening days she hired a young woman who, suspended in a giant steel hoop crinoline, glided along the impressive length of the Arsenale's central *allée*, as if surveying the expanse of artworks by Sterbak's peers that were scattered to either side of the path she cut. This imperious apparition was commandeered by the artist wielding a remote control unit. Whether perceived as a prisoner of the motorized cage or as a mighty courtesan propelled along a victorious trajectory with the assistance of a faithful servant, the woman aloft was a spectacular seductress. The performance was pure Sterbak, and a triumph of paradox in which the artist's

STANLEY IN ORBIT



When Montreal's Musée

d'art contemporain chose the always controversial Jana Sterbak to represent Canada at this summer's Venice Biennale, Sterbak went out and bought a dog

by JESSICA BRADLEY

Stanley at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal media preview, April 2003

Remote Control II 1989 Aluminum, remote control 1.5 x 4.9 m Collection Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona





Faradayurt 2001 Stainless steel, flectron (polyester coated with copper)
2.9 x 3.5 m Courtesy Galeria Toni Tàpies, Barcelona

perennial themes of liberty and restraint, seduction and repulsion, corporeal limits and transformative prostheses were brought into full play.

Sterbak's memorable installation *Golem: Objects as Sensations*, shown at Toronto's Mercer Union in 1982, marked the onset of the critical acclaim her work has met on both sides of the Atlantic since. A lead heart, a bronze tongue and a rubber stomach figured among the assembly of body parts comprising this work inspired by the legend of the Golem of Prague. The exhibition registered with Sterbak's peers, sending waves through the artistic community at a moment when many artists eschewed the risky territory of expressionist materiality, opting instead for the rigours of more fashionable semiotic realms such as appropriated imagery and photography. In the intervening years, Sterbak has risen to join the group of Canadian artists with highly acclaimed international reputations. An important touring survey of her work was mounted by the National Gallery of Canada in 1991, the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago organized another comprehensive exhibition in 1998 and solo shows dedicated to her work have been held in several European museums, most recently Sweden's Malmö Konsthall and the Haus der Kunst in Munich. Though she still keeps an apartment in Montreal, where she spends frequent sojourns and where for almost two decades her work was seen regularly at Galerie René Blouin, Sterbak currently lives in Barcelona. Today her work is at least as well known abroad as at home.

Like the light edging the clouds in a ceiling painted by the Venetian master Tiepolo, an intermittent glint of Jana Sterbak's Prague past pierces the shadowy paradoxes of her work. Conceived with an admirable economy of means, at times austere, Sterbak's art is always palpably present even when objects are absent. The ghosts of Surrealism inhabit her oddly sensuous and psychically contorted works, as does the literature of Czech writers such as Kafka and Kundera. Like a good story, her art builds upon a talent for creating graphic images in the viewer's mind. Repulsive as her infamous *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic* (1987), which doubles as a body flayed and turned inside out, uncomfortable and perfidious as *Dissolution (Auditorium)* (2001), her recent chairs with seats of ice, or luxurious as the fabric that drapes her tent-like shelter *Faradayurt* (2001), Sterbak's art inevitably summons the body.

Though much has been made of this presence of the body, especially when her work first emerged amidst 1980s-era

postmodernist theories of identity, in Sterbak's work the body is less literal than metaphorical. At issue are the inevitabilities and dilemmas of other, more ephemeral but equally real states of our existence. Her recurrent themes are the stuff of philosophical inquiry into the contradictions of our human condition. Giving form to feeling, she deftly calls upon age-old stories of mythic struggle, as in her 1985 dress-like sculpture wound with live heating wires that glow red-hot when the viewer approaches. The work recalls the fateful actions of the vengeful Medea who, jilted by her unfaithful husband, sets her rival alight with the gift of a poisoned garment that bursts into flames when donned. An accompanying text projected as a backdrop begins with the phrase that constitutes the work's effective title and conveys both a lover's spiteful wish and a desperate plea: "I want you to feel the way I do." Similarly, her *Seduction Couch*, made two years later, suggests the risks of intimacy, drawing the spectator toward the crackling shock of light that travels between a metal chaise longue and a Van de Graaff electrical generator. Aware of the electrically charged field, viewers are tempted to test their resistance. Typically, both pieces conjure the atavistic and destructive forces of desire.

Gregor Samsa, the protagonist of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, who awakens to find that he has become a beetle, lingers in the insect-like contraption that the crazed man in Sterbak's *Condition* (1995) drags around behind him as he runs aimlessly in circles. Another man struggles to maintain equilibrium in Sterbak's *Sisyphus* (1991), and her exquisite glass globes, carried on the shoulders in a performance, pay homage to the Bohemian blown glass of her homeland while recalling the burden of the world Atlas was condemned to bear. But Sterbak's *Catacombs* (1992), a skeleton cast in bittersweet chocolate, is, like her flesh dress, deeply transgressive. It renders the only part of our being that survives long beyond our life paradoxically transient, and, more ominously, raises the spectre of the cannibalistic necrophiliac or *croque mort*.

The most striking common link between Sterbak's works—whether realized in text, performance, embroidery, photography, video or sculpture—is the way she folds formal poetics and material metaphor into a seamless conceptual bond between idea and object. The lightness at the heart of her dark humour is administered with a wry smile, like a slap that leaves in its wake a sting of self-recognition.

The visible process of decomposition her flesh dress manifests

Absorption: Work in Progress 1995 Colour print and text on aluminum; cocoon made from tape in vinyl bag
Text 35.5 x 28 cm; colour print 1.7 x 1.2 m; bagged object 40.5 x 216 x 51 cm Collection Art Gallery of Ontario



In Sterbak's new video work the pedestrian *fondamente* of Venice and the banks of the lower St. Lawrence River make an unlikely pair

in the course of being exhibited disrobes mortality before our eyes. Confronted with public outcry and media frenzy over food wastage when the work, made from 30 pounds of flank steak, was seen at the National Gallery of Canada in 1991, Sterbak responded with steely reserve: "What is lacking is not food, but a political and social desire to distribute the necessary economic means for everybody to purchase it." Her piquant sense of irony seems to express acceptance of a certain cruel injustice to life that is reason enough for its common absurdities and occasional tragedies. Nowhere is this more evident than in her 1993 video installation *Declaration*, in which a young man with a heartrending stutter struggles through the French Revolution's August 1789 *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen*, a source document for modern democracy, performing a torturous reverse reading of the famous text from the end to the beginning. He is tongue-tied, a subject whose speech—his voice in the world—is compromised. Two modernist chairs flank the TV monitor in a clean scenario of designer perfection, like domestic icons of obliviousness to the messy minor drama unfolding on the screen.

The Surrealist poet André Breton once referred to Prague as the capital of old Europe, but Venice also shares such mythic status in the minds of its residents and visitors alike. Venice's history lies as much with the world beyond Europe as within it, though by 1492, when Columbus discovered the New World, it was losing its place of political, economic and cultural prominence. A protected monument now, Venice is magnificently trapped in time, out of this world. In the Russian émigré writer Joseph Brodsky's book *Watermark*, Venice is a "Penelope of a city, weaving her patterns by day and undoing them by night, with no Ulysses in sight. Only the sea....Water," he continues,

"equals time and provides beauty with its double....By rubbing water, this city improves time's looks, beautifies the future." Brodsky reminds us that in Venice beauty and death are intertwined. It is like the riddle of Sterbak's glass coffin, *Inside* (1990), which contains a child-sized, mirrored double of itself within. We look at it only to have death stare back in the form of our own reflection. Once hailed by Evelyn Waugh as the world's greatest surviving work of art, today Venice has become a floating museum, some would say a mausoleum. It is an enormous preservation project whose object remains at risk as mass tourism and Disneyfication become a threat greater than the legendary *acqua alta* of the surrounding tidal lagoon. Venice is famously a place of paradoxes. Its narrow streets open suddenly into breathtaking squares resembling stage sets where characters appear and slip away through mysterious entrances and exits. But these sublime civic spaces are equally matched by sinister alleys with evocative names like *calle degli assassini*. An illustrious past punctuated by intrigue and plague clings like the winter fogs that creep in at night to engulf the city.

In Sterbak's new video work the pedestrian *fondamente* of Venice and the banks of the lower St. Lawrence River make an unlikely pair. Marco Polo set out from Venice in 1271 to wander the Silk Road for 24 years, returning with tales of princely harems and untold wealth. Samuel de Champlain, the father of New France, skirted the wild shores of the St. Lawrence, recording his journey in the first map of the region in 1607. Stanley, a plucky young Jack Russell terrier equipped with a camcorder, goes about his peregrinations in these contrasting sites. Accompanied by Glenn Gould's frisky 1955 rendition of Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, a masterpiece of incremental variation and permutation, he blissfully discovers new territory, oblivious to the vastly different

histories of the sites. Sterbak captured the canine tourist's experience through a miniature video camera normally used for medical research, adapted for rough outdoor use and surreptitiously attached to Stanley's head. Following behind during production, the artist and her technical assistant were party to the dog's world-view on a wireless handheld screen.

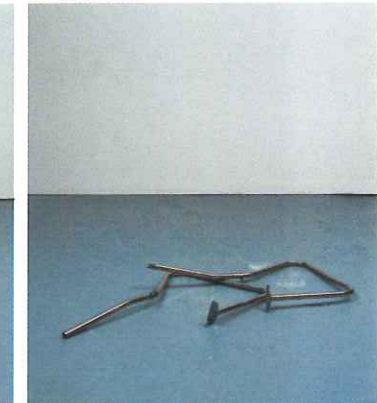
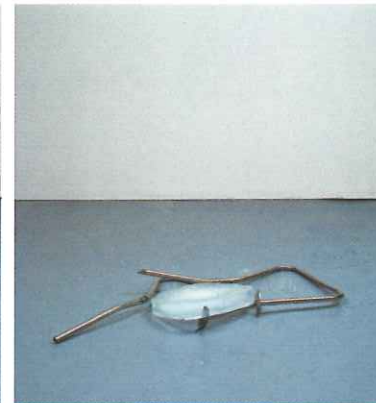
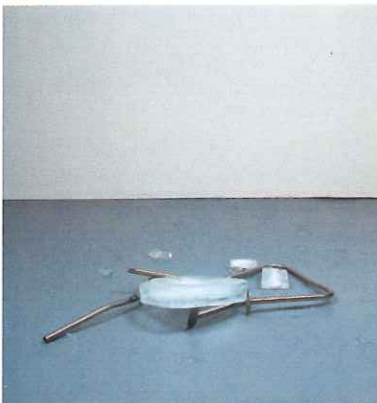
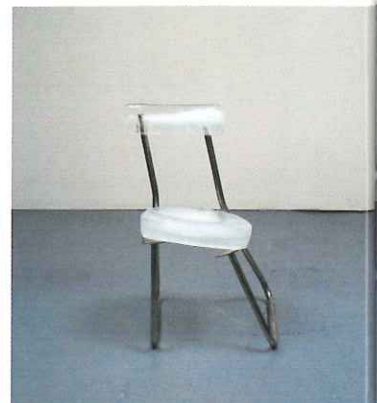
In *From Here to There* Sterbak contrasts the Old and the New Worlds, implicitly recounting her own voyage from the man-made wonders of one to the *terre sauvage* of the other. However, such an obvious end would be uncharacteristic in her work. Instead, in transferring control to the dog, to the randomness of his movements (an act that recalls the desire for unfettered expression in Surrealist automatic writing), she introduces several complex themes. How might Venice, the image-weary subject of too many bad postcards, be imagined by a blind person? Is this a place that can be represented, or must it be experienced, not only visually but through other senses?

Stanley is the artist's guide, her techno seeing-eye dog whose alien vision affords Sterbak and viewers a new perception of the world. Perhaps Sterbak also pays homage to Michael Snow, whose body of work is a long meditation on vision. In her 1995 *Absorption: Work in Progress*, the mystique of Joseph Beuys, another artist who loomed large for her generation, is featured in the artist's fantasy of devouring his renowned felt suits like a moth and re-emerging anew from her chrysalis.

Shaking his head, trotting, running, stopping and turning as he sniffs his way, Stanley innocently subjects the viewer to a visual roller-coaster that bears uncanny resemblance to passages in Snow's 1971 film *La Région Centrale*. In that dizzying exposé of vision, the camera moved on a multidirectional armature and Snow created an autonomous and voracious mechanical eye.

The barren northern landscape in Snow's film is recalled during Stanley's romp across the ice-encrusted shores of the St. Lawrence. At other moments, when Stanley swings his head briskly, objects in his path leave a trail of light scattered across the screen like the Milky Way, the details of recorded imagery obliterated in a schematic trace of his movements. Here we may remember the sparks in Rodney Graham's *Coruscating Cinnamon Granules* (1996), a work in which the history of film returns through the simple re-creation of an enchanting imaginative realm reminiscent of the first cinematic experiments.

In 1970, Michael Snow was Canada's official representative at the Venice Biennale. During that occasion he made *Venetian Blind*, a photographic sequence featuring blurry views of the artist's face with closed eyes, seen against a background of skewed glimpses of Venice. The photos were shot as Snow made his way on a vaporetto, holding his camera at arm's length. *Venetian Blind* is, among other things, a comment on the challenge of seeing and representing what is already known, clichéd even. But Snow and Sterbak both re-enact an earlier cinematic trip up the Grand Canal, that shutter-clicking voyage every visitor to Venice makes. In 1896, a year after the first biennale, Alexandre Promio, a Lumière cameraman, used the movie camera as a moving camera, placing it on its tripod in a gondola to record that majestic voyage in black and white. Secure in the arms of Sterbak's assistant, Denis Labelle, Stanley repeats the voyage in the bow of a vaporetto, unknowingly creating a new reading of historic precedent. The rest of the time Stanley has his nose to the ground, whether promenading in Venice—a dog on a leash in the city of dogs—or a free spirit scampering through the fields of Kamouraska on the trail of a porcupine. Notably, that strange, lumbering beast appeared in the first images of



Dissolution 2001 Colour photographs 93 x 51.5-cm each Edition of 10 Courtesy Galeria Toni Tàpies, Barcelona

From Here to There (detail) 2003 Video projection Courtesy Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal



Canada, recorded in the late 17th-century *Codex Canadensis*.

What does Sterbak's abdication of her vision to that of man's best friend mean? A desire to see with the eyes of another, to discover a less predictable world? Perhaps to demolish the maddening perfection of Venetian palace façades? Or unmask the stereotype of Canada's tourist paradise of endless untouched nature as a barren snow-covered landscape inhospitable to human life but a few months a year? *From Here to There* is a work in progress, and in many respects a departure for Sterbak. Though not the first time she has used video, this piece promises to highlight a "baffling incongruity" of sites and sight, to borrow Glenn Gould's description of the densely layered structure of the *Goldberg Variations*. It also deftly traces and reinvents signal developments in the history of cinema; the notion of the "subjective camera" and the long shot. Cinematically scaled, *From Here to There* is a series of projections that unfold in alternating sequences over six screens. These cover the perimeter windows of the Canadian pavilion, an eccentric hut-like building whose curved form resembles a teepee and whose footprint is purported to be based on the distinctive outline of the maple leaf.

The paradoxes in *From Here to There* are ostensibly found in the disorienting flow of intercontinental imagery, the contrast between the locale on one screen and the next. And, incidentally, the awkward symbolic appeal to the natural surroundings of the Canadian pavilion's architecture in the company of the imperial pretenses of its more solid and graceful neighbours, Britain, France and Germany. However, there is a deeper tug of opposing forces; Stanley's engaging animal nature is present, though his image is absent. Smell as much as sight is the sense that he translates into vision—for his Venice is surely damp spots on palace foundations and musty corners as much as ornate cornices and sun-dappled water. Inherently, the spatial and olfactory dimensions of his sensory experience are transmitted to the viewer, though safely distanced and delivered by technology. *From Here to There* is, after all, also about autonomy and control, the artist's and the animal's.

On April Fool's Day, unable to attend the press conference held at the Musée d'art contemporain to introduce her project for Venice, Sterbak sent Stanley as her representative. He was a charming host, posing for the cameras like a professional and causing a stir reminiscent of the crowds parting around Sterbak's enormous motorized crinoline during the biennale press days in 1990. Cheekily equipped with his own camera, Stanley stood flashing keen eyes at arriving journalists. Enthralled by his presence, they were unaware that they featured in a wobbly, dramatically foreshortened dog's-eye view of their progress toward the event, projected live to the assembling press in a nearby room. Affecting a welcoming canine smile, and seemingly entirely aware of the occasion, Stanley performed like a real star—and Sterbak prevailed. ■

PHTHALO

GALLERY



photo by Shane O'Brien

June EMERGING

Ann-Marie Brown, Cheng-yu Hsieh,
Peter Mintchev, Drew Shaffer

July BELLE RUSSE

Nikolai Makarov & Andrei Zadorine

August SUMMER GROUP EXHIBITION

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