

Redressing Femininity:

Power and Pleasure in Dresses by Jana Sterbak and Cathy Daley

by

Catherine Ann Laird, B.Hum

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## **Abstract**

Since the mid 1980s, numerous Western women artists have employed the dress form in their work. Disembodying it or rendering it unwearable, they have used the dress's traditional connection with women to investigate the constructed nature of their femininity and, consequently, their subordination in patriarchal society. In this context, the work of two such artists – Canadians Jana Sterbak and Cathy Daley – stands out as exemplary. Like their peers, they investigate femininity but delve comparatively deeper, to symbolically destabilize its central power and pleasure relationships. After discussing the artistic precedents and the feminist theories that have arguably inspired their work with the form, this thesis examines Sterbak's and Daley's dress-based art as deeply transgressive; their respective destabilizations powerfully and pleasurably redefine, or redress, femininity.

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## **Introduction**

Most Western women wear dresses, if not everyday then for special occasions, putting them on without much thought about why. While specific cuts have perpetually shifted in and out of style, the dress itself remains one piece of clothing that women – and, aside from girls, traditionally only women – have worn for centuries, making it an archetypal form. So, whether falling to the ankles or cutting high on the thigh, the dress signals far more about the individual who wears it than her fashionableness, or lack thereof. The dress signals her gender identity. Men's clothes have a similar, albeit much less exclusive, archetype in pants; but to signal that an individual is a woman has potentially devastating consequences in patriarchal society. Whereas 'man' is characterized by a dominant masculinity, the gender identity 'woman' is normally characterized by a subordinate femininity. Significantly, however, when it is disembodied or rendered unwearable in life, the dress becomes a form capable of transgressing this femininity, of symbolically destabilizing what it means to be a woman. By examining their work with the dress form, I shall expound how two contemporary women artists, Jana Sterbak and Cathy Daley, have created deep transgressions, which respectively destabilize, for viewers, the core of femininity's subordination: man's power and pleasure.

### **Jana Sterbak**

Born in 1955, Jana Sterbak spent her formative childhood years living in Prague, Czechoslovakia. After the 1968 Russian invasion, her family immigrated to Canada, settling in Vancouver. Sterbak began her artistic education, attending the Vancouver School of Art between 1973 and 1974. The following academic year, she attended the

University of British Columbia, starting a Bachelor's degree in Fine Arts. After transferring to Concordia University in Montréal, where she currently lives and works, Sterbak completed her B.F.A. (1977) and subsequently earned her Master of Fine Arts degree from the University of Toronto (1980-1982). In these Canadian cities, Sterbak began exhibiting her early yet already multidisciplinary works: sculptures, installations, performances, and photographs. Many of them incorporated parts of the body – for example, *Cone on Hand* (1979) – and, importantly, various pieces of empty clothing. However, Sterbak started creating dresses in 1984, with the sculptural installation *I Want You to Feel the Way I Do ... (The Dress)*. Intermittently over the next decade, she would create three additional sculptures using the dress form and unconventional materials: *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic*, *Remote Control I and II*, and *Chemise de Nuit*.<sup>1</sup> While the intermittency makes them an unofficial series, Sterbak has strongly connected these dress works to one another; in all of them, she not only disembodies the dress (except during performances) or renders it unwearable, but also unites the form with perverse, powerfully un-feminine characteristics.

### **Cathy Daley**

Born in Toronto, also in 1955, Cathy Daley has continued to live and work there, currently teaching as an associate professor at the Ontario College of Art and Design. She studied at the Ontario College of Art between 1973 and 1975, and at the independent art school Art's Sake Inc. through the end of the decade. In the 1980s, Daley began

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that in 1995, Sterbak created the performance *Psi A Slecna (Defence)*, whereby a woman wearing a ball gown sings opera while surrounded by barking dogs. Unlike Sterbak's other works, the dress form cannot function as art, as a sculpture, when emptied. So, I have chosen not to include the performance in this thesis.

exhibiting her work in Toronto, Montréal, and Vancouver. While some of these early drawings and paintings depict a variety of empty clothes, by the mid 1990s, the dress form had become the constant, even obsessive, subject of her work. Since then, Daley has primarily created black-and-white drawings of dresses, all untitled, as well as a sculptural installation and a short animated film, both titled *Little Black Dress*.<sup>2</sup> Although they do vary from work to work, Daley has often redrawn or reworked specific, fashionable styles that especially preoccupy her; so, similar-looking dresses reappear throughout her post-1995 oeuvre. This, in addition to the black-and-white colouration, connects her dress works together as a series, to which she still continues to add. Furthering such a connection, in all of these works, Daley represents the dress as an unwearable, disembodied, or just partially embodied form; like Sterbak, she also unites the dress form with perverse characteristics – though in her case, hyper-feminine, hyper-pleasurable ones.

The dress-based art of Sterbak and Daley is but one part of a larger artistic tendency that exploded in the mid 1980s and through the 1990s. Although only a few had employed it in the previous two decades, numerous women artists began taking up the disembodied or unwearable dress form to investigate ‘woman’. I have chosen to focus this thesis on Sterbak’s and Daley’s works – examining them in two case studies – for several reasons, the most obvious being their distinct differences. While Sterbak’s unofficial series is limited to the period of the mid 1980s and early 1990s, Daley’s more

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that Daley has recently been working on drawings of dress-like forms using pink pastel and collage. Unlike her black-and-white ones, various body parts (legs, feet, arms, torsos, heads, lips) are common and prominent in these drawings. So, because my focus is on the emptied form, I have decided not to include them in this thesis.

organized one is continuing. And while Sterbak's dresses are largely sculptural and created with unconventional materials, Daley's are primarily two-dimensional and created with conventional ones. The result of these different degrees of engagement with the dress form, time frames, methods, and media, their works significantly represent two poles within the artistic tendency. However, even more significant is what makes them similar: both Sterbak's and Daley's dresses achieve deep transgressions. Both artists delve deeply into how women become 'woman'; through the dress form and the unfeminine or hyper-feminine characteristics united in their works, they destabilize man's subordinating power and pleasure. Even so, the differences between their dresses remain so distinctly obvious that a comparative examination would arguably become consumed with explaining them, and not the more significant similarities. Rather, exploring how exactly Sterbak and Daley achieve their destabilizing criticisms of femininity, in independent yet related case studies, enables a fuller analysis and, therefore, understanding of their dress works.

### **Chapter Breakdown**

Chapter One provides an artistic, historical, and theoretical context for Sterbak's and Daley's dress works, through a detailed lineage of dress-based art. The chapter begins by discussing the work of the few women artists who employed disembodied or unwearable dresses in the 1960s and 1970s. It explains how the foundational ideas and theories of first-wave feminism, as well as the dress styles popularized after World War II, inspired them. The chapter then discusses the subsequent explosion in the number of women artists who took up the form, briefly examining dresses by Sterbak's and Daley's most notable peers. Rebecca Belmore, Annette Messenger, Beverly Semmes, Lesley Dill,

and Gathie Falk are established artists from North America and Europe, who have all used the dress in important works. I also discuss how these works were inspired by second-wave feminism's rising new theories – especially those dealing with the performance or construction of gender identity through clothes, by such scholars as Judith Butler and Kaja Silverman. Chapter One shows that Sterbak's and Daley's peers employ the dress form to investigate 'woman' by analyzing the constructedness of femininity, while suggesting how their own works delve even deeper.

The first case study, Chapter Two examines Sterbak's four-part, unofficial series of dresses. After providing a detailed introduction to her dress-based art, the chapter introduces a theory that supplements those of Butler and Silverman, based upon Michel Foucault's analysis of power as internalized.<sup>3</sup> Susan Bordo likens this power "from below" to the self-surveillance that women exercise in patriarchy, which maintains femininity's subordination.<sup>4</sup> The chapter subsequently examines each of Sterbak's dress works individually, discussing the meanings conveyed by their media, titles, installation, performance, and effect on viewers. Through such an examination, Chapter Two shows how Sterbak's union of the dress form and un-feminine characteristics destabilizes the power "from below" or self-surveillance that is central to femininity and, therefore, to women's disempowerment.

Chapter Three, the second case study, examines a representative selection of dress works from Daley's more organized, continuing series. It too provides a detailed

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<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, "The Eye of Power," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. and trans. Colin Gordon (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1980), p. 155.

<sup>4</sup> Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 167.

introduction to her dress-based art before introducing the theories of Naomi Wolf, Valerie Steele, and, importantly, Luce Irigaray, which supplement Butler's and Silverman's. Describing beauty, Wolf and Steele suggest how patriarchal society helps maintain women's self-surveillance by encouraging them to define femininity as eroticizing – to see themselves as erotic objects – putting male pleasure over their own. But Irigaray suggests that with mimicry, deliberate exaggerations, women may “thwart” this.<sup>5</sup> The chapter then analyzes five of Daley's drawings, her sculptural installation, and her short animated film individually. Chapter Three thus shows how Daley's union of the dress form and hyper-feminine characteristics destabilizes the definition of femininity that is central to women's subordination and lack of pleasure, by mimicking it.

### **Literature Review**

There are several books that discuss clothing in art – including Anne Hollander's *Seeing Through Clothes*, Radu Stern's *Against Fashion: Clothing as Art, 1850-1930*, and Nancy J. Troy's *Couture Culture: A Study in Modern Art and Fashion*. But as their titles suggest, these books explore, respectively, how the clothes worn in Western historical art have conveyed a physical ideal, how wearable clothing has become art when designed by modern artists, and how modern art and fashion have both experienced a tension between originality and commoditization. By contrast, recent exhibition catalogues provide the most germane discussions of disembodied or unwearable clothes in contemporary art. They include *Empty Dress: Clothing as Surrogate in Recent Art* (Neuberger Museum, New York, 1993-1995), *Art/Fashion* (Biennale di Firenze, Florence, Italy, 1997),

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<sup>5</sup> Luce Irigaray, *This Sex which is not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 76.

*Dressing Down* (Oakville Galleries, Ontario, 1998), *Uncommon Threads: Contemporary Artists and Clothing* (Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, New York, 2000), and *Doublures: vêtements de l'art contemporain* (Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, 2003). Much broader in scope than this thesis, the curatorial essays in these catalogues discuss the use of clothing forms, women's and a small number of men's, as a way for all contemporary artists to explore the construction of gender identity. Importantly, they indicate that the explosion of dress-based art occurred alongside an explosion in clothing-based art generally. But as a result, the essays provide a limited analysis of why the dress specifically became so interesting to women artists, only implying the influence of second-wave feminist theory and earlier work with the form.

In *Art/Fashion* and *Doublures*, the curatorial essays provide a brief discussion of Sterbak's works but no discussion of Daley's, whose dress-based art has yet to appear in such exhibitions. Comparatively, Sterbak is better known in the international art world and popular culture; so, while not always included in the recent exhibitions on disembodied or unwearable clothes – and their catalogues – her dresses have appeared in many other group and solo shows, which have published meaningful essays discussing them. The most notable, for its thoroughness, is Diana Nemiroff's "States of Being," in the catalogue for the 1992 retrospective exhibition *Jana Sterbak: States of Being*. Nemiroff examines *I Want You to Feel the Way I Do* as representing a gender identity that women may put on and take off, *Vanitas* as an expression of the hierarchal body-soul binary, and *Remote Control I* and *II* as a robotic machine, very much informing the analysis in this thesis. Additionally, several scholarly articles have contributed analyses of Sterbak's dresses. In "Flesh and Bones," curator Nancy Spector discusses the same

three works as Nemiroff, but as a series, focusing on how they all convey the suffering inflicted on women's bodies in patriarchy. And in "Disciplined Subjects and Docile Bodies in the Work of Contemporary Artist Jana Sterbak," art historian Jennifer McLerran describes *Vanitas* and *Remote Control I and II* as alluding to how 'woman' is constructed, in part, through a kind of bodily self-surveillance. But however notable, these writings stop short of examining the transgressive power of Sterbak's dresses – how her works create such a power to destabilize the subordinating femininity traditionally symbolized by the dress form.

Because she is less renowned, curators and scholars have written much less on Daley's dress-based art; and the majority of what has been written is found in brief curatorial essays and exhibition reviews. Curator Renee Baert's essay in the catalogue for *Cathy Daley*, a 2002 exhibition at the Newzones Gallery of Contemporary Art, Calgary, discusses Daley's dress drawings as depicting an impossible kind of beauty, which simultaneously attracts viewers with glamour and repulses them with excessiveness or exaggerations. In addition, the essays by curators Jocelyne Fortin and Carolyn Bell Farrell, who together provide the most substantial discussions of Daley's sculpture and film, describe these works as presenting a ridiculous thinness, tallness, or voluptuousness. Most other writings on Daley's dresses similarly describe them as whimsical and nostalgic, while suggesting that a criticism of women as spectacles underlies this. Even so, none of the literature examines how her works transgress male pleasure – how she creates mimicries to destabilize patriarchal society's subordinating, eroticizing definition of femininity. And none has connected any of Daley's work with the dress form to that of Sterbak.

## Methodology and Theoretical Framework

With literature on her dress-based art scarce, even in the National Gallery of Canada's Library and Archives, this thesis draws heavily on information gathered from my interview with Daley, conducted at her Toronto studio this past spring. Sterbak, however, prefers to no longer comment on her works, leaving their meanings open for the viewer alone to interpret. As a result, an interview with her was not possible. Nevertheless, the National Gallery's archival holdings on Sterbak – newspaper clippings from their Artist and Exhibition Files, as well as installation and performance video recordings – are extensive. Alongside earlier artist statements and interviews in exhibition catalogues, they have provided at least some first-hand commentary from Sterbak on what she intends her dresses to convey.

As already indicated, the primary theoretical framework underlying this thesis is feminist, expounded in Chapter One through the theories of Butler and Silverman. I have selected their texts for two reasons. Firstly, Butler's seminal "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" (1988), *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), and *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (1993) are key to any study of gender identity. Explaining the many complex ideas within her radical theory, these writings describe how gender identity – and, even more radically, sex – is constructed through performances, rendering it utterly inessential to the body. And secondly, although written earlier, Silverman's 1986 essay "Fragments of a Fashionable Discourse" adds to Butler's theorization, describing how clothes play a central role in the performance, especially for women. Together, these texts establish why the destabilization of 'woman', of femininity, is even

possible, as well as why the dress form is so capable of symbolizing or representing this. I have chosen Foucault's power "from below" and Irigaray's mimicry as important supplementary theories in Chapters Two and Three for a more simple reason: they explain how femininity's subordination is maintained and how it may be transgressed, in terms markedly appropriate for Sterbak's and Daley's works. Thus, in the following chapters, this thesis will argue that the dress-based art of Sterbak and Daley employs the dress form for its ability to deeply transgress femininity, destabilizing the subordinating power and pleasure relationships at its core. Consequently, their works open femininity to redefinition – to redressing – as empowering of and pleasurable for women.

## Chapter One

### Dress-based Art: Its Emergence and Explosion

In the West, dress-based art exploded into an artistic tendency in the mid 1980s and through the 1990s. It had emerged earlier, however, between 1965 and 1977, in the work of such American women artists as Mimi Smith, Nancy Youdelman, and Mira Schor. Responding to the foundational ideas and theories of first-wave feminism, they used the dress's deep-seated relationship with women viewers to explore their shared, everyday experiences in patriarchal society. Although they held much of this feminist subject matter in common with their peers, the form that these artists' responses took was atypical, perhaps surprisingly so; major designers of women's clothes, for example, Christian Dior, had popularized dresses with particularly demanding and restricting silhouettes only a decade earlier, in the 1950s. Significantly, several art historians have attributed the subsequent explosion in the number of women artists working with the dress form to a radical, second wave of feminist theory. The work of Jana Sterbak's and Cathy Daley's peers in North America and Europe – most notably Rebecca Belmore, Annette Messenger, Beverly Semmes, Lesley Dill, and Gathie Falk – supports this. Consistent with rising theories of performative gender identity and of the central role played by clothes in its enactment, these artists all use dresses to investigate 'woman'. That is, through the most strikingly representative piece of clothing, the dress, they analyze the constructedness of women's characteristic, subordinating femininity. The following detailed lineage of dress-based art thus provides a historical, theoretical, and artistic context for Sterbak's and Daley's deeply transgressive work with the disembodied or unwearable dress form.

### First-wave feminism: Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, and the New Look

In *The Second Sex*, French existentialist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir formulated the ideological and theoretical foundations of first-wave feminism. Published in 1949 and translated into English four years later, the book waged the first comprehensive, post-war attack on women's "secondary place in the world in relation to men."<sup>1</sup> Specifically, Beauvoir argues that living in patriarchy, in which all institutions are established by men and help to maintain their dominance, women are taught to assume this place. Throughout childhood and adolescence, girls and boys undergo an "apprenticeship," gender educations intended to create women and men.<sup>2</sup> Guided by the expectations of their caregivers, who are themselves guided by learned stereotypes, girls and boys gradually learn to embody the characteristics that identify their genders: femininity and masculinity. Masculinity advances intellect, activity, independence, and, therefore, subjectivity in boys; in contrast, femininity encourages irrationality, passivity, dependence, and, therefore, objectivity or otherness in girls. As Beauvoir explains, "The great advantage enjoyed by the boy is that his mode of existence in relation to others leads him to assert his subjective freedom. His apprenticeship for life consists in free movement toward the outside world."<sup>3</sup> The great disadvantage endured by the girl is that she "is treated like a live doll and is refused liberty ... [T]he less she exercises her freedom to understand, to grasp and discover the world about her, the less resources will

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<sup>1</sup> H.M. Parshley, trans. and ed., preface to *The Second Sex*, by Simone de Beauvoir (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953; repr. 1968), p. vii.

<sup>2</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H.M. Parshley (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953; repr. 1968), p. 280.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

she find within herself, the less will she dare to affirm herself as subject.”<sup>4</sup> In this way, Beauvoir implicitly distinguishes sex, a body’s anatomical facts, and gender, the social meaning ascribed to those facts. A woman’s sex, female, is determined at conception. But she learns her gender identity in patriarchal society; it interprets her anatomical difference to mean that she is inherently subordinate and, consequently, teaches her so.<sup>5</sup> Hence, Beauvoir famously states that “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.”<sup>6</sup>

*The Second Sex* clearly influenced the key writers of first-wave feminism: Kate Millett, Shulamith Firestone, Juliet Mitchell, and Germaine Greer.<sup>7</sup> With Beauvoir’s “sex/gender distinction” as an underlying justification, they attacked the institutions that continued to subordinate women, primarily marriage and motherhood, and argued for equality.<sup>8</sup> However, as Sandra Dijkstra explains, before their respective books hit the shelves and bestseller lists, particularly in North America, *The Second Sex*’s foundational feminism “needed a ‘translator’ who could boil down its ideas, and its theory, into less radical, more readable journalese, so that its message could be transmitted to the masses, at least partially.”<sup>9</sup> No writer produced such a translation earlier, more fully, or to greater popular success than Betty Friedan. In her 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan states that surveying her graduating class at Smith College, she discovered that many of her former classmates, all women, felt dissatisfied with their lives and did not know why.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Judith Butler, “Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir’s *Second Sex*,” *Yale French Studies* 72 (1986): p. 35.

<sup>6</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 267.

<sup>7</sup> Sandra Dijkstra, “Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan: The Politics of Omission,” *Feminist Studies* 6, 2 (summer, 1980): p. 301.

<sup>8</sup> Butler, “Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir’s *Second Sex*,” p. 35.

<sup>9</sup> Dijkstra, “Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan,” p. 293.

She terms this “the problem that has no name.”<sup>10</sup> Having interviewed affected women across the United States and examined the image of ‘woman’ disseminated by psychoanalysts, anthropologists, educators, and the mass media throughout the 1950s, Friedan deduced its cause: the feminine mystique. The mystique is an idealized standard of femininity that pervades patriarchy, primarily through articles in women’s magazines and advertisements on television. It celebrates the dominated wife and the dutiful mother, urging women to adopt these roles to fulfill their anatomical destiny as man’s sexual plaything and child-bearer. According to Friedan, “The mistake, says the mystique, the root of women’s troubles in the past is that women envied men, women tried to be like men, instead of accepting their own nature.”<sup>11</sup> To accept it, a woman must deny her ability and desire to work outside of the home. She consequently never asserts herself as an individual “by her own actions in society,” a necessity for all human beings to feel satisfied.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, women’s dissatisfaction, their nameless problem, implies that the feminine mystique is not essential; a woman’s “secondary place,” her femininity, is learned rather than inborn.

Friedan translated Beauvoir’s existentialist philosophy into sociological statistics, her dense prose into layman’s terms, and her feminine “apprenticeship” into the feminine mystique. Her book thereby made the origins, perpetuation, and consequences of women’s subordination accessible to those outside of the intellectual vanguard.

Together, *The Second Sex* and *The Feminine Mystique* rallied the leaders of first-wave

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<sup>10</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W.W Norton and Co., 1963), p. 19.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxxi.

feminism – among them Millett, Firestone, Mitchell, and Greer – and recruited its supporters.<sup>13</sup> But how did Beauvoir and Friedan come to write their books in the post-war period? Their reasons are undoubtedly complex, most notably for Beauvoir. By the mid 1940s, she had developed a strong intellectual and intimate relationship with a leading existentialist philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre; and she wrote in a particularly ardent patriarchal country, which had denied women the vote until 1946, over twenty years longer than other parts of Europe and North America.<sup>14</sup> Common to both continents, however, was a marked change to women's situation since the war's end. During the war, they had enjoyed relative freedom, and their clothing reflected this. With able-bodied men soldiering abroad, young women took on traditionally masculine jobs; they worked in factories on consumer-goods assembly lines and as shipbuilders, mechanics, and welders.<sup>15</sup> As Peter McNeil indicates, the surge of women into the labour force resulted in "a suspension of social conventions regarding dress."<sup>16</sup> For safety and efficiency, many wore uniforms of overalls or trousers when working. When at leisure, war-time shortages and the activeness of the working woman/mother similarly made fussy, feminine clothes impractical.<sup>17</sup> According to Angela Partington, women wore

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<sup>13</sup> Dijkstra, "Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan," pp. 290, 294, 300.

<sup>14</sup> Anne Hollander, *Feeding the Eye: Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1999), pp. 78-79.

<sup>15</sup> Karen Anderson, *Wartime Women: Sex Roles, Family Relations, and the Status of Women During World War II* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1981), pp. 4-7, 23-26.

<sup>16</sup> Peter McNeil, "'Put Your Best Face Forward': The Impact of the Second World War on British Dress," *Journal of Design History* 6, 4 (1993): p. 283.

<sup>17</sup> Anderson, *Wartime Women*, p. 43; McNeil, "'Put Your Best Face Forward'," p. 289; Maureen Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender, and Propaganda during World War II* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), pp. 114, 185.

utility dresses; “the silhouette was unadorned, a plain rectangle of clothing consisting of [a] box-shaped jacket with padded shoulders and a narrow skirt.”<sup>18</sup>

Nevertheless, as the war ended and the men returned, these women were pushed back into domesticity, to revitalize family life and replenish the population.<sup>19</sup> The most obvious symbol of this push was the feminization of women’s clothes, epitomized by the couturier Christian Dior’s 1947 New Look. The collection’s dresses, which were popularized on the international mass market through rising ready-to-wear manufacturers, emphasized women’s breasts, full, rounded hips, tiny waists, and swathed their legs in long skirts.<sup>20</sup> Although celebrated for returning women to their essential or natural femininity, the dresses’ hourglass silhouette demanded body-reforming corsetry, boning, padding, and almost Victorian-style crinolines. The New Look thereby reconstructed not only a feminine-looking woman, but also a feminine-behaving one. The tight bodices and full skirts restricted her movement, rendering physical activity, let alone factory work, impractical.<sup>21</sup> As Joanne Hollows suggests, the collection, in part, “aimed to remove women from the workforce, and relegate them to their ‘traditional’ roles as wife and mother, locked in the private sphere.”<sup>22</sup> Beauvoir and Friedan were thus writing their books at the New Look’s height and in its wake – while a symbol, or even a

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<sup>18</sup> Angela Partington, “Popular Fashion and Working-Class Affluence,” in *Chic Thrills: A Fashion Reader*, ed. Juliet Ash and Elizabeth Wilson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 154.

<sup>19</sup> Dijkstra, “Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan,” p. 291.

<sup>20</sup> Joanne Hollows, *Feminism, Femininity and Popular Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 148-149.

<sup>21</sup> McNeil, “‘Put Your Best Face Forward’,” pp. 293-296.

<sup>22</sup> Hollows, *Feminism, Femininity and Popular Culture*, p. 149.

“mechanism,” of women’s renewed subordination perhaps hung in their closets.<sup>23</sup> In fact, the fashion historian Valerie Steele, quoted by Hollows, states that critics of the collection have interpreted its dresses as the “sartorial expression” of Friedan’s feminine mystique and, therefore, Beauvoir’s feminine “apprenticeship” before it.<sup>24</sup> In reaction, then, *The Second Sex* and *The Feminine Mystique* advised post-war women to stay in the labour force – to throw off their feminine, “secondary place” by asserting themselves, like men, through productive work in the public sphere.<sup>25</sup>

### **The dress form: an atypical response by women artists, 1965 to 1977**

Academically rigorous yet accessible, first-wave feminism’s foundational ideas and theories legitimized multifarious explorations into what it means to be a woman in patriarchy and desire a self-satisfying life outside of the home. So, it is unsurprising that by the mid 1960s, a supportive response stirred in the North-American art world. According to Thalia Gouma-Peterson and Patricia Mathews, women artists began developing “a new art,” intended “to promote and even engender a feminist consciousness.”<sup>26</sup> Considering the recent evidence of the power of clothes, and specifically dresses, to subordinate women, it appears surprising that only one prominent artist working at this time responded with the dress form: the sculptor Mimi Smith. Like the more typical latex-rubber blobs and breast-shaped mounds by Lynda Benglis and Eva Hesse, Smith’s dresses, composed of household materials, upset the impersonal,

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<sup>23</sup> Jennifer McLerran, “Disciplined Subjects and Docile Bodies in the Work of Contemporary Artist Jana Sterbak,” *Feminist Studies* 24, 3 (autumn, 1998): p. 545.

<sup>24</sup> Hollows, *Feminism, Femininity and Popular Culture*, p. 149.

<sup>25</sup> Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, p. 348; Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 679.

<sup>26</sup> Thalia Gouma-Peterson and Patricia Mathews, “The Feminist Critique of Art History,” *The Art Bulletin* 69, 3 (Sept., 1987): p. 332.

masculine rigidity of the dominant sculptural movement – Minimalism.<sup>27</sup> But unlike her peers, she sought a direct communication with women viewers about their shared, everyday experiences in patriarchal society.<sup>28</sup> Interestingly, the dress remained women's primary piece of clothing until the early-to-mid 1970s. Although the full-skirted New-Look dress had ceded its popularity to the mini designed by André Courrèges and Mary Quant, dresses still demanded a specific body type, the long-legged waif, and restricted women's activeness; the mini, with its especially short skirt, encouraged their bodies to move conservatively and cautiously, lest they show their underwear.<sup>29</sup> In addition, while many did stay in, as well as enter, the labour force, women remained the primary caretakers of their homes and families.<sup>30</sup> Hence, the strong familiarity of Smith's basic form and materials immediately connected women viewers, regardless of their art-historical knowledge, to her work.

Smith's dress-based art initiated a dialogue with these viewers on patriarchy's unrealistic ideals of beauty, marriage, and pregnancy. Created while she studied in the Master of Fine Arts program at Rutgers University, Smith's first dress, *Model Dress* (1965) (Figure 1.1), is made of transparent plastic. Though unremarkable in style – a sheath with a scoop neck, short sleeves, and a long skirt – it is ridiculously narrow; no woman could fit her waist and hips into it, as its emptiness emphasizes. Even if one

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<sup>27</sup> Jane Harris, "Clothing Art: Mimi Smith and the Fabric of Time," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 20, 3 (Sept., 1998): p. 32.

<sup>28</sup> Mimi Smith, "Feminist Artist Statement," Brooklyn Museum, Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, [http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/feminist\\_art\\_base/gallery/mimi\\_smith.php](http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/feminist_art_base/gallery/mimi_smith.php) (accessed Aug. 8, 2008).

<sup>29</sup> Susan Brownmiller, *Femininity* (London: Paladin Grafton Books, 1986), pp. 55, 60, 62.

<sup>30</sup> Dijkstra, "Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan," p. 291; Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, p. xviii.

could, its transparency, ironically resembling the protective furniture coverings popular in the 1960s, threatens to reveal any bodily imperfections. As Judith Tannenbaum states, by modelling a kind of impossible beauty, the dress indicates that “it is cruel to make women think they will achieve happiness through clothes, or forcing them to reshape their bodies so that others will find them attractive.”<sup>31</sup> Comparably cruel are women’s romantic expectations of married life. Smith famously examined these in her *Steel Wool Peignoir* (1966), combining the form of a woman’s sexy lingerie with the material of her abrasive reality.<sup>32</sup> Just as successful, however, is her lesser-known dress installation, *The Wedding* (1966) (Figure 1.2). Smith’s graduate project at Rutgers, it centers around a dressmaker’s dummy that wears a wedding gown composed of transparent plastic and lace. From its backside cascades a train – thirty feet of white carpet runners, doilies, tablecloths, and pillows. In her accompanying thesis *Clothes as a Form*, Smith explains: “I am not against weddings or wedding gowns. I just do not think they should lie.”<sup>33</sup> Women expect that the romance of the day and the dress will continue into their marriages; but with the cake cut and the dress stored away, monotonous routines and duties inevitably take over. Smith’s installation suggests that such learned expectations are sealed off from reality, plastic-protected, which renders women’s married lives cruelly disappointing.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Judith Tannenbaum, *Mimi Smith: Steel Wool Politics*, exh. cat. (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1994), p. 6.

<sup>32</sup> Mimi Smith, “Mimi Smith,” in “Women’s Work: A Lineage, 1966-94,” ed. Nina Felshin, *Art Journal* 54, 1 (spring, 1995): p. 72.

<sup>33</sup> Tannenbaum, *Mimi Smith*, p. 6.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

Drawing more plainly from her own life, Smith subsequently created the sculpture *Maternity Dress* (1966) (Figure 1.3) when she became pregnant with her first child. While its material, white marbled vinyl, is more associated with 1950s kitchen furnishings than with women's clothes, the dress's short skirt recalls Courrèges' and Quant's mini. Following the body-conscious style but still accommodating an invisible woman's belly, it includes a transparent-plastic dome, which is attached to its waist.<sup>35</sup> Rather than covering up her pregnancy with shapelessness, the dress daringly exhibits it, a considerable departure from traditional maternity wear. As Jane Harris states, it thereby "challenged the inherent passivity of a barefoot-and-pregnant ideal, and at the same time raised important issues about shame, body image, and sexuality."<sup>36</sup> Therefore, Smith's atypical response to first-wave feminism, paralleling Friedan's message in particular, pioneered the personal and political subject matter that would preoccupy women artists through the next decade – the first wave's climax.<sup>37</sup> Most significantly, however, Smith introduced a specific method for exploring such subjects, through the dress form and household materials. Although many would employ the latter, only a few artists would take up dresses in the 1970s.

Those who did, most notably Nancy Youdelman and Mira Schor, had participated in the first Feminist Art Program at the California Institute of the Arts. The all-women program was established in 1971 by Miriam Schapiro and Judy Chicago, artists known for their fabric collages or *femmagés* and central-core imagery. The Cal Arts program

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<sup>35</sup> Harris, "Clothing Art," p. 32.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

was a continuation and amplification of one established by Chicago at Fresno State College a year earlier, aimed to “help women to restructure their personalities to be more consistent with their desires to be artists and to help them build their artmaking out of their experiences as women.”<sup>38</sup> The students received a practical introduction to articulating their ideas, standing up against patronizing remarks, expressing aggression, and setting goals.<sup>39</sup> For their class project *Womanhouse* (1972), they filled a vacant Los-Angeles mansion with installations and performances, many employing what Harris describes as Smith’s “domestic vernacular.”<sup>40</sup> Exhibited to viewers throughout the winter, the works explored women’s traditional limitation to the home, as well as the students’ thoughts, feelings, and observations about their own experiences within it.

Youdelman’s dress sculpture *Button Dress* (1972) (Figure 1.4) emerged from this education. She created it – a hand-sewn fabric dress with a crew neck, floor-length skirt, and long sleeves, encrusted with black and silver buttons – directly following *Womanhouse*. For the project, Youdelman had collaborated on a performance in which a student wore a pink silk and lace dress as a costume, repeatedly enacting the painstaking application and removal of cosmetics.<sup>41</sup> Although this introduced dresses into her art, Youdelman primarily attributes her work with the disembodied dress form to Schapiro’s teachings. Through them, she learned that patriarchy had historically denigrated

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<sup>38</sup> Linda Nochlin, foreword to *Miriam Schapiro: Shaping the Fragments of Art and Life*, by Thalia Gouma-Peterson (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1999), p. 10.

<sup>39</sup> Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, “A Feminist Art Program,” *Art Journal* 31, 1 (autumn, 1971): pp. 48-49.

<sup>40</sup> Harris, “Clothing Art,” p. 35.

<sup>41</sup> Miriam Schapiro, “The Education of Women as Artists: Project Womanhouse,” *Art Journal* 31, 3 (spring, 1972): p. 269.

women's work; despite displaying marked skill and creativity, their dress-making, weaving, quilting, and knitting were denoted as craft, not art. By making a dress and by using craft materials and techniques to do so, Youdelman states that she was entering women's work into the contemporary art world, thereby conferring on past women "the credibility they deserved."<sup>42</sup> But further, *Button Dress* also elevated the work of a particular woman, her mother. Youdelman's childhood memories are dominated by the countless, unacknowledged hours that her mother spent sewing dresses, as well as her vast button collection: it "was kept in a tin; I loved running my fingers through [it]."<sup>43</sup> Thus, Youdelman's education raised her consciousness of women's work. And the historical denigration of dress-making, her mother's art, moved her to take up the form.

Schor similarly attributes her sculptural series *Dress Books* (1977) (Figure 1.5) to the emphasis at Cal Arts on "exploring all aspects of female experience for use in high art."<sup>44</sup> She had not employed dresses in her contribution to *Womanhouse*; rather, she created *Red Moon Room*, a closet painted with a self portrait in a shadowy moonscape.<sup>45</sup> In the mid 1970s, however, Schor began to interpret the form as representing femininity. The only one of these three early artists to examine it explicitly, she states that "I saw [femininity] as a free-floating identity outside of the individual woman, that she could put

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<sup>42</sup> Kate McGraw, "Nancy Youdelman – Castoffs Reinvented," Articles/Press, Eight Modern gallery, <http://www.eightmodern.net/articles/view/63> (accessed Aug. 25, 2008).

<sup>43</sup> Nancy Youdelman, "Artist Statement, Disembodied Garments: The Essence of Memory," Nancy Youdelman Sculpture, <http://www.nancyyoudelman.com/Pages/statement.htm> (accessed Aug. 25, 2008).

<sup>44</sup> Mira Schor, "Mira Schor," M/E/A/N/I/N/G Online, # 4 Feminist Forum (2007), ed. Susan Bee and Schor, <http://writing.upenn.edu/epc/meaning/04/forum.html#schor> (accessed Aug. 25, 2008).

<sup>45</sup> Schapiro, "The Education of Women as Artists," p. 269.

on or take off.”<sup>46</sup> Additionally, Schor’s written statement in the 1995 article “Women’s Work: A Lineage, 1966-94,” suggests that she simultaneously saw femininity as rendering the woman who puts it on vulnerable and available. She becomes an open book, a known or readable stereotype. Conveying this, the dresses in Schor’s series are empty and life-size, resembling distinct beings. They are also delicate in style – narrowly cut with sweetheart necklines – and in material, made of translucent layers of rice paper. She has covered the paper with handwritten diary entries, describing intimate emotions for viewers to read by turning the dresses’ pages; even so, her scratchy scrawl subverts a complete understanding, encouraging them to question the known, readable stereotype.<sup>47</sup> Hence, prompted by her education, Schor took up the form to explore, like Smith and Youdelman, experiences shared by women living in patriarchal society.

More specifically, Smith used the dress’s formal familiarity to initiate a dialogue with women viewers on unrealistic ideals; Youdelman, its association with women’s work to elevate their craft to art; and Schor, its distinctness from women’s bodies to present femininity as outside them, as subordinating but inessential. Interestingly, according to Schor, the “idea of the dress as the subject of art” became a common one in the mid-to-late 1970s.<sup>48</sup> As pants became popular together with first-wave feminism, women were taking their dresses off in their everyday lives, perhaps opening the dress form up to critical thought in general.<sup>49</sup> From this perspective, Schor’s response to the

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<sup>46</sup> Schor, “Mira Schor,” M/E/A/N/I/N/G Online, # 4 Feminist Forum (2007).

<sup>47</sup> Mira Schor, “Mira Schor,” in “Women’s Work: A Lineage, 1966-94,” ed. Nina Felshin, *Art Journal* 54, 1 (spring, 1995): p. 76.

<sup>48</sup> Schor, “Mira Schor,” M/E/A/N/I/N/G Online, # 4 Feminist Forum (2007).

<sup>49</sup> Brownmiller, *Femininity*, p. 55.

first wave may be considered relatively less atypical. However, she not only thought about the form, conceived of it as an idea for art; she also actually employed it, which continues to differentiate her work from her peers' and connects it to Smith's and Youdelman's. So, while many consciously or unconsciously avoided using the dress – arguably because it appeared to symbolize a patriarchal understanding of what it means to be a woman, not women's own – the form enabled these artists to most clearly articulate their meanings.

### **Igniting the explosion: the rise of gender and sartorial theory**

Approximately a decade after *Dress Books*, a second wave of feminist theory developed the view of femininity suggested in Schor's work, particularly through the post-structuralist philosophy of Judith Butler. In her seminal writings "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" (1988), *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), and *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (1993), Butler moves beyond women's learned subordination. Extending and ultimately challenging Beauvoir's "sex/gender distinction," her theorization radically unsettles gender identity itself. For Butler, the distinction immediately indicates that "'woman' need not be the cultural construction of the female body, and 'man' need not interpret male bodies."<sup>50</sup> However, in patriarchy, regulatory "cultural fictions" compel bodies to enact such normative interpretations.<sup>51</sup> As Butler explains, gender identities are constituted or constructed through performances.

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<sup>50</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 112.

<sup>51</sup> Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, 4 (Dec., 1988): p. 522.

These consist of corporeal acts – gestures, postures, movements – that stylize a body. That is, the acts interpret a body’s sex within a range of historically delimited possibilities: female bodies become feminine women and male bodies, masculine men. By repeatedly enacting them, as both individual bodies and as part of a collective throughout history, women and men legitimize and maintain these possibilities. At the same time, they come to believe their own performances, identifying with their normative genders as natural and necessary, as essential.<sup>52</sup>

According to Butler, these gender identities are the “cultural fictions.” Bodies perform their genders normatively not because the acts are an essential expression or miming of their sex, but because alternative performances regularly yield punishment, as evidenced by the marginalization of transvestites. Their transgression threatens patriarchal society’s “system of compulsory heterosexuality,” requiring bodies to enact binary gender identities that mime their binary reproductive roles.<sup>53</sup> The fictions, therefore, conceal the performative nature of gender. As Butler states, “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results.”<sup>54</sup> Gender exists only in so far as it is performed, which suggests that bodies could construct alternative identities equally as real or, more precisely, unreal as the normative ones. Even more radically, Butler theorizes that sex – denoted by Beauvoir and subsequent first-wave writers as an anatomical fact – is also performative, constructed through repeated acts; it

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<sup>52</sup> Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” p. 522.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 524.

<sup>54</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 25.

is not a “static condition of a body, but a process whereby regulatory norms materialize ‘sex’ and achieve this materialization through a forcible reiteration of those norms.”<sup>55</sup>

Within patriarchy, normative interpretations of a body’s sex, specifically of its sexual difference, are expressed in language. The expression materializes the differences, making them understandable by naming them. And it thereby creates a discourse compelling bodies to assume – to repeat and identify with – their binary sexes.<sup>56</sup> Butler thus completely dispenses with the body as an anchor for gender identity, revealing it “as already clothed, and nature’s surface as cultural invention.”<sup>57</sup>

Joanne Entwistle and Elizabeth Wilson state that just prior to Butler’s writings, “Interdisciplinarity [had] gained ground across the humanities and social sciences,” and scholars began to examine clothes from various “perspectives that have challenged the marginal place of fashion within traditional academic scholarship.”<sup>58</sup> No longer dismissing it as the frivolous and wasteful result of consumerist societies, they integrated fashion – the clothes that represent the aesthetic norms of a certain place and time – into art history, social history, philosophy, sociology, and social psychology.<sup>59</sup> Most germane, for its suggestion that feminine clothes play a central role in the performance of ‘woman’, is Kaja Silverman’s 1986 essay “Fragments of a Fashionable Discourse.” The film theorist and art historian explains that until the mid-eighteenth century, clothes primarily

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<sup>55</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 2.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 2-11, 28.

<sup>57</sup> Butler, “Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir’s *Second Sex*,” p. 49.

<sup>58</sup> Joanne Entwistle and Elizabeth Wilson, ed., introduction to *Body Dressing* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), p. 1.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

indicated class, as opposed to gender. Noblemen publicly displayed their prestigious life of leisure by wearing impractically voluminous pants and coats that, as signals of their wealth, were often more elaborate than noblewomen's dresses. According to Silverman, "in so far as clothing was marked by gender," the particular elaborateness of noblemen's clothes "defined visibility as a male rather than a female attribute."<sup>60</sup>

However, this changed in the latter half of the century with the commencement of the Industrial Revolution, first in Britain and then in the rest of Europe and North America. Drawing on Quentin Bell's book *On Human Finery* (1976), Silverman explains that now, as production thrived, the rising middle-class man could earn more working as a factory manager than the nobleman managing his family's assets. With work disassociated from privation, a man's leisure and his impractical clothes no longer signaled wealth and prestige. As Bell states, middle-class managers subtly distinguished themselves from factory labourers by putting on a "black coat, cylindrical hat, spotless linen, carefully rolled umbrella, and general air of refined discomfort," which signaled their relative gentility – a style and attitude that noblemen would also adopt.<sup>61</sup> Noble and middle-class women, therefore, became responsible for displaying their husbands' success in public; clothed elaborately, they became signs of male wealth and prestige, desirable specular objects.<sup>62</sup> Hence, visually uniting men, while dividing them from women, late-

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<sup>60</sup> Kaja Silverman, "Fragments of a Fashionable Discourse," in *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture*, ed. Tania Modleski (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 139.

<sup>61</sup> Quentin Bell, *On Human Finery* (London: Hogarth Press, 1976), p. 141.

<sup>62</sup> Silverman, "Fragments of a Fashionable Discourse," pp. 140, 147-148.

eighteenth-century fashion softened class differences and hardened gender ones.

Clothes now primarily indicated, or represented, a body's gender.

Explaining the consequences of the “Great Masculine Renunciation” for gender identity, Silverman states that men's clothes “subsequently settled into sobriety and rectitude” and remained “largely unchanged for two centuries.”<sup>63</sup> Their simple, lean cut continuously covered the male body in phallic verticality. Men's clothes thereby define the male body as sexually stable, projecting onto it the image of a singular, eroticized “genital zone.”<sup>64</sup> This aligns man's sexuality with the symbolic order, described by the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan in the 1940s and 1950s. Most simply, it is the pre-existing “system of meaning” – language, law, and interaction with subjects – that structures patriarchy,<sup>65</sup> in which individuals accept as children that having the phallus signifies domination and lacking it, subordination.<sup>66</sup> Conversely, women's clothes underwent perpetual changes. Through the first half of the twentieth century alone, they emphasized the breasts, waist, hips, and then the legs – exemplified in the shift from Dior's New-Look dress to Courrèges' and Quant's mini. Shifting from one “zone” to another, fashion eroticized the entire female body, rendering the exposure of any of its parts erotic. Women's clothes, then, define the female body as sexually unstable,

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 147.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Louise A. Hitchcock, *Theory for Classics: A Student's Guide* (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 157.

<sup>66</sup> Jacqueline Rose, ed. and trans., introduction to *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1982), pp. 40, 45, 49; Jacques Lacan, “The Meaning of the Phallus,” in *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne*, ed. and trans. Jacqueline Rose (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1982), pp. 74-85.

creating and recreating its sexuality through corporeal displays. For Silverman, these “endless transformations within female clothing construct female sexuality and subjectivity [or identity] in ways that are at least potentially disruptive, both of gender and of the symbolic order, which is predicated on continuity and coherence.”<sup>67</sup> That is, the female body’s sexual instability challenges the assumed essentialness of its gender identity, characterized by a subordinating femininity, by a lack. Thus, for women in particular, putting on feminine clothes is a defining act that normatively constructs their gender but simultaneously contains transgressive potential.<sup>68</sup>

### **Clothes make the woman: the dress form in women’s art, 1987 to 1998**

Alongside and directly following the rise of these gender and sartorial theories, dress-based art exploded. The art historians Nancy Spector and Nina Felshin suggest that the “new theoretical territory” motivated a large number of women artists to take up the form.<sup>69</sup> Artists such as Belmore, Messenger, Semmes, Dill, and Falk do not explicitly credit Butler or Silverman for initiating their work with dresses. But Susan Brownmiller, a best-selling writer and women’s rights activist, indicates that by the mid 1980s, the ideological seeds of performative gender identity and the central role of feminine clothes in the enactment of ‘woman’ were already in the air. In her 1984 book *Femininity*, she states that pants, specifically blue jeans, “became the emblem of hip sophistication” and a “feminist statement” in the early-to-mid 1970s – right before, as Schor suggested, the

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<sup>67</sup> Silverman, “Fragments of a Fashionable Discourse,” p. 148.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Nancy Spector, “Freudian ‘Slips’: Dressing the Ambiguous Body,” in *Art/Fashion*, ed. Germano Celant, et al., exh. cat. (New York: Distributed Art, 1997), quotation on p. 110; Nina Felshin, ed., introduction to “Women’s Work: A Lineage, 1966-94,” *Art Journal* 54, 1 (spring, 1995): p. 71.

dress form began opening generally to critical thought.<sup>70</sup> Shortly thereafter, the majority of women returned to wearing dresses, at least occasionally. According to Brownmiller, they missed adorning themselves, publicly displaying a flirtatiousness, and “the promised change in appearance that a new dress – and only a new dress – can hold ... Straight-legged pants are boring. One cannot take on a new identity by changing trousers.”<sup>71</sup>

Considering this, it follows that the work of Sterbak’s and Daley’s earliest peer, Rebecca Belmore, reunites the dress form and performance art; implicitly building on Youdelman’s use of costumes, she investigates the constructedness of her, as well as her people’s, gender and cultural identities. To create *Rising to the Occasion* (1987) (Figure 1.6), Belmore adorned a Victorian-style crinoline with a porcelain-saucer breastplate, suede-fringed epaulettes, floral embroidery, and beading. From its backside explodes a bustle, a tangle of branches and birch bark resembling a beaver dam but knitted with cheap trade goods and photographs of British royals. Above its shoulders hovers an inverted headdress – a feather and two braids that stick straight up in the air like antennas.<sup>72</sup> Wearing the dress, Belmore participated in *Twelve Angry Crinolines*. For the performance, organized by Lynne Sharman, she and eleven other Aboriginal women artists living in Thunder Bay paraded their interpretations of “angry crinolines” through

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<sup>70</sup> Brownmiller, *Femininity*, p. 55.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Allan Ryan, *The Trickster Shift: Humour and Irony in Contemporary Native Art* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1999), p. 211; Johanne Lamoureux, *Doubleures: vêtements de l’art contemporain*, exh. cat. (Québec: Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, 2003), p. 104.

the city. It coincided with an official, mid-summer visit by Prince Andrew and Lady Sarah Ferguson. Belmore explains why, stating that

it was discovered that the Queen Mother had five cousins who were mad, who were insane, and were locked away in an insane asylum ... And this woman [Sharman] ... was making the analogy that women artists suffer the same as the five cousins ... So it's [about] how difficult it is to be a woman artist in a man's world ... and the erasure of Native women's art history, [how] it's non-existent.<sup>73</sup>

She further explains that the beaver dam, a conglomeration of Canadian cultural codes, represents Canada, “a man's world.” And the braids of the headdress stick up “to signify the anger” that Aboriginal women artists feel at their exclusion from it.<sup>74</sup>

Separating the dress from Sharman's analogy, however, Jessica Bradley interprets Belmore's more personal intentions – to investigate, through performance and the dress form, “her people's struggles for their own identity.”<sup>75</sup> Quoting Marilyn Burgess's article “The Imagined Geographies of Rebecca Belmore,” Bradley states that when enacting her alter ego Trauma Mama, Belmore dresses up in kitschy pop-star clothes and becomes “a sort of postmodern crazed ‘warrior maiden’ who has shaken to her very bones the enduring image of the passive Indian princess ... She is loud and fighting mad.”<sup>76</sup> Similarly, as an “angry crinoline,” she clothed herself in the images stereotyping Aboriginal women as exotic others. By parading them through Thunder Bay and, since the dress's reconstruction in 1991, exhibiting them disembodied in a gallery space,

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<sup>73</sup> Ryan, *The Trickster Shift*, pp. 209, 211.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 211.

<sup>75</sup> Jessica Bradley, “Rebecca Belmore: Art and the Object of Performance,” in *Caught in the Act: An Anthology of Performance Art by Canadian Women*, ed. Tanya Mars and Johanna Householder (Toronto: YYZ Books, 2004), p. 124.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.

Belmore renders the stereotypes obvious and even humourous. She or a mannequin is literally burdened by them, exposing their constructedness by eliminating “any presumed naturalism.”<sup>77</sup> Through stereotypes as well – the photographed royals and tea saucers – Belmore revisits Canada’s colonial past; colonized by Britain, Canada subsequently colonized and marginalized the Aboriginal people, which arguably generated the country’s exoticizing and othering stereotypes.<sup>78</sup> With her work, Belmore presents a struggle: against a normative gender and cultural identity constructed by stereotypes that distort her people’s heritage, and for one constructed through her own multifarious existence as a woman, artist, Aboriginal person, Canadian, and member of the British Commonwealth.<sup>79</sup> Hence, the dress form – a cage-like crinoline whose rigidity and width have notoriously restricted women’s bodies, as in the New Look collection – emphasizes this struggle.

Although it underlies Belmore’s exploration, the constructedness of femininity is the focus of French artist Annette Messager’s sculptural series *Histoire des Robes/Story of Dresses*, begun in 1990 (Figure 1.7). Her empty thrift-store dresses, countless in number, are delicate – embellished with chiffon ruffles and lace overlays. In style and colour, they resemble a woman’s first communion, wedding, evening, and mourning dresses.<sup>80</sup> But onto them, Messager has pinned small tokens: watercolour paintings of

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 124.

<sup>78</sup> Renee Baert, *Margins of Memory: Rebecca Belmore, Marlene Creates, Sarindar Dhaliwal, Wyn Geleynse, Jan Peacock, Jin-me Yoon, Sharyn Yuen*, exh. cat. (Windsor: Art Gallery of Windsor, 1994), p. 7.

<sup>79</sup> Bradley, “Rebecca Belmore,” p. 124.

<sup>80</sup> Arnolfini Gallery, *Annette Messager: Telling Tales*, exh. cat. (Bristol: Arnolfini Gallery, 1992), p. 20.

hearts, a photograph of a clown, letters that spell out *promesse* (the French word for promise), ink drawings of bones, and depictions of torture.<sup>81</sup> She has encased each dress in a box; rectangular and made of wood and glass, they are a cross between coffins and museum display cases. According to Spector and Annette Hurtig, when installed together in groups, Messenger's works appear to represent the chapters in a woman's biography.<sup>82</sup> They delineate her life's movement through the traditional climaxes – entry into the church congregation, marriage and married life, widowhood and death – with the tokens representing her stories of happiness and grief in each.

However, considering Messenger's self-description, "I am the peddler of chimeras," Spector further interprets the works as "costumes that signify role-playing or play-acting. The 'story' of dresses that Messenger imparts is not, therefore, one woman's narrative, but rather, a tale of femininity as masquerade."<sup>83</sup> The French psychoanalyst Joan Rivière introduced this idea in her 1929 essay "Womanliness as a Masquerade." Rivière observed that after publicly displaying their intelligence, a number of successful women sought desirous attention from elderly men, father figures, in the audience; they behaved femininely, flirtatious and coquettish. From her observation, Rivière concluded that the women feared reprisal from these patriarchal leaders, whom they had metaphorically castrated or rendered impotent. The women's displays of intelligence had signaled their equality and potential superiority, so they unconsciously attempted to

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<sup>81</sup> Catherine Grenier, *Annette Messenger* (Paris: Flammarion, 2000), p. 130.

<sup>82</sup> Spector, "Freudian 'Slips'," p. 112; Annette Hurtig, "Annette Messenger: Making up Stories," in *Annette Messenger: Faire des Histoires/Making up Stories*, ed. Johanne Lamoureux and Hurtig, exh. cat. (Toronto: Mercer Union, 1991), p. 16.

<sup>83</sup> Spector, "Freudian 'Slips'," p. 112.

reassure the father figures that their success was an act, that ‘woman’ remained essentially subordinate.<sup>84</sup> While Butler’s writings suggested that this reveals womanliness or femininity as an act, Luce Irigaray, a contemporary French psychoanalyst and philosopher, explicitly supplements Rivière. In her book *This Sex which is not One* (1985), Irigaray theorizes that the masquerade is “what women do in order to recuperate some element of desire, to participate in man’s desire, but at the price of renouncing their own.”<sup>85</sup> As notes to the book further explain, it is an “alienated or false version of femininity arising from the woman’s awareness of the man’s desire for her to be his other,” that is, for her to be the object to his subject, acting as a mirror that reflects his subjectivity back to him; she thereby experiences desire “not in her own right” but through or as a reflection of his.<sup>86</sup> Messenger’s dress series exposes this masquerade. The forms’ costume-like emptiness, marked delicacy, and encasement combine to indicate that a woman’s femininity is constructed through her “alienated or false” enactment of the established biography; it subordinates her, sublimates her desire to man’s, but enables her participation in society, in patriarchy.

Though her work with dresses began alongside Messenger’s, American artist Beverly Semmes deepens the investigation. In her over-life-size, dress-sculpture installations, Semmes presents both a rejection of normatively constructed femininity and a gender identity bound by it. Large panels of richly coloured fabric sewn into simple,

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<sup>84</sup> Joan Rivière, “Womanliness as a Masquerade,” in *The Body*, ed. Tiffany Atkinson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 111-113.

<sup>85</sup> Luce Irigaray, *This Sex which is not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 133.

<sup>86</sup> Cornell University Press, “Publisher’s Note and Notes on Selected Terms,” in *This Sex which is not One*, by Luce Irigaray (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 220.

almost shapeless styles, Semmes' dresses hang flat against gallery walls, filling the spaces with their physical presence. In *Red Dress* (1992) and *Blue Gowns* (1993) (Figures 1.8 and 1.9), for example, the voluminous skirts fall down to the floor and form long pools of fabric.<sup>87</sup> And in *Big Silver* (1996) (Figures 1.10, 1.11, and 1.12), the dress mechanically rises up a wall and then descends into a crumpled heap; recalling a glittering curtain, it transforms the space into a stage for its disembodied performance.<sup>88</sup> Considering their size, an undeniably dominant feature, Spector again provides a useful reading: the dresses “embody the myth that woman’s appetite – sexual, intellectual, or material – would, if not restrained, expand to unimaginable proportions.”<sup>89</sup> She draws on Susan Stewart’s 1984 book *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collector*. Stewart argues that in literature and mythology, “the gigantic is viewed as a consuming force,” and she describes the giant Brobdingnagian women in Jonathan Swift’s novel *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726) as particularly repulsive to the protagonist because their bodies looked ever-ready to devour.<sup>90</sup> So, the women symbolized by Semmes’ dresses are similarly unrestrained, made monstrous because they reject femininity’s limitation of them.

Discussing the historical relationship between the constructedness of gender identities and architecture, Amada Cruz suggests another interpretation, particularly of

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<sup>87</sup> Russell Ferguson, “Familiar and Old – Established in the Mind,” in *Beverly Semmes*, exh. cat. (West Palm Beach: Norton Museum of Art, 1996), p. 13.

<sup>88</sup> Linda Muehlig, “Big Silver,” in *Beverly Semmes*, exh. cat. (West Palm Beach: Norton Museum of Art, 1996), p. 8.

<sup>89</sup> Spector, “Freudian ‘Slips’,” p. 109.

<sup>90</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collector* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), pp. 86-87.

the dresses' size. She explains that by analyzing Leon Battista Alberti's architectural recommendations for private homes in his fifteenth-century text *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, Mark Wigley found clear differences between the spaces for women and men. While the men's were close to the outdoors and designed for studying, Alberti recommended situating women's spaces deep within homes and designing them for dressing. According to Cruz, gendered architecture – spaces built to accommodate either women or men and to suit their traditional roles in the home – encouraged feminine subordination; it urged women to ignore their intelligence and potential contribution in the public sphere for bodily adornment.<sup>91</sup> Now, the dresses appear too big for the gallery spaces – their hanging and pooling fabric restrained, forced by the architecture to fall and pool. As Margo A. Crutchfield states, for Semmes, the large disembodied dress form symbolizes a strong “yet vulnerable woman,”<sup>92</sup> whose femininity is constructed as much by feminine norms as by a rejection of them.

In her many dress sculptures, Lesley Dill has explored the effects of two international epidemics on women, HIV/AIDS and domestic violence,<sup>93</sup> as well as race, religion, and spiritual transcendence.<sup>94</sup> At the same time, however, Dill's dresses investigate the construction of what she terms “a different femininity,” which links her

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<sup>91</sup> Amada Cruz, *Options 50: Beverly Semmes*, exh. cat. (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1995), n.p.

<sup>92</sup> Margo A. Crutchfield, “The Presence of Absence,” in *Beverly Semmes*, exh. cat. (West Palm Beach: Norton Museum of Art, 1996), p. 17.

<sup>93</sup> Lesley Dill, “Lesley Dill,” in “Women's Work: A Lineage, 1966-94,” ed. Nina Felshin, *Art Journal* 54, 1 (spring, 1995): p. 84.

<sup>94</sup> Sean M. Ulmer, *Uncommon Threads: Contemporary Artists and Clothing*, exh. cat. (Ithaca: Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, 2000), p. 16; Lesley Dill, “Lesley Dill,” in *Empty Dress: Clothing as Surrogate in Recent Art*, ed. Nina Felshin, exh. cat. (New York: Independent Curators Incorporated, 1993), p. 26.

work with the form to that of Semmes, a fellow American.<sup>95</sup> Living in India in 1990, Dill “became aware” of this femininity, explaining that “All the women dressed in beautiful vibrant fabrics. Whether working at paved roads, or practicing medicine or law, all were clothed with draped or skirted fabric ... I feel this combination of femaleness and strength was extremely influential.”<sup>96</sup> The Indian women whom Dill observed worked in professions often associated in the West with either physical or mental strength and, therefore, with men. Rather than wear masculine-looking clothes to signal their equality as Western women have done, especially since the 1980s with the power suit, these women continued wearing distinctly feminine fabrics. Dill literally creates a kind of strong femininity with her dresses, most notably with the mixed-media *White Hinged Poem Dress* (1992) (Figure 1.13) and *Hinged Copper Poem Dress #3* (1997). They resemble empty, floor-length evening gowns, which balance precariously on the edge of their hems. Into the dresses, Dill has cut lines from poems by Emily Dickinson. When viewed with the hinges closed and the dress forms whole, the lines are difficult to read; they wrap around the dresses and disappear onto the back side. But when opened, breaking the forms, the poems are easily legible; the lines move from left to right.<sup>97</sup> Connecting, like Schor, dresses with writing, Dill’s sculptures either obscure the form of the dress or the meaning of the words.

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<sup>95</sup> Dede Young, “The Gesture of an Open Hand: Dede Young and Lesley Dill in Conversation September 2006,” in *Lesley Dill: Tremendous World*, exh. cat. (Purchase: Neuberger Museum of Art, 2007), p. 24.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> Dill, “Lesley Dill,” in *Empty Dress*, p. 26.

Julie Nicoletta states that “For Lacan the patriarchal framework of language provides the key to sexual difference. Language divides male from female, placing the male in a dominant position.”<sup>98</sup> More specifically, because it is part of it, language expresses the symbolic order; so, as Butler suggested, the act of writing or speaking simultaneously articulates the meaning of the words and the “system of meaning” that subordinates women.<sup>99</sup> The style and installation of Dill’s dresses appear to represent their delicate, subordinating femininity, but the poems infuse the forms with strength. Because she renders the poems’ words meaningless unless the dress form is obscured, Dill upsets the traditional, masculine dominance that language has held over ‘woman’. Furthering this are the words themselves. They present Dickinson’s acute intellect and insightfulness, which have made her seminal in the male-dominated genre of American late-Romantic poetry.<sup>100</sup> Dickinson’s poems clothe the dresses in what Dill describes as a “spiritual armor,” forming a “sheath of emotion that protects the inner [albeit invisible] body, a skin of words.”<sup>101</sup> Thus, with the dress form, Dill subversively suggests that femininity’s constructedness allows for the possibility of a reconstruction, in which “femaleness and strength” may coexist.

While contemporaneous, Gathie Falk’s dress works markedly avoid such subversion; they expose, without challenging, her own constructed femininity. Inspired

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<sup>98</sup> Julie Nicoletta, “Louise Bourgeois’s *Femme-Maisons*: Confronting Lacan,” *Woman’s Art Journal* 13, 2 (autumn, 1992-winter, 1993): p. 21.

<sup>99</sup> Cora Kaplan, “Language and Gender,” in *The Feminist Critique of Language*, ed. Deborah Cameron (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 57.

<sup>100</sup> Margaret Drabble, ed., *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 274.

<sup>101</sup> Ulmer, *Uncommon Threads*, p. 16.

by a vision, the Canadian artist created a series of six dress sculptures between 1997 and 1998 (Figure 1.14). Although well-known for her small ceramic works, including pieces of clothing – for example, *Single Right Men’s Shoes: Eight Red Boots* (1973) – Falk envisioned the dresses as life size, necessitating a lighter material; she chose *papier-mâché*. As she sculpted them in layers of newspaper and liquid cellulose, each of the dresses took on a prim but distinct style, with varying collars and sleeves.<sup>102</sup> Onto all of them, however, Falk formed the “relief traces” of a woman’s barely protruding breasts and slightly curved waist, and into all of their front hems, she built platforms.<sup>103</sup> These display a photograph of a woman’s crossed ankles, another of a boy, toy-like singing birds, a box of dead insects, lit candles, or cosmetics.

Falk exhibited the dress series at her solo exhibition *Traces*, organized by Vancouver’s Equinox Gallery in 1998. According to Robin Laurence, filled with work imaging women’s body parts, poses, and adornment,

*Traces* is a meditation on femininity. Although in a visual sense Falk is deconstructing notions of gender conditioning, she is not critiquing the social or cultural production of the feminine. Instead, she is examining, with candour, affection and a little skepticism, aspects of her own life, her own feminine being.<sup>104</sup>

What aspects of her life is Falk examining with the series? All of its dresses, with their vague but readable breasts and curves, imply that a woman’s body has only recently taken them off; as a result, they trace a sense of loss and longing. Laurence interprets this

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<sup>102</sup> Josée Drouin-Brisebois, “Gathie Falk,” in *Treasures of The National Gallery of Canada*, ed. David Franklin (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 2003), p. 220.

<sup>103</sup> Robin Laurence, “To be a Pilgrim,” in *Gathie Falk*, exh. cat. (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2000), p. 126.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 126, 130.

in the dresses displaying the boy, birds, insects, and candles as Falk's "quiet mourning over a condition of childlessness."<sup>105</sup> While such an interpretation is perhaps biographically sound, the series' two other dresses trace a different and arguably unintended aspect. Their emptiness – juxtaposed with the real physical presence of the makeup tubes, the prim style, and traditional crossed-ankle pose – reveals that normative femininity lies more essentially in these things than in women. In women, it is constructed.

It appears evident that Western dress-based art exploded in the mid 1980s and through the 1990s because a sequence of artistic and theoretical developments led, directly or indirectly, numerous women artists to take up the form. While atypical in their time, the earlier artists Smith, Youdelman, and Schor demonstrated the dress's usefulness for a feminist exploration of women – of their shared, everyday experiences in patriarchy. As Felshin states, they thereby established a "formal precedent."<sup>106</sup> Butler's subsequent theory of performative gender identity and Silverman's of the central role played by clothes in its enactment together suggested the possibility of alternative genders and the particular instability of 'woman'. In addition, as Brownmiller indicated, the power of feminine clothes, and specifically dresses, to help construct women's characteristic and subordinating femininity had already begun to root itself in their collective consciousness. All of this combined to create a moment in which the dress form, opened to critical thought, strikingly represented second-wave feminist concerns. The five artists whose work I have considered as exemplifying the consequent explosion

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., p. 130.

<sup>106</sup> Felshin, ed., introduction to "Women's Work," p. 71.

all share a common thread: with dresses, they investigated femininity's constructedness. Even so, their use of the form is subtly but noticeably varied in its results. Belmore, Messenger, and Falk expose the construction of 'woman' by denaturalizing stereotypes, plotting out women's pre-established lives, and visually emphasizing that femininity is essential only outside of them, respectively. Delving deeper, Semmes and Dill challenge femininity, revealing an alternative to its normative construction by coupling it with strength. Contextualized within this lineage, Sterbak's contribution to dress-based art starts to become clear. Compared to that of her peers, her work with the form delves even deeper, closer to what Butler, as well as Silverman, transgressively theorized is possible – a more complete or powerful destabilization of the meaning of femininity, what it means to be feminine.

## Chapter Two

### Jana Sterbak: The Dress Form and Power

Between 1984 and 1993, Jana Sterbak created an unofficial series of installations and sculptures, all using, or at least strongly evoking, the same basic form: the dress. As evidenced throughout her diverse oeuvre, Sterbak is a conceptual artist. Each work emerges from her experiences – plays she sees, observations she makes, feelings or thoughts she has – and she employs the forms, as well as the media, that most fully express them.<sup>1</sup> While this connects her work to that of the early women artists who took up the dress form to express shared or everyday experiences in patriarchal society, Sterbak states that she is not influenced by feminist, or any other, theory. She consciously avoids “reductivism” – the reduction of her works to a specific theoretical model and, therefore, theoretical interpretation – deliberately leaving her meanings unfixed.<sup>2</sup> Sterbak’s mistrust of theory may result from her Czechoslovakian roots. Czech culture has tended to view all authority, political or academic, with suspicion; this attitude appears in the writings of its most prominent authors – Karel Capek, Franz Kafka, Jaroslav Hasek – whom Sterbak read after immigrating to Canada.<sup>3</sup> Her deliberately unfixed meanings, then, allow for numerous readings of her work, including her dresses. Significantly, Sterbak’s oeuvre contains many works using disembodied or unwearable clothing forms in general – for example, the two pairs of women’s ballet slippers in *Plasticine Shoes* (1979) and the man’s military jacket with conjoined sleeves

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<sup>1</sup> Jana Sterbak, “Artist Text,” in *The Impossible Self*, ed. Bruce W. Ferguson and Sandy Nairne, exh. cat. (Winnipeg: Winnipeg Art Gallery, 1988), p. 70.

<sup>2</sup> Cindy Richmond, ed., “On the Surface of the Self,” in *Jana Sterbak*, exh. cat. (Regina: Mackenzie Art Gallery, 1989), p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Diana Nemiroff, “States of Being,” in *Jana Sterbak: States of Being*, exh. cat. (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1991), pp. 14-15.

in *Vest* (1992). As Richard Noble suggests, with these forms, Sterbak is “recalling us to our bodies,” to both the metaphysical and physical presence of human beings.<sup>4</sup> Also significantly, Sterbak states that she intentionally employs recognizable rather than abstract forms. “They are not only functional, but symbolic ... ageless in their relevance.”<sup>5</sup>

Employing the dress, Sterbak recalls viewers to women’s bodies, which invites, despite her mistrust of theory, feminist interpretations. More specifically, as indicated by the work of her peers, the form typically symbolizes or represents women’s normatively constructed gender identity, ‘woman’, characterized by a subordinating femininity. But simultaneously, Sterbak’s dresses symbolize what maintains this femininity: patriarchy’s covert, controlling power over ‘woman’. To explain, the feminist philosopher Susan Bordo draws on “The Eye of Power,” a 1974 essay by the French historian and philosopher Michel Foucault. She states that “in the realm of femininity, where so much depends on the seemingly willing acceptance of various norms ... we need an analysis of power ‘from below’.”<sup>6</sup> Unlike a sovereign’s overt power from above, it is not exercised through physical violence but through an “inspecting gaze.”<sup>7</sup> Foucault writes that the modern prison’s panopticon – the central tower whose windowed eye forces inmates to

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Noble, “Chaos and Self-Creation in the Art of Jana Sterbak,” *Parkett* 35 (1993): p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> Jana Sterbak, “The Conceptual Object: Interview with Jana Sterbak,” in *Jana Sterbak: The Conceptual Object*, ed. Bera Nordal, exh. cat. (Malmö: Malmö Konsthall, 2002), p. 91.

<sup>6</sup> Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 167.

<sup>7</sup> Michel Foucault, “The Eye of Power,” in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. and trans. Colin Gordon (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1980), p. 155.

assume that they are perpetually watched – is a metaphor for such a gaze. Each inmate internalizes its watchfulness “to the point that he is his own overseer,” exercising surveillance “over, and against, himself.”<sup>8</sup> Similarly, patriarchal society maintains restraining feminine norms through women’s self-surveillance, markedly recalling Judith Butler’s regulatory “cultural fictions.”<sup>9</sup> The following examination of *I Want You to Feel the Way I Do ... (The Dress)*, *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic*, *Remote Control I and II*, and *Chemise de Nuit* expounds a particular reading of Sterbak’s dress-based art. Uniting the form with a deeply transgressive emotion, material, performance, or ambiguity, Sterbak strips femininity down to patriarchy’s power “from below,” that is, to women’s self-surveillance. She symbolically destabilizes femininity at its core and, ultimately, proposes an empowering redefinition of what it means to be a woman.

**The power of electric emotion: *I Want You to Feel the Way I Do ... (The Dress)* (1984-1985)**

Jana Sterbak’s first dress, central to her installation *I Want You to Feel the Way I Do ... (The Dress)* (Figure 2.1), is primarily composed of steel mesh. Balancing on its floor-length hem, it stands upright, with its arms outstretched. Around its torso circles an uncoated nickel-chrome wire, which thick black cables connect to two electrical outlets in the wall. Sterbak displays the dress in a small, dark room whose entrance is equipped with an invisible “electronic eye” or motion detector.<sup>10</sup> As viewers enter, the “eye” activates the wire; it begins to glow a bright orange, the electrical current building in intensity until it emits heat perceptible to those nearby. Shortly thereafter, the wire turns

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” *Theatre Journal* 40, 4 (Dec., 1988): p. 522.

<sup>10</sup> Marni Jackson, “The Body Electric,” *Canadian Art* 6, 1 (1989): p. 66.

off and cools, activating again only when the “eye” detects another entrant into the room. During this cycle of heating up and cooling off, a slide-projected text illuminates a wall near the dress. Vitriolic in tone, it reads:

I want you to feel the way I do: There’s barbed 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.<sup>11</sup>

In a written statement for the 1988 group exhibition *The Impossible Self*, Sterbak explains what inspired the installation, giving meaning to these apparently incongruent parts: Euripides’ *Medea*. Just prior to creating it, she had seen the ancient Greek tragedy and noted the power of its title character.<sup>12</sup> The play begins as Medea learns that her husband, the heroic mortal Jason, is divorcing her for the princess of Corinth. Although lawful, his betrayal of their marriage oath consumes Medea with rage. After falling in love with him, the semi-divine sorceress had helped Jason win the coveted Golden Fleece from her father, the king of Colchis, and killed her brother in the process. Offered marriage as a reward, Medea had renounced her Colchian citizenship and fled with Jason to Corinth, where she became his dutiful wife and the mother of his two sons.<sup>13</sup> As Michael Collier and Georgia Machemer state in their introduction to the play, the oath – a

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<sup>11</sup> Nemiroff, “States of Being,” p. 26.

<sup>12</sup> Sterbak, “Artist Text,” in *The Impossible Self*, p. 65.

<sup>13</sup> Euripides, *Medea*, trans. Michael Collier and Georgia Machemer, ed. Peter Burian and Alan Shapiro (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 37, 51-52.

result of Medea's and Jason's love and appreciation for each other – “could not be deemed a mere alliance between two families, but something more electric, a blood pact between fellow conspirators.”<sup>14</sup> It follows, then, that Medea devised a revengeful plan; she would destroy Jason, make him feel her pain for the rest of his life, by destroying his potential and existing lineage. She sent the princess deadly wedding gifts, most notably a beautiful but poisoned dress that burned the flesh from her body. Subsequently, she stabbed her and Jason's sons, escaping punishment for the murders by flying to Athens in a god-sent chariot.<sup>15</sup>

*Medea* had disturbed its first audience – primarily men, viewing it on the Acropolis in 431 B.C.E. – but not because the title character transgressed moral boundaries. The Athenians understood oath-breaking as a serious affront to the gods, if not to the law, hence Medea's divine escape. Rather, what the audience likely found disturbing was her empowered transgression of normatively constructed gender identities.<sup>16</sup> Ancient Greek society idealized modest and reserved women, characterizing femininity as the restraint of their gender's essential irrationality.<sup>17</sup> Such women could quietly endure a husband's betrayal or, finding it intolerably shameful, commit suicide. Although she performed femininity while married, Medea fully embodies her power as a woman of the dark arts when she learns of the divorce. She acts excessively, without modesty and reserve. Medea “becomes totally resistant to moderation, indifferent to the

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<sup>14</sup> Michael Collier and Georgia Machemer, trans., introduction to *Medea*, by Euripides, ed. Peter Burian and Alan Shapiro (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 28.

<sup>15</sup> Euripides, *Medea*, pp. 74, 79.

<sup>16</sup> Collier and Machemer, trans., introduction to *Medea*, pp. 4, 24, 29.

<sup>17</sup> Sarah B. Pomeroy, et al., *Ancient Greece: A Political, Social, and Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 102.

propriety of her actions, incapable of bowing to the will of her betters, much less of her equals.”<sup>18</sup> With this, she not only throws off feminine norms, but also puts on characteristics of traditional masculinity. As Helene P. Foley explains, “No woman in tragedy – none of all those who take revenge – models her self-image [or identity] so explicitly on a masculine heroic and even military model.”<sup>19</sup> So, like a masculine hero, Medea violently avenged a betrayal.

When examined with them in mind, *I Want You to Feel the Way I Do* reiterates much of the play’s plot and historical context. The dress’s live-wire torso – heating up, cooling off – parallels the rage burning inside Medea and its quenching with revenge, as well as the princess’s fiery death. Similarly, the outstretched arms gesture a hostile challenge, a dare for confrontation, and one last wave for help. Equally important is the dress form itself. While it generally suggests that both of these women are central to the installation, its style and material relate specifically to Medea. Its modest, reserved cut, with a close crewneck and full-length sleeves, combines with the cage-like steel mesh to emphasize the restraint imposed on her by femininity. And the dress’s emptiness, made all the more obvious by its transparency, evokes Medea’s transgression, her refusal to remain restrained. Read cursorily, the text – a dialogue of desire and hate – annotates all of this. In particular, the first paragraph begins by alluding to Medea’s revenge. She wants Jason to feel the pain that he inflicted on her; becoming like him, she slips under his skin, relieving her pain by passing it on to him.

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<sup>18</sup> Collier and Macheimer, trans., introduction to *Medea*, p. 15.

<sup>19</sup> Helene P. Foley, *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 260.

Even so, removed from narrative and contextual details, a more subversive comparison between Euripides' *Medea* and Sterbak's installation emerges: both explore a woman's quest for empowerment, for an escape from patriarchal society's subordinating characterization of femininity. According to Nancy Spector, who compares the play and the work in her article "Flesh and Bones," Medea's excessive actions imply the collapse of patriarchy itself. Spector states that "To achieve empowerment through excess – through a Dionysian abandonment of all restraint, through a celebration of chaos – is to exist in, or at least to conjure, a realm of utter transgression."<sup>20</sup> Georges Bataille describes such a realm as the *informe* or formless.<sup>21</sup> In his 1929 "Critical Dictionary," the French theorist and unofficial Surrealist writes that "A dictionary begins when it no longer gives the meaning of words, but their tasks. Thus *formless* is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down in the world."<sup>22</sup> Though its task is inherently indefinable, Bataille indicates that the *informe* brings "things down" to one horizontal level, to both everything and nothing or meaninglessness. It collapses established binary hierarchies: for instance, men over women, masculinity over femininity, subject over object. As a result, it collapses the symbolic order, the "system of meaning" structuring patriarchy that is founded on these hierarchies.<sup>23</sup> Throwing off femininity and putting on masculinity – more precisely, notable characteristics ascribed to them – Medea arguably demonstrates her existence in

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<sup>20</sup> Nancy Spector, "Flesh and Bones," *Artforum* (Mar., 1992): p. 99.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Georges Bataille, "Formless," in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. and trans. Allan Stoekl, et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 31.

<sup>23</sup> Louise A. Hitchcock, *Theory for Classics: A Student's Guide* (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 157.

the *informe*; here, gender norms become meaningless and, therefore, powerless to restrain her, to restrain her sorcery. She thus ceased self-surveillance and utterly transgressed or transcended the meaning of ‘woman’ in ancient Greece, empowering herself as “absolute excess, desire, and madness”<sup>24</sup> as she flew from Athens.<sup>25</sup>

Considering this, it appears that the unnamed, universal woman represented by the dress and text of *I Want You to Feel the Way I Do* conjures a kind of alternative realm, too. She draws viewers into her small, dark room – seemingly set off from contemporary patriarchal society – and creates a physical and psychological connection with them, which the installation’s title initiates. It mentions nothing about Medea, Jason, or his princess but refers to the intense desire for understanding that underlies the play. Through its perceptible heating up and cooling off, the dress expresses such a desire to viewers, literally making them feel the way that it does. Its restraining yet neutral, timeless style and obvious emptiness further the connection. Without distinguishing features to classify its cut as from the past or a body wearing it, the dress encourages viewers, particularly women, to envision themselves within it.<sup>26</sup> In doing so, they may empathize with and experience as their own the pain and rage in the text. However, simultaneously, the text speaks to viewers, drawing them even further into the realm. Written in the first person, it acts as the woman’s voice, addressing viewers as “you” and positioning them as the present-day Jason or betrayer. The text’s first paragraph, though removed from the details of *Medea*, still describes a hateful desire to

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<sup>24</sup> Spector, “Flesh and Bones,” p. 99.

<sup>25</sup> Foley, *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy*, p. 266.

<sup>26</sup> Johanne Lamoureux, “Body Doubles/The Sartorial Bond,” in *Doublures: vêtements de l’art contemporain*, exh. cat. (Québec: Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, 2003), p. 106.

unite with him, to pass on painful feelings. And the lines opening the second paragraph suggest the woman's success: "Now I have your attitude and you're not comfortable anymore. Making them yours you relived me of my opinions, habits, impulses." Admittedly, she should feel satisfied; but remaining inside the betrayer and under his control, she feels irritated instead.<sup>27</sup> So, the woman will remove herself and "practice being new on someone else."

Although vague, this last line recalls the subject-object dialectic indirectly described by Simone de Beauvoir, as well as Luce Irigaray, indicating that the unnamed, universal woman does empower herself but to a different degree than Medea. In patriarchy, the subject, traditionally the man, becomes so because he actively negates the subjectivity of the object, traditionally the woman. That is, he practices his subjectivity on her and renders her an object, his opposite.<sup>28</sup> Removing herself from the betrayer's body, the unnamed, universal woman asserts her subjectivity similarly. She will become "new" by objectifying "someone else," another man. The woman thereby inverts the binary hierarchies that structure patriarchal society, which may appear possible to viewers drawn into her alternative realm. The realm, however, is not that of the *informe*; existing in it would impossibly require these viewers to make meaningless all meaning ascribed in the symbolic order. Because binarism itself cannot collapse, the woman, unlike Medea, remains dependent on the object; the dominant depends on the subordinate, the woman on the man, to construct her gender identity. As a result, she

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<sup>27</sup> Jessica Bradley, "Jana Sterbak: Objects as Sensations," in *Jana Sterbak*, ed. Cindy Richmond, exh. cat. (Regina: Mackenzie Art Gallery, 1989), p. 45.

<sup>28</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H.M. Parshley (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953; repr. 1968), p. 280.

cannot utterly transgress restraining feminine norms and, therefore, self-surveillance.

Nevertheless, through the electric emotion of *I Want You to Feel the Way I Do ... (The Dress)*, Sterbak invokes the mythological Medea to destabilize the controlling power of patriarchy's binary, hierarchal structure over 'woman'.

**The power of meat: *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic (1987)***

For her next dress work, Sterbak turned from the electric to the organic. *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic* (Figures 2.2 and 2.3) – the notorious sculpture that shot Sterbak to international fame in the art world and popular culture – consists of fifty to sixty pounds of raw flank steak. A video recorded for the 1991 retrospective exhibition *Jana Sterbak: States of Being* at the National Gallery of Canada chronicles its assembly. Sterbak and National Gallery conservators pound the pieces of meat flat with mallets and cover them in salt. Like seamstresses, the conservators then sew the pieces together with needles and black thread, forming a calf-length sheath.<sup>29</sup> The dress is either installed on a freestanding dressmaker's dummy or suspended from the ceiling on a furrier's hanger, its torso supported by a wire-mesh body. Displayed for approximately six weeks at a time, the salted meat gradually cures, transforming from supple red flesh to withered brown jerky. As it transforms, juices drip from the dress's hemline, and the distinct smell of decay fills the surrounding air.<sup>30</sup> The dress also shrinks – conforming to and, when the meat has withered, contorting the hourglass shape of the dummy or wire

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<sup>29</sup> National Gallery of Canada, *Vanitas [videorecording]: flesh dress for an albino anorectic*, Exh. Records, *Jana Sterbak: States of Being*, EX 1795, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, NGC Fonds.

<sup>30</sup> Bradley, "Jana Sterbak," p. 46.

body.<sup>31</sup> Exhibited alongside the dress is a colour photograph of a woman modelling it. Young, thin, and beautiful, she stands or sits gracefully on the floor, as if posing for a fashion shoot. Her smooth pale skin, which recalls the albino colouring referenced in the title, is juxtaposed with the fibrous meat; this accentuates the vicerality of the material and, as the displayed dress decays, of the ageing process.

According to Sterbak, her active social life in New York City, on the cusp of her thirtieth birthday, inspired the dress. She states that “It was a period when I was going out a lot ... and I thought about the emphasis placed on physical attractiveness, on the way my friends and I would use phrases such as ‘treated like a piece of meat, or my flesh is rotting’.”<sup>32</sup> It follows, then, that the dress’s primary title is the Latin word for vanity, as well as a synonym for the art historical term *memento mori*. Both describe works, typically paintings and sculptures from the Middle Ages or the Renaissance, that depict decay. Their artists intended to remind viewers of the continuous passage of time, the ephemeral nature of worldly possessions, and the inevitability of death.<sup>33</sup> In the Renaissance – with interest in the classical, ideally proportioned body resurging – many artists employed allegorical images: watches, rotting fruit, dead flowers, human skulls. However, there is evidence that in the Middle Ages, they used markedly more literal imagery. For example, the German artist Gregor Erhart’s small-scale sculpture *Vanitas* (c. 1500) depicts a beautiful young couple on one side, and on the other, a decrepit old

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<sup>31</sup> Jennifer McLerran, “Disciplined Subjects and Docile Bodies in the Work of Contemporary Artist Jana Sterbak,” *Feminist Studies* 24, 3 (autumn, 1998): p. 537.

<sup>32</sup> Nancy Baele, “Post-war Czech childhood exerts powerful influence on sculptor’s work,” *Ottawa Citizen*, March 17, 1991, Exh. Doc., Jana Sterbak: States of Being, EX 1795, Documentation February 12-April 4, 1991, Book 1, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, NGC Fonds.

<sup>33</sup> Bradley, “Jana Sterbak,” p. 46.

hag.<sup>34</sup> Chosen for its resemblance to human flesh, Sterbak's material most closely connects the dress to this *vanitas*, albeit pushing further with real as opposed to imaged decay.<sup>35</sup> It mocks the futility of emphasizing "physical attractiveness," which the dress form indicates preoccupies 'woman' in particular. Although the beauty industry has increasingly advertised dietary regimes, fitness programs, cosmetic products, and surgeries in the mass media that claim the contrary, women's bodies decay – through the ageing process and in death – as inevitably as the meat.

The Medieval *vanitas* not only communicated the idea of ageing, death, and decay, but also that of "rebirth, transcendence of the body, and ascension to a spiritual realm."<sup>36</sup> It thereby implies the Greco-Christian bifurcation of human existence into body and soul. The ancient Greek philosopher Plato and the Christian theologian Saint Augustine describe the body – irrationality, passion, materiality – as imprisoning the soul – rationality, intellect, spirituality.<sup>37</sup> Significantly, Caroline Walker Bynum explains that through the early and later Middle Ages, "*male* and *female* were contrasted and asymmetrically valued as soul and body. Such values suggested that men were like God in a sense that women could never achieve, that women ought to sluff off femaleness in rising to meet the divine."<sup>38</sup> Acknowledging the hierarchal binary, either consciously or unconsciously, ascetic women sloughed off their "femaleness" by subordinating their

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<sup>34</sup> Nemiroff, "States of Being," p. 31.

<sup>35</sup> Diana Nemiroff, "Statement on Jana Sterbak's Flesh Dress," April 9, 1991, Personal Files of Nemiroff, Ottawa, Ont.

<sup>36</sup> McLerran, "Disciplined Subjects and Docile Bodies," p. 540.

<sup>37</sup> Susan Bordo, "Anorexia Nervosa: Psychopathology as the Crystallization of Culture," in *Toward a New Psychology of Gender*, ed. Mary M. Gergen and Sara N. Davis (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 428-429.

<sup>38</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), pp. 177-178.

bodies to the power of their souls. Much more than men, they flogged and sickened themselves, as well as fasted, all of which later-Medieval writers have interpreted as cultivating maleness, masculine rationality.<sup>39</sup>

Sterbak incorporates this understanding of women's bodies ironically into *Vanitas*. In the photograph, the model wears her fleshy femininity; it restrains her, weighs her down. Worn by the dummy or the hanger's wire body, however, the dress appears to represent the ascetic woman's spiritual ascension, begun in life and completed in death. When fresh, its red rawness and dripping juices recall her bloody, flogged body. And when withered, its contortions recall her sick and starving one. At the same time, the decaying meat evokes her body's death and her soul's escape from imprisonment. Sterbak's flesh dress, then, turns the ascetic inside out – presenting her internal, masculine power to control her body and her consequent rise to a divine formlessness, the ultimate corporeal transcendence.

Attempting to rise towards a similar transcendence, to escape feelings of powerlessness in contemporary patriarchal society, is the anorexic woman. According to Susan Bordo, she too acknowledges, takes in, the body-soul binary that subordinates her.<sup>40</sup> Having studied eating disorders for over two decades, Bordo explains that anorexia emerged in the West's upper-middle class as early as the nineteenth century. In the late 1970s and through the 1980s, its incidence rose dramatically and almost exclusively in women.<sup>41</sup> Bordo attributes this to a shift in feminine norms, which began teaching women to simultaneously embody traditional femininity and masculinity. In accordance

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid, pp. 172-173, 178.

<sup>40</sup> Bordo, "Anorexia Nervosa," p. 431.

<sup>41</sup> Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, p. 168.

with the former, patriarchy continued pushing women into domesticity, to nurture their husbands and children in the home. Women learned “to feed others, not the self, and to construe any desires for self-nurturance and self-feeding as greedy.”<sup>42</sup> But because they had established themselves as an equal part of it, these women now also learned to embody the labour force’s masculine characteristics or values: determination, discipline, and control. Interestingly, the dietary regimes and exercise programs encouraged as normal behaviour in women require both limited “self-feeding” and vast control. So, Bordo states that in “the pursuit of slenderness and the denial of appetite,” traditional femininity “intersects with the new requirement for women to embody the ‘masculine’ values” of the public sphere.<sup>43</sup>

Inside the anorexic woman’s body, these two gender identities are constantly embattled. Disdaining it, she attempts to starve her femininity to death – to primarily embody masculinity – by enacting women’s normal behaviour abnormally. The anorectic diets and exercises to excess. Because it is starving, her body consumes the fleshiness of her breasts and hips, halting her menstruation. She neither looks on the outside nor functions on the inside like a woman; and consequently, she feels empowered. Controlling her body so fully by learning to ignore its needs, the anorectic feels that she has become as masculine, or as disconnected from the body and connected to the soul, as any man.<sup>44</sup> Through her excessiveness, she “deconstructs” her femininity into its opposite, into the values characterized as masculine.<sup>45</sup> But resembling Sterbak’s

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 171.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 173.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 207.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 179.

unknown, universal woman in *I Want You to Feel the Way I Do* more than Euripides' Medea, the anorectic's empowerment is illusory. Although she appears to have transcended her body, she continues to exist in patriarchal society. As Bordo explains, "To reshape one's body into a male body is *not* to put on male power and privilege. To *feel* autonomous and free while harnessing body and soul to an obsessive body-practice is to serve, not transform, a social order that limits female possibilities."<sup>46</sup>

In the end, the anorectic reinforces the body-soul binary. She utterly imprisons or restrains herself within normatively constructed femininity and, consequently, self-surveillance. Hence, *Vanitas* evokes the anorexic woman's illusory power and real powerlessness. With its decay, Sterbak creates an oscillation between these states – turning the anorectic's body, like the ascetic's, inside out to display her internal battle for control. The fresh, supple meat vulnerably sags and tears under its own weight; but by withering, it hardens into a kind of armor. The anorectic interprets her withered body similarly, as her armor against subordination. Even so, she is simultaneously shrinking.<sup>47</sup> Recalling the curing meat, she occupies less and less space, becoming the literal embodiment of the weak, insubstantial woman.

The dress generated substantial controversy, however, when exhibited in *States of Being*. According to newspaper articles and an unpublished essay by the exhibition's curator, Diana Nemiroff, the controversy centered around waste. As Nemiroff states, it began with Maxine Robert Bédard's letter to the editor, printed in the *Ottawa Citizen* on

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Spector, "Flesh and Bones," p. 98.

March 30.<sup>48</sup> The letter claimed that Sterbak had insensitively wasted meat in an economic recession, “when people down the street [from the National Gallery] are lining up at the soup kitchen.”<sup>49</sup> *Ottawa Sun* reporter Jan Louder further developed this claim the following day. She asked spokesmen for local homeless shelters their opinion of the dress, and wrote that after hearing of it, they were “shocked and outraged” at the waste.<sup>50</sup> Shortly thereafter, Members of Parliament similarly condemned it, most notably the chairman of the Culture Committee, Felix Holtmann. Finding that the National Gallery, rather than Sterbak, had paid approximately three hundred dollars for the meat, he led an unsuccessful call for punitive budget cuts.<sup>51</sup> Leading the response, written statements by Nemiroff and Sterbak herself, as well as still more newspaper articles, publicly explained the controversy’s nonsensicality. As *Ottawa Citizen* staff writer Jay Stone summarizes, “You might as well argue that all the paint in some gargantuan Frank Stella work could be put to better use on the peeling walls of an orphanage.”<sup>52</sup>

Nevertheless, the sculpture had so acutely upset the public that the controversy continued well into the spring. Perhaps bureaucratic Ottawa was more ignorant of *avant-*

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<sup>48</sup> Diana Nemiroff, “Food for Thought: Jana Sterbak’s ‘Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic’ and the National Gallery of Canada,” Personal Files of Nemiroff, Ottawa, Ont., p. 1.

<sup>49</sup> Maxine Robert Bédard, “Meat is the Issue,” *Ottawa Citizen*, March 30, 1991, Exh. Doc., Jana Sterbak: States of Being, EX 1795, Documentation February 12-April 4, 1991, Book 1, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, NGC Fonds.

<sup>50</sup> Jan Louder, “Beef Dress Cooks up Criticism,” *Ottawa Sun*, March 31, 1991, Exh. Doc., Jana Sterbak: States of Being, EX 1795, Documentation February 12-April 4, 1991, Book 1, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, NGC Fonds.

<sup>51</sup> Kate Taylor, “Cross Current,” *Globe & Mail*, Toronto, April 10, 1991, Artist Doc., Sterbak, Jana (1955- ), Documentation 1978-1996, Book 1, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, NGC Fonds.

<sup>52</sup> Jay Stone, “Meat Furore has no Logic,” *Ottawa Citizen*, April 11, 1991, Exh. Doc., Jana Sterbak: States of Being, EX 1795, Documentation April 5-November 2, 1991, Book 2, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, NGC Fonds.

*garde* art than the other cities that had displayed it without incident – Toronto, Montréal, Boston, and Paris.<sup>53</sup> Or perhaps the meat made an upsetting connection between humanity and animality; despite their innumerable differences, human and animal lives both end with bodily decay.<sup>54</sup> Sarah Milroy, however, offers another meaningful perspective. In her defense of the dress, originally published in *Canadian Art* (summer, 1991), she writes that the waste claim concealed what was really upsetting about Sterbak’s material: “Meat is traditionally for men.”<sup>55</sup> Milroy draws on Carol J. Adam’s book *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*, which states that throughout Western history, the most powerful people always ate meat. In patriarchy, this not only differentiated the diets of the aristocracy and labourers, but also those of the men and women of all classes. As subordinate, women generally ate foods considered secondary – fruits, vegetables, grains; they offered men whatever meat there was and neglected their own nutrition, thus Bordo’s characterization of femininity as self-denial.<sup>56</sup> Milroy, therefore, suggests that in combination with its form and title, the sculpture’s material articulates what “patriarchal society would prefer to leave unspoken (and therefore more pervasive).”<sup>57</sup> That is, it articulates the connection between ‘woman’ and meat, alluded to by Sterbak when she described her inspiration. Both are objects traditionally consumed and, therefore, controlled by men. Patriarchy has commoditized women, rendered their bodies desirable specular objects – pieces of meat – with a typical

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Nemiroff, “Statement on Jana Sterbak’s Flesh Dress.”

<sup>55</sup> Sarah Milroy, “The Flesh Dress: A Defense,” in *Feminism-Art-Theory: An Anthology, 1968-2000*, ed. Hilary Robinson (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), p. 153.

<sup>56</sup> Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* (New York: Continuum, 1990), p. 26.

<sup>57</sup> Milroy, “The Flesh Dress,” p. 152.

shelf life of no more than thirty years. Far from wasting it, *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic* transgressively consumes meat. So, through the flesh dress, Sterbak destabilizes man's covert power, his power "from below," which results, in part, from the hierarchal body-soul binary and is exemplified by the anorexic woman – the ascetic's tragic, self-surveilling sister.

**The power of performance: *Remote Control I and II* (1989)**

Performance underlies the process of decay in *Vanitas*, as well as the heating up and cooling off of the wire in *I Want You to Feel the Way I Do ... (The Dress)*. But Sterbak employs it explicitly with the dress works that followed, *Remote Control I and II* (Figures 2.4 and 2.5). The sculptures themselves are large skirts, composed of between nine and twelve aluminum hoops. These gradually increase in circumference, narrow at the top and wide at the bottom, to create a dome. Attached from the top hoop of each work is a canvas sling, which recalls a modest pair of women's underwear; mounted on the bottom hoops are mechanized wheels and battery-powered motors, controlled by a hand-held remote. Their specific form is modelled on the European cage crinoline, invented in 1856 and worn by Victorian women beneath the skirts of their dresses.<sup>58</sup> As Valerie Steele describes, "Hitherto, an ever-increasing number of petticoats had given the skirt its bell-shape; now these could be dispensed with, and the wearer have an even fuller skirt," no longer restricted by the petticoats' stifling weight.<sup>59</sup>

While they have been exhibited disembodied, in Sterbak's performance, the sculptures are worn by models. According to a video recorded at the National Gallery's

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<sup>58</sup> McLerran, "Disciplined Subjects and Docile Bodies," p. 543.

<sup>59</sup> Valerie Steele, *Fashion and Eroticism: Ideals of Feminine Beauty from the Victorian Era to the Jazz Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 59.

First Canadian Biennial of Contemporary Art (1989), photographs shot during an exhibition at Seattle's Donald Young Gallery (1990), and descriptions from additional shows, including the 1990 Venice Biennale in Italy, the performance opens as a model begins to put on one of the works. Young, thin, and beautiful – like the woman photographed in the flesh dress – she is clothed only in a white leotard and holds onto a bar. It is supported on either side by men wearing all black, who stand on ladders. Lifting up the bar, they suspend the model above the seat so that she can slide her body into it. As she hangs vertically with her feet dangling above the floor, Sterbak hands her the remote. At the National Gallery, the model moved the work up the colonnade, cautiously at first but quickly becoming more assertive. Once in the Great Hall, she met the second work; its model had moved it along a perpendicular hallway, beginning at the staircase that leads up to the curatorial wing and passing by the temporary exhibitions gallery. Together, they performed un-choreographed movements, a spontaneous dance, through the Hall's open space.<sup>60</sup> While the video ends shortly thereafter, with the women preparing to take off the sculptures, Richard Noble and Jo-Ann Conklin describe what has occurred next in other performances, which used either *Remote Control I* or *II*.<sup>61</sup> After controlling it herself, the model handed the remote to one of the male assistants. Now in control, he moved her in any direction and at any speed he chose. Offering insight into the combined meaning of these two parts of the performance, Sterbak

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<sup>60</sup> Jana Sterbak, Jana Sterbak [videorecording]: remote control, Exh. Records, First Canadian Biennial of Contemporary Art, EX 1768, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, NGC Fonds.

<sup>61</sup> Noble, "Chaos and Self-Creation in the Art of Jana Sterbak," p. 11; Jo-Ann Conklin, introduction to *Jana Sterbak: Metamorphosis*, exh. cat. (Providence: David Winton Bell Gallery, Brown University, 1997), n.p.

explains that the works were inspired by the “dilemma of dependency,” the feeling that “you’re not responsible for your direction, but at the same time, you’re not a free and a fully determining being.”<sup>62</sup> However, even freedom is dependent, a “set-up construct,” and Sterbak states that she has built this into the works.<sup>63</sup> The freedom that they allow any model depends on the assistants’ help, the batteries’ charge, the motors’ mechanics. It is “a condition of many different variables ... many of them can cease to exist during the performance.”<sup>64</sup>

Sterbak’s explanation of the dilemma speaks to dependency in general, for instance, to that of children pushed in strollers, the injured or the elderly transported in wheelchairs. Even so, the cage-crinoline form and the gendered roles in the performance indicate that *Remote Control I* and *II* more specifically speak to the simultaneous freedom and dependency, empowerment and powerlessness experienced by ‘woman’ in patriarchal society. Significantly, the cage crinoline may be read as a technology that represents both. Examining issues of the satirical British magazine *Punch*, Terri A. Hasseler finds that ridicule of the crinoline was a reoccurring theme in 1857, a year after its invention. The magazine’s articles and cartoons depicted it – one of the first fashion trends adopted by women of all classes and ages, a result of its inexpensive manufacturing and consumer cost – as literally erecting a fortress around women’s bodies.<sup>65</sup> According to one writer, “Whether as a waltzer or as husband, a man likes a

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<sup>62</sup> Sterbak, Jana Sterbak [videorecording]: remote control.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Terri A. Hasseler, “Mr. Punch’s Crinoline Anxiety: The Indian Rebellion and the Rhetoric of Dress,” in *Comedy, Fantasy and Colonialism*, ed. Graeme Harper (London: Continuum, 2002), p. 131.

woman he can take to his arms: and how is this possible when she is entrenched in an impregnable hoop petticoat, which when he approaches, he breaks his shin against [?]"<sup>66</sup> *Punch* further portrayed the crinoline as occupying too much space on city sidewalks, pushing men into the street when they tried to accompany their wives or daughters on walks. Hasseler states that this demonstrates the Victorian man's anxiety about the freedom that it allowed women, which centered around space. Wearing the crinoline, women limited man's access to the spaces that he traditionally controlled: the private, sexualized space of their bodies and the social space of the public sphere.<sup>67</sup> As a result, the crinoline was arguably understood in the mid-nineteenth century as an empowering and, therefore, anxiety-laden technological advance for women.

The first part of the performance parallels this historical reading. When she controls the remote, the model wearing either one of *Remote Control I* or *II* limits viewers' access to her body and the space that they may occupy. At the National Gallery, she sits high above them, far out of reach; and charging forward, she herds them like sheep into small groups around the Hall.<sup>68</sup> The viewers' consequent dodging and jogging contrasts with the model's mechanical movements. Her legs dangling above the ground, she moves similar distances but with little effort, with the push of a joystick. As a result, the model escapes the limitations of her body – endurance, speed, and agility – becoming a kind of woman-machine or robot. Sterbak's invocation of the robot is perhaps unsurprising; the term had been coined famously by Karel Capek in his 1920 play *R.U.R* (*Rossum's Universal Robots*), which she would have read as an adolescent. In the play's

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 130.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., pp. 130-132.

<sup>68</sup> Sterbak, Jana Sterbak [videorecording]: remote control.

opening act, Harry Domain, the General Manager of the R.U.R factory, explains to Helena Glory, the President of The Humanity League, that the robots are mechanized workers; they were invented and mass produced to free humanity “from the degradation of labour.”<sup>69</sup> Although they resemble human beings – assembled from simplified systems of mechanical organs, muscles, and nerves – the robots were designed to be markedly more efficient. Their bodies possess greater strength, but equally important, their minds lack the distracting desire for self-fulfillment through learning or leisure. With “no will of their own,” the robots are completely dependent on and powerless against humans.<sup>70</sup>

More contemporary readings have described the cage crinoline in similar terms, as a technology that rendered women dependent and powerless. My examination of Christian Dior’s *New Look* and Rebecca Belmore’s *Rising to the Occasion* – a precursor to *Remote Control I and II*, though Sterbak mentions no connection – has suggested that the crinoline limited women’s movement. Despite freeing them from the weight of layered petticoats, its wide, rigid frame made passing through doorways, getting in or out of carriages, and sitting down almost impossible, particularly without the help of an accompanying man.<sup>71</sup> The width also exaggerated women’s hips, making their bodies look curvaceous and fecund, ideal for childbearing. The crinoline thereby emphasized their pregnability to men, as much as it “entrenched” them in an impregnable fortress. According to Jennifer McLerran, this encouraged women to construct their femininity normatively, that is, to understand their bodies as “suited to a particular social use” in

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<sup>69</sup> Karel Capek, *R.U.R. (Rossum’s Universal Robots)*, trans. P. Selver (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 25.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>71</sup> Hasseler, “Mr. Punch’s Crinoline Anxiety,” p. 129.

patriarchy: the dominated, passive wife and mother.<sup>72</sup> Writing in the *New Look's* wake – after the crinoline had resurged in women's dresses, symbolizing their post-war return to the domestic sphere – Betty Friedan characterized such wives and mothers as perpetually denying their own desires, their wills.<sup>73</sup>

Sterbak's performance simultaneously parallels the cage crinoline's restraint or limitation of women, especially in its second part. Similar to the anorexic woman in particular, the model appears to have technologically transcended her body, to have conjured an alternative realm. But her continued dependency becomes obvious when she hands the remote to a male assistant. Noble states that she is then “radically disempowered; suspended in mid-air she is completely helpless, contained and entirely dependent.”<sup>74</sup> The freedom that the work had allowed the model depended on her control of the remote – even more than on the assistants' help, the batteries, and the motor noted by Sterbak. However, like Capek's robots, who through a mechanical flaw come to feel their wills and murder humanity in the play's last act, *Remote Control I and II* transgressively enact a revolt.<sup>75</sup> As Bruce W. Ferguson suggests, differentiating these sculptures from *I Want You to Feel the Way I Do* and *Vanitas*, “The exchange of power is not cerebral, but actual.”<sup>76</sup> To initiate the performance, power – the remote – is physically handed from Sterbak to the model. Regardless of her inevitable return to

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<sup>72</sup> McLerran, “Disciplined Subjects and Docile Bodies,” p. 545, quotation on p. 543.

<sup>73</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W.W Norton and Co., 1963), p. xxxi.

<sup>74</sup> Richard Noble, “Jana Sterbak: The Dialectic of Creation and Containment,” in *Velleitas: Jana Sterbak*, exh. cat. (Saint-Etienne and Barcelona: Musée d'art moderne de Saint-Etienne and Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 1995), p. 63.

<sup>75</sup> Capek, *R.U.R. (Rossum's Universal Robots)*, pp. 47, 90.

<sup>76</sup> Bruce W. Ferguson, “Works by Jana Sterbak,” in *Jana Sterbak*, exh. cat. (New York: The New Museum, n.d.), n.p.

dependency, this creates a moment of actual empowerment for her, as the crinoline did for the Victorian woman. And, in fact, when the model subsequently hands the remote to an assistant, Sterbak not only shows viewers that man holds control in the end, that subordinating hierarchal binaries continue; she also shows them a specific “mechanism” of his control over ‘woman’: the fashion industry.<sup>77</sup> Its trends or technologies help maintain women’s self-surveillance and, consequently, restraining feminine norms – hence the inevitability of the model’s return. Through the sculptures’ performance, then, Sterbak revolts against patriarchal society’s denial of women’s wills, destabilizing its controlling power, if only momentarily.

**The power of gender-bending ambiguity: *Chemise de Nuit* (1993)**

Sterbak returns to the organic for her final, and least well known, dress sculpture *Chemise de Nuit* (Figure 2.6), a delicate nightgown made of transparent, cream-coloured organza silk. It is cut shapelessly – with a scoop neck, long sleeves, and a floor-length hem. Although almost invisible from a distance, Sterbak has embroidered its torso with short, dark, and wiry human body hair. The pattern resembles that of a man’s chest hair, covering an area just below the neckline and just above the waist. Suspended from the ceiling on a long metal hanger, the gown fills the room displaying it with the scent of Annick Goutal’s *Eau de ciel*, a soft floral perfume that Sterbak has sprayed onto it.<sup>78</sup> All of this creates an unsettling confusion of signs for viewers. As they approach the sculpture, they most likely see a disembodied dress-like form that, despite its cut, is traditionally feminine; its delicateness and transparency seductively evoke women’s

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<sup>77</sup> McLerran, “Disciplined Subjects and Docile Bodies,” p. 545.

<sup>78</sup> Pandora Tabatabai Asbaghi, “The Sculpted Dress,” in *Art/Fashion*, ed. Germano Celant, et al., exh. cat. (New York: Distributed Art, 1997), p. 36.

lingerie. Drawn into the room for a closer look, viewers start to smell the perfume, which emphasizes the gown's femininity. But at the same time, they also start to see its hairiness. In the West, body hair in general, and chest hair in particular, is a biological and cultural characteristic of masculinity. On women, it requires removal or at least considerable grooming – evidenced by an entire section of the beauty industry dedicated to waxing, tweezing, and chemically dissolving it.

Because Sterbak, art historians, and critics have written so little on it, examining a shirt-length version of the gown, *Hairshirt* (1992), helps elucidate its inspiration and meaning, developing this initial reading. A visibly bare-breasted woman models *Hairshirt* in a photograph; when displayed, it is accompanied by another of a woman modelling *Jacket* (1992), a tweedy purple jacket with sleeves that conjoin in the front.<sup>79</sup> Three years after their creation, Sterbak organized a performance in Paris, France, using these works, which she titled *Distraction* (1995). As her textual description recounts,

Two couples reserve a table in a renowned and ostentatious restaurant (Grand Véfour). The two men are formally dressed. One woman wears a jacket with joined sleeves which make it impossible for her to use her hands. The second wears a transparent shirt into which body hair has been woven, in a copy of male chest hair pattern.

During the meal one of the men feeds his partner – the one with the imprisoned hands – as if nothing were amiss.

The rarefied atmosphere of the restaurant discourages obvious reactions from the other clients, who remain innocent of the purpose of the action that is taking place in their midst.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Jana Sterbak, "Images," "Distraction, 1995," <http://www.janasterbak.com/images.html> (accessed Feb. 5, 2009).

<sup>80</sup> Jana Sterbak, "Distraction," in *Velleitas: Jana Sterbak*, exh. cat. (Saint-Etienne and Barcelona: Musée d'art moderne de Saint-Etienne and Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 1995), p. 135.

The performers clearly transgressed the restraining decorum expected in the “renowned and ostentatious” restaurant. But arguably, the purpose of their action was to show the restraint imposed by normatively constructed gender identities, most notably femininity. As Clement Page explains, the shirt embodies “the opposition between the engendered sexes, the jacket with the continuous arms condensing its antithesis; the impossibility of escaping these constraints, imposed from both within and without.”<sup>81</sup> That is, the shirt’s chest hair and the woman’s bare breasts look startlingly incongruent, representing the oppositional binaries men-women, masculinity-femininity. And the jacket, which recalls the straitjackets used in psychiatric hospitals to pacify patients, represents man’s control over women in patriarchy. Appearing to wear it willingly, making no protest against being fed, the woman indicates that her powerlessness continues because she enacts feminine norms. Ironically, the reaction of the restaurant’s clients to the performance was closer to quiet embarrassment than rousing distraction; they thereby indicate that the implied complicity of undistracted, undisturbed individuals also contributes to this powerlessness. Even further, however, when *Hairshirt* is removed from the context of both the accompanying photograph and the performance, when it is considered alone, the incongruity between the chest hair and the breasts lessens. Although still opposing them, at the same time, the shirt confuses the masculine and the feminine; the model or performer has clothed herself in a traditional characteristic of masculinity. As a result, the possibility of escaping femininity’s restraint – its burdensomeness implied by the shirt’s title – begins to emerge.

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<sup>81</sup> Clement Page, “Jana Sterbak: ‘I Want You to Feel the Way I Do’,” *Third Text* 35 (summer, 1996): p. 64.

Employing a dress-like form instead of breasts, *Chemise de Nuit* may be interpreted similarly; it too is a sign of femininity clothed in a characteristic of masculinity or, more specifically, a gender-bending woman who represents such an escape. According to Sofie Van Bauwel, the term gender-bending describes a body whose gender identity hybridizes “masculine and feminine stereotypes” in repeated corporeal acts.<sup>82</sup> As Judith Butler theorized, gender is not expressive but performative, constructed through these acts: gestures, postures, movements. Normative ones, which mime a body’s heterosexual reproductive role, construct normative genders; and alternative ones, which transgress this role, construct alternative genders.<sup>83</sup> By hybridizing femininity and masculinity, gender-bending bodies construct a kind of alterative gender identity, simultaneously enacting their normative and their opposite genders. Examples include otherwise masculine bodies – with body hair, defined muscles – performing the stereotypically graceful postures and movements of ‘woman’, and otherwise feminine bodies – with little body hair, fleshier builds – performing the stereotypically forceful gestures of men.

While undoubtedly varied, gender-bending performances commonly employ the act of cross dressing or transvestism. Coined in 1910 by the German physician Magnus Hirschfield in his book *The Transvestites: An Investigation of the Erotic Drive to Cross Dress*, the terms denote deliberately putting on clothes understood in a society as those of

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<sup>82</sup> Sofie Van Bauwel, “Representing Gender Benders: Consumerism and the Muting of Subversion,” in *At the Interface: Continuity and Transformation in Culture and Politics*, ed. Joss Hands and Eugenia Siapera (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), p. 18.

<sup>83</sup> Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” pp. 522, 524.

the opposite gender.<sup>84</sup> Whether a gender-bending man wears women's clothes or a woman wears men's, both feminine and masculine signs or characteristics remain apparent. Unlike transsexual individuals – who identify with and seek to live as the opposite sex, using clothes to mimetically express a normative gender – they use clothes to generate androgyny. This, in turn, generates the ultimate result of gender bending: an ambiguous, unclassifiable third gender.<sup>85</sup> By refusing to heed social marginalization, which Butler described as punishing alternative constructions, the gender-bending body bends the seemingly stable boundaries between femininity and masculinity, exposing the essential instability of binary, hierarchal gender identities.<sup>86</sup>

It follows that gender-bending individuals conjure a realm of possibility outside the boundaries, at the margins of contemporary patriarchal society. Here, gender norms have lost much of their meaning, their controlling power, and binarism is threatened; such a realm thus recalls that of the *informe* or formless.<sup>87</sup> Significantly, however, men and women conjure it with distinctly different intentions. As Van Bauwel states, “male gender benders are *traveling* to examine the *other*. This is a journey without any obligations,” intended not to reposition men in society, as they dominate it, but to enable their examination of the acts constructing women and femininity; much more subversively, women gender benders intend “to create possibilities to break the

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<sup>84</sup> Vern L. Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1993), p. 207.

<sup>85</sup> Van Bauwel, “Representing Gender Benders,” p. 20; Alison Shaw, introduction to *Changing Sex and Bending Gender*, ed. Shirley Ardener and Shaw (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005), p. 4.

<sup>86</sup> Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” p. 528.

<sup>87</sup> Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing & Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 17; Van Bauwel, “Representing Gender Benders,” p. 18.

boundaries of their position as women in society (i.e. the position of the *other*).”<sup>88</sup>

Performing a hybrid of feminine and masculine stereotypes, which renders her unclassifiable, the gender-bending woman breaks away from ‘woman’. Her ambiguity thereby enacts a powerful resistance and opposition to her normative gender identity, to her position as “the *other*” or the object.<sup>89</sup> And this utterly destabilizes femininity’s restraining self-surveillance. Therefore, like Euripides’ Medea – who threw off femininity, put on masculinity, and empowered herself as chaos – the gender-bending woman transcends what it means to be a woman in patriarchy.

By referring to such a woman in her final dress work, Sterbak opens an *informe*-like realm of possibility to viewers. Clothed in chest hair, the nightgown enacts a third gender or, as Marjorie Garber suggests, a “third speaker” in the theater of performative gender identity.<sup>90</sup> Pioneered by the ancient Greek tragedian Sophocles, a predecessor of Euripides, the “third speaker” enabled greater character and dramatic development in plays because the plot depended less on the Chorus’ narration. Traditionally, the speaker interrupts conversations between two protagonists – husband and wife, hero and villain – with oracles, news, or messages. As Garber states, the interruption “of things that ‘exist’ in a theatrically conceived space and time but were not present onstage as agents before, reconfigures the relationships between the original pair, and puts in question identities previously conceived as stable.”<sup>91</sup> In the same way, the sculpture’s gender bending “reconfigures” its relationship with viewers. From a distance, they interpret the gown as

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<sup>88</sup> Van Bauwel, “Representing Gender Benders,” p. 19.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>90</sup> Garber, *Vested Interests*, p. 11.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

women's lingerie; it is known and stable. But as they approach, the seductively feminine gown becomes ambiguous, hermaphroditic. With this transformation, boundaries, hierarchal binaries, and norms begin to bend, becoming confused and questionable. So, like *I Want You to Feel the Way I Do*, the sculpture draws viewers into a room in which femininity appears unrestrained by self-surveillance; and alternative gender identities appear possible. Thus, through *Chemise de Nuit*, Sterbak produces her most complete destabilization of patriarchal society's power "from below" – presenting an empowering escape from 'woman' and, consequently, from man's control.

Sterbak's dress-based art strips normatively constructed femininity down to the covert power, the self-surveillance, that maintains it by uniting the dress form with deeply transgressive characteristics: Medea's electric emotion in *I Want You to Feel the Way I Do ... (The Dress)*, the decaying and drying meat in *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic*, the performance revolting against women's dependency in *Remote Control I and II*, and the ambiguous gender bending in *Chemise de Nuit*. These unions destabilize the dress's typical meaning as a symbol of 'woman' characterized by a subordinating femininity. That is, they destabilize femininity's restraining control; making dresses appear perversely unfamiliar, they confront viewers, especially women, with their internalization of the "inspecting gaze," with their understanding of 'woman', which patriarchy's hierarchal binaries have taught them is a given. Sterbak's installations and sculptures, as I interpret them, consequently render femininity re-definable. They open it to new meanings or understandings – evidenced most notably by her final dress – redefining 'woman' as potentially unrestrained, uncontrolled, and powerful. Thus, through the form, Sterbak creates a destabilization and a redefinition that together clearly

distinguish her work with the dress from that of her peers. Rather than expose and challenge femininity's constructedness or reconstruct it by coupling it with strength, her dresses subvert – uncover and disempower – the core of femininity itself. A similar subversion also distinguishes Cathy Daley's dress-based art. Indirectly extending what Sterbak achieves, albeit with distinctly different means, she too more completely destabilizes and redefines what it means to be feminine.

## Chapter Three

### Cathy Daley: The Dress Form and Pleasure

Since 1995, Cathy Daley has employed the dress form obsessively in drawings, as well as in a sculptural installation and a short animated film. However, she began to incorporate dresses into her work in the mid 1980s, exploring the empty clothes of both women and men as conceptual objects, capable of expressing psychological states or feelings. Created several years after she had completed her artistic education, Daley's first clothing works depict dresses, pants, shirts, and socks that hang on horizontal laundry lines. While immediately recognizable, these forms are, according to Daley, paradoxically "animated" and "mournful."<sup>1</sup> For example, in her black-and-white drawing *Dress (I)* (1987), the flowing skirt conveys liveliness; but the dark emptiness, an absence. Almost simultaneously, Daley created colourful oil paintings of dresses, with similar results. Taken off the laundry line, each dress appears to float freely but like a ghost. These two series exemplify an emerging and developing interest in dresses, in a particularly feminine psychology; and Daley, like the women artists of the mid 1960s and 1970s, connects this to feminism. Even so, her drawings and paintings from 1990 to 1994 investigate numerous forms: small animals, flowers, shadowy figures, legs. Only after a subsequent investigation, in which she draped cloth over a table, would Daley again incorporate the disembodied or unwearable dress form into her work, now to the exclusion of most others. She states that the draping created a kind of skirt, both reminding her of and enabling her to see the dress in "a new way," as a form capable of

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<sup>1</sup> Cathy Daley, interview by Catherine Laird, Toronto, Ont., May 25, 2009.

subtle yet deep transgression in patriarchal society.<sup>2</sup> So, while her obsessive use of the dress form, her conventional artistic materials, and her open acknowledgment of feminism differentiate her from Jana Sterbak, the transgressiveness of Daley's dresses from 1995 onward approaches that of Sterbak's.

Though whimsical and nostalgic, these dresses transgress a "mechanism"<sup>3</sup> of women's self-surveillance that helps maintain patriarchy's controlling power (alluded to in Sterbak's *Remote Control I* and *II*, as well as in *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic*): the fashion industry. Specifically, the fashion industry has eroticized the subordinating femininity that characterizes women's normatively constructed gender identity, 'woman'; it covertly emphasizes the importance of women attaining and sartorially displaying beauty, to pleasure viewers rather than themselves. While not a problem in itself, and generally a happy fact of human existence, eroticization thereby becomes problematic. Read in tandem, author Naomi Wolf's book *The Beauty Myth* and Valerie Steele's *Fashion and Eroticism: Ideals of Feminine Beauty from the Victorian Era to the Jazz Age* explain how the covert emphasis works. Wolf describes beauty as a physical ideal that varies over time and across cultures. In the West, as women became comparatively free from domesticity, the mass media increasingly disseminated images of it, generating "the beauty myth."<sup>4</sup> The myth urges women to equate a beautiful feminine appearance – face, hair, body, and clothes – with fulfillment; but such an

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Jennifer McLerran, "Disciplined Subjects and Docile Bodies in the Work of Contemporary Artist Jana Sterbak," *Feminist Studies* 24, 3 (autumn, 1998): p. 545.

<sup>4</sup> Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth* (Toronto: Vintage Books, 1991), p. 10.

appearance is impossible for most to fully attain, perpetually preoccupying them.<sup>5</sup>

Though she too deems it a variable physical ideal, Steele further describes beauty as sexually arousing or attractive, if not gratifying. With this, she indicates that it is particularly displayed by clothes, which shift from accentuating one erotic zone to another. These shifts – the result of fashion’s frequent style changes, also disseminated in the mass media – sexualize women’s entire bodies, as Kaja Silverman has stated in “Fragments of a Fashionable Discourse.” Simultaneously, however, they sustain the zones’ arousal of viewers, traditionally men, urging women to equate a beautiful feminine appearance with being a desirable, or pleasuring, specular object.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, Luce Irigaray suggests that women may “thwart” femininity and, therefore, the covert emphasis that Wolf and Steele described, with mimicry.<sup>7</sup> Unlike the masquerading one, the mimicking woman performs femininity deliberately

to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself – inasmuch as she is on the side of the “perceptible,” of “matter” – to “ideas,” in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic,<sup>8</sup>

playfully repeating them. Women cannot remove themselves from patriarchal society, “a masculine logic” or discourse; but mimicry becomes a way for them both to understand these ideas and to parody them from within. The mimicking woman acts exaggeratedly feminine, almost but not really as a woman and not at all as a man. Similar to the gender-

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp. 9, 11-14.

<sup>6</sup> Valerie Steele, *Fashion and Eroticism: Ideals of Feminine Beauty from the Victorian Era to the Jazz Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 40-42.

<sup>7</sup> Luce Irigaray, *This Sex which is not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 76.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

bending woman, her parody distances her from such hierarchal binaries and, consequently, from her normative gender identity, allowing her to examine it critically.<sup>9</sup> The following analysis of Daley's dress-based art interprets a representative selection of her *Untitled* drawings and her *Little Black Dress* sculpture and film as mimics. The works "resubmit" the dress form, a typical symbol of 'woman', to mass-media beauty icons, which women have internalized as early as in girlhood and which urge them to attain and sartorially display beauty. That is, Daley unites the form with the icons' beautiful feminine appearances, playfully repeating or exaggerating them. She thereby strips femininity's eroticization down to this kind of beauty, the core of the fashion industry's control, symbolically destabilizing it and, ultimately, offering a pleasurable redefinition of what it means to be a woman.

**The pleasure in girlhood memories: a representative selection of *Untitled* drawings (1995-2004)**

Daley's *Untitled* drawings, countless in number, depict a variety of dresses cut in fashionable styles. Some curve around or overwhelm an invisible woman's body, implying its proportions. Others, focusing in on the skirt, reveal her slightly splayed or daintily crossed legs; her head, and most of her torso, remain invisible, outside the works' edges, leaving her identity as the wearer unfixed by facial features and expressions. Despite these variances from drawing to drawing, Daley has rendered the skin-tight sheaths, voluminous ball gowns, sexy cocktail wear, and flirtatious tutus using the same media and in the same colours, or the tones in between them: black pastel, sometimes liquefied for fluidity, on translucent white vellum. As she explains, the process of

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<sup>9</sup> Jarrod Hayes, *Queer Nations: Marginal Sexualities in the Maghreb* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), pp. 234-235.

drawing with black pastel, “an elemental drawing material,” is very direct, allowing her to create immediately and spontaneously.<sup>10</sup> Its depth and tonal range – as well as the vellum’s smooth, bright surface – also allow Daley to convey both the thick richness of velvet and the feather-light flimsiness of gossamer; she may intensely charge the vellum with black or broadly and lightly sweep over it with gray washes.<sup>11</sup> At either extreme, the pastel is divested of colour’s “mood swings,” its tendency to evoke emotions perhaps unrelated to a work, which makes the dresses “timeless.”<sup>12</sup> Significantly, then, Daley describes her dress drawings as inspired by girlhood memories of the way that women are imaged in patriarchy, by the icons of beauty that exist – suspended in time – within “personal memory” and “the cultural imaginary.”<sup>13</sup>

As her description implies, these memories belong both to Daley specifically and to women in general, which scientifically classifies them as episodic, or autobiographical, and semantic memory. According to Patricia J. Bauer, the former kind of memory denotes information and knowledge about precise moments and “the perceptions, thoughts, and emotional reactions” that an individual had during them; the latter denotes information and knowledge “about the world,” which is relevant but not exclusive to an individual’s life.<sup>14</sup> Whether they exist in Daley’s mind alone, the result of her own past experience with the beauty icons, or in the minds of all women – the result of their

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<sup>10</sup> Cathy Daley, interview by Catherine Laird, Toronto, Ont., May 25, 2009.

<sup>11</sup> Jocelyne Fortin, *Le vêtement comme envoûtement: Cathy Daley*, exh. cat. (Rimouski: Musée régional de Rimouski, 2002), p. 28.

<sup>12</sup> Cathy Daley, interview by Catherine Laird, Toronto, Ont., May 25, 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Cathy Daley, “Texts,” “Artist’s Statement,” <http://www.cathydaley.com/> (accessed Mar. 1, 2009).

<sup>14</sup> Patricia J. Bauer, *Remembering the Times of Our Lives: Memory in Infancy and Beyond* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2007), p. 20.

inevitably viewing them to some extent, for example, through television advertisements – Bauer explains why the memories persist into womanhood. By the time she enters girlhood, approximately at the age of four, a girl’s brain structure has developed to allow the long-term memory storage and recollection precluded in her infant and toddler years. Additionally, the memories have a strong, to the point of inseparable, connection with visual imagery, a feature that may make them “especially vivid” and, therefore, enduring.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, though removed from the world of cognitive science, Daley suggests that it is the imagery itself that primarily accounts for the memories’ persistence. In both “personal memory” and “the cultural imaginary,” the icons represent a “tantalizing fantasy,” a seductive but exploitative understanding or definition of ‘woman’, of femininity.<sup>16</sup> So, it follows that by interweaving and confusing her own with those of women generally, Daley’s dresses extract from girlhood memories the most fantastical icons: the Barbie, fairy-tale princess, Old-Hollywood starlet, and ballerina.

In an inaugural drawing, *Untitled* (1995) (Figure 3.1), Daley depicts an over-life-size, richly black sheath – a dark stroke on an otherwise empty piece of vellum. Although disembodied, its sweetheart neckline curves around full breasts, held up by two lightly sketched straps. Its skirt further delineates hourglass proportions, ending at the ankles in a slightly trumpeted hemline. Most strikingly, the dress’s cut is toweringly narrow and implies that the invisible figure within has excessively long legs; the bodice ends just under the breasts, where the hips and then the legs appear to begin. Interestingly, this emphasis on the breasts and legs, with little in between, recalls an 1887

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>16</sup> Cathy Daley, interview by Catherine Laird, Toronto, Ont., May 25, 2009.

Viennese caricature discussed by Valerie Steele. Titled *Man's Ideal of Beauty*, it humorously portrays a woman whose upper back attaches to her hips, making her body only leg and buttocks from behind and, presumably, only leg and breasts from in front.<sup>17</sup> However, the drawing also recalls a more contemporary beauty – that of the iconic Barbie.<sup>18</sup>

The American toy company Mattel Inc. introduced the fashion doll in 1959. Instantly popular, she measured eleven-and-a-half inches tall and possessed the body and face of a woman, a significant departure from the traditional, realistically sized baby doll. Consequently, with the Barbie, girls' doll play changed; they no longer made a game of mothering but of attaining a beautiful feminine appearance, encouraged by the doll's particular design.<sup>19</sup> As Daley suggests, women's memories of playing with her centre around "Barbie doll couture," around clothing her in an assortment of glamorous dresses.<sup>20</sup> While proportioned ideally for modelling them, her body lacked flat feet for standing or movable fingers for grasping, allowing girls to do little else with her. But according to Mary F. Rogers, once they had clothed the doll, girls could and often did "stage imaginary scenes with her in the starring role"; they displayed her beauty to a cast of Barbie-world characters, which includes her equally popular boyfriend Ken.<sup>21</sup> So, Daley's drawing evokes the doll by evoking how women likely remember her: as a well-dressed, slender, and desirable or visually pleasurable woman, whom they could only

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<sup>17</sup> Steele, *Fashion and Eroticism*, p. 40.

<sup>18</sup> Fortin, *Le vêtement comme envoûtement: Cathy Daley*, p. 32.

<sup>19</sup> Catherine Driscoll, "Barbie Culture," in *Girl Culture: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Claudia A. Mitchell and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2008), p. 39.

<sup>20</sup> Daley, "Texts," "Artist's Statement."

<sup>21</sup> Mary F. Rogers, *Barbie Culture* (London: Sage Publications, 1999), p. 13.

aspire to become. However, she enlarges the Barbie-like dress and figure to almost eight feet, far beyond the doll's original height and that of viewers. The exaggerated scale not only makes her beauty appear ridiculous, even grotesque, as she towers over viewers like one of Beverly Semmes' monstrous dress-women; it also indicates that when girls play with her, she – as an icon – is simultaneously playing with them.

While its larger-than-life size, heart-shaped neckline, and lack of torso parallel the previous drawing, Daley's *Untitled* (1997) (Figure 3.2) is markedly expanded in width. The empty dress consists of a tiny, strapless black bodice that sits on top of an enormous skirt, which almost fills two entire pieces of vellum. The skirt is rendered in various shades of dark gray with undulating, twisting, and curling strokes, forming a circular mass. As a result, it may be read as a haystack ready for harvest, a body of choppy water, or an uncharted cosmic universe.<sup>22</sup> Most germane, however, the skirt combines with the bodice to resemble the dresses worn by fairy-tale princesses, swathing their legs in innumerable layers of tulle. Daley states that she remembers fairy tales, read in girlhood, as carrying moral lessons – commonly that hard work is rewarded, the clever outwit the strong, and good triumphs over evil.<sup>23</sup> But she adds that they also carry patriarchal society's norms "in a big way."<sup>24</sup> Their visual imagery, from book illustrations to Walt Disney's cartoon characters, encourages girls to enact the normative femininity exemplified by the princess's iconic beauty.

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<sup>22</sup> Cathy Daley, interview by Catherine Laird, Toronto, Ont., May 25, 2009.

<sup>23</sup> Susan Linn, "A Royal Juggernaut: The Disney Princesses and Other Commercialized Threats to Creative Play and the Path to Self-Realization for Young Girls," in *The Sexualization of Childhood*, ed. Sharna Olfman (Westport: Praeger, 2009), p. 36.

<sup>24</sup> Cathy Daley, interview by Catherine Laird, Toronto, Ont., May 25, 2009.

In *Snow White*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Cinderella*, for instance, the particular plots and, consequently, moral lessons vary. Nevertheless, the beautiful feminine appearance of the protagonists, fairy-tale princesses, remains largely the same. Their inner softness, which reduces them to helpless victims, is paralleled by their equally soft outer features: shining hair, sparkling eyes, wide smiles – all enhanced, at some point in the tales, by a big fluffy dress or ball gown.<sup>25</sup> Interestingly, Cinderella’s beauty is particularly connected to one. Wearing a big fluffy gown to the ball, displaying her desirability to its attendees, she captivates Prince Charming. He falls in love with her; and, unlike her victimizing stepsisters who fail to attain beauty, to look pleasurable to the prince, she lives happily ever after.<sup>26</sup> Daley’s drawing recalls Cinderella’s gown – arguably remembered by girls as a significant part of her beauty – in all of its soft fluffiness. Even so, with the skirt, Daley simultaneously exaggerates such a softness, until it too becomes ridiculous and, towering over viewers from eight feet high, grotesque. The dress’s bodice furthers the exaggeration; so tiny in relation to the skirt, it creates the illusion of additional height because, when viewers look upwards, it appears to retreat into the distance. As Daley states, this may make them feel “smaller than usual,” child-like.<sup>27</sup> And while she adds that she is unsure how to interpret it, such an illusion thus physically positions viewers under the icon’s monstrous influence.

Subsequently, Daley created *Untitled* (1998) (Figure 3.3), a drawing of a disembodied, dark gray cocktail dress. Despite its sweetheart neckline, the dress is

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<sup>25</sup> Susan Brownmiller, *Femininity* (London: Paladin Grafton Books, 1986), p. 45.

<sup>26</sup> Charles Perrault, “Cinderella,” in *Fifty Stories for Six Year Olds*, ed. Marie Greenwood (New York: Gallery Books, 1989), pp. 12-17.

<sup>27</sup> Cathy Daley, interview by Catherine Laird, Toronto, Ont., May 25, 2009.

different from its predecessors, featuring a knee-length skirt and light gray polka dots as an embellishment. In addition, its cut carefully delineates a more traditional hourglass figure; buxom breasts are accentuated by a nipped-in waist and full hips, themselves accentuated by a narrow hemline that clings tightly at the knees. Close to life-size, at approximately four-and-a-half feet in height, and filling the vellum, the dress immediately evokes Old Hollywood's petite but famously voluptuous starlets, the most iconic being Marilyn Monroe.<sup>28</sup> Daley describes Monroe's beauty as "ingrained" in her through girlhood, as a kind that she internalized particularly intensely.<sup>29</sup> She remembers how her mother and her mother's friends sought to resemble Monroe – considering her curviness the epitome of a beautiful, and pleasurable, feminine appearance.<sup>30</sup> This is perhaps unsurprising. Attaining such an appearance had not only made Monroe a starlet, but also a bombshell, a sex symbol; displayed in curve-revealing dresses, she had attracted considerable male desire, notoriously including that of a handsome American president.

In style, Daley's drawn dress does not recall one memorably worn by Monroe – for instance, the full-skirted white halter from her 1955 film *The Seven Year Itch*. But it clearly recalls, or reveals, the curves that made her memorable for women as much as for men; the polka dots, a popular embellishment on women's clothes in the 1950s, further reference the period of her heyday. Nevertheless, Daley states that her drawing portrays

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<sup>28</sup> Carolyn Bell Farrell, *Cathy Daley: Little Black Dress*, exh. cat. (Toronto: The Koffler Gallery, 2001), n.p.

<sup>29</sup> Cathy Daley, interview by Catherine Laird, Toronto, Ont., May 25, 2009.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

Monroe's beauty as "conforming or restrictive."<sup>31</sup> Though primarily dark gray, the dress is surrounded by a smudged yet distinct black outline; it indicates an imprisonment, a forced conformance of the invisible woman wearing it to its bounds. The tightness at the knees similarly indicates that the dress restrains or restricts her freedom to move. Without the trumpeted hemline in *Untitled* (1995) or the undulating strokes in *Untitled* (1997) to signal at least the possibility of movement to viewers, the dress literally objectifies the woman; it makes her body an immobilized object. Hence, with this exaggeration, Daley suggests that seen through a mother's admiring eyes, as opposed to in Monroe's films, the beauty of the flesh-and-blood icon becomes just as absurd, or impossible, as that encouraged by the Barbie and fairy-tale princess.

Although she focused on these empty dresses for five years, Daley then reintroduced a body part into her drawings: women's legs. In the early 1990s, she had worked with legs alone, rendering them in various standing and sitting poses. While still truncating them at the upper thigh, Daley renders the legs in her small-scale *Untitled* (2001) and *Untitled* (2004) (Figures 3.4 and 3.5) as attached to short, black, puffy skirts. The former drawing depicts bare legs – long and lean – slightly splayed at the knees, and wearing high-heeled sandals; positioned upside down, they suggest that the weight of the woman's skirt, which covers the bottom half of the vellum, has toppled her over, and she cannot get up. The latter depicts long-and-lean legs in dark stockings, daintily crossed at the ankles, and wearing high-heeled pumps; positioned right-side-up, they suggest that the woman is steadying herself against a gust of wind, which has gotten caught up in her wide skirt and threatens to set her in flight. The legs' positions or postures thereby

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

supplement those of the skirts, to evoke such meanings. Just as significantly, though, they evoke a beauty icon – the ballerina.

Daley recalls that “I never did ballet, but when we were young, we just always thought we could be ballerinas, twirl[ing] around the living room.”<sup>32</sup> For many girls, the celebrated dancers represent a beautiful feminine appearance, encouraging the attainment of a graceful and delicate body costumed in an equally graceful and delicate tutu. Despite its prominence in girls’ dolls, books, and films, this representation is relatively new; until the early twentieth century, ballerinas came largely from the lower class, and some were also prostitutes.<sup>33</sup> As Annette Dixon indicates, the display of the ballerina’s body in her tutu costume, which particularly revealed her legs, thus “exerted a strong attraction for the spectators,” often wealthy men.<sup>34</sup> But even without the explicit tawdriness, it arguably still does. Interestingly, Daley’s drawings – and especially her later one – resemble a photograph by André Kertesz titled *Dancer’s Legs* (1939). In it, the legs are posed differently, with Kertesz’s model pointing a foot and resting a hand on her hip, yet the truncation is markedly the same.<sup>35</sup> Linda Nochlin states in her 1988 essay “Women, Art, and Power” that the photograph thereby implies the “sexual attractiveness” of the model, “presented as a passive object for the male gaze”; she is unable to stare

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Juliette Peers, “Ballet and Girl Culture,” in *Girl Culture: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Claudia A. Mitchell and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2008), pp. 73-74.

<sup>34</sup> Annette Dixon, “Investigations of Modernity: The Dancer in the Work of Degas, Forain, and Toulouse-Lautrec,” in *The Dancer: Degas, Forain, Toulouse-Lautrec*, exh. cat. (Portland: Portland Art Museum, 2008), p. 14.

<sup>35</sup> Christopher Willard, “À la Mode: Is Artist’s Feminism Old Hat?” *Calgary Herald*, March 25, 2007.

back at her viewers, who are free to stare desirously at her legs.<sup>36</sup> Daley, therefore, depicts the ballerina's iconic grace and delicacy, which women likely remember attempting to emulate in their own make-believe twirling. However, while the drawings' smallness requires viewers to move in close, promoting an intimacy, the models look absurd rather than just sexually attractive or pleasurable. They appear endangered by the exaggerated tutus flaunting their legs; they appear endangered by this beauty.

When considered together, as part of a continuing series, what do these dresses and their media combine to mean? According to curator Carol Laing, Daley's act of drawing may produce

a performative space where the body – in a process of markmaking – moves, in private and alone. Moves, and dares to make marks in the face of a 'semiotic glut' we all daily live until the activity of markmaking itself becomes, through the body's agency, a kind of 'available language'<sup>37</sup>,

an alternative language. For Laing, marks compose and articulate such a language, which draws on "all the norms and conventions of communication, specific to its history, a history that needs to be continually modified through use because, for women, existing meanings are precisely what need most to be contested, revised and reformulated."<sup>38</sup>

Significantly, in art history, mark-making has been notoriously masculine, exemplified by the work of the Abstract Expressionists in post-war New York City.<sup>39</sup> Franz Kline, a member of the movement, was particularly well known for his thick, linear, and angular

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<sup>36</sup> Linda Nochlin, "Women, Art, and Power," in *Women, Art, and Power: and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), p. 15.

<sup>37</sup> Carol Laing, *(K)ein Vergleich: (Dis)similarities, Silvia Bächli, Thérèse Bolliger, Cathy Daley*, exh. cat. (Lethbridge: Southern Alberta Art Gallery, 1991), pp. 8-9.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>39</sup> Ann Eden Gibson, "Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics," in *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, ed. Francis Frascina (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 310.

black gestures on white canvas, in *Painting Number 2* (1954) or *Le Gros* (1961). The flowing, loose, and curvilinear black gestures in Daley's dresses, then, create an alternative language that modifies the "norms and conventions" of mark-making communicated by male artists like Kline. But more specifically, her marks modify the "norms and conventions" of beauty – communicated by the Barbie, fairy-tale princess, Old-Hollywood starlet, and ballerina – mimicking them as important to normatively constructed femininity.

In her dress drawings, Daley almost but does not really depict the icons' beautiful feminine appearances, recalling a key part of Luce Irigaray's mimicry. She playfully repeats or exaggerates their defining features: a glamorously slender figure, fluffy softness, bombshell curves, and a leg-flaunting costume. Doing so, Daley removes the icons from the realm of memory – where they appear timeless, forever "tantalizing," and perhaps even pleasurable to women; she moves them out onto the vellum and, when exhibited, onto the walls of a gallery. Here, with her exaggerations, Daley distances women from the beauty icons, enabling a critical examination of them. That is, her playful repetitions confront women viewers – if not with their internalization of icons urging them to attain and sartorially display beauty for men, then with a sense that this beauty, while ridiculous, encourages an eroticizing definition of femininity. Just as significantly, however, her drawings unsettle men's pleasure. Daley explains that the dresses' exaggeratedly feminine appearances have sexually aroused male viewers. Although not surprising, given Steele's description of beauty, their arousal results from a beautifully implied and often invisible woman – rather than a beautiful woman herself –

who in some drawings towers monstrously over them or looks absurd.<sup>40</sup> These conditions may make male viewers feel unsettled, uncomfortable, and embarrassed. As Daley humorously states, “it’s a paper drawing!”<sup>41</sup> Hence, through her mimicry, her alternative language of exaggeration, she resubmits but does not reduce ‘woman’ to girlhood’s memorialized beauty icons, thereby thwarting them. Daley thus destabilizes, for the women and men who view her drawings, femininity’s subordinating eroticization; by confronting the former and unsettling the latter, her drawn dresses transgress being merely desirable specular objects that pleasure viewers, that pleasure men.

**The pleasure in proportions: *Little Black Dress* (1997)**

While working on these drawings, Daley decided to create a sculptural installation. Her *Little Black Dress* (Figure 3.6) is a seventeen-foot-long evening dress made of black cotton jersey. Simply cut, with thin straps and a deep v-shaped neck, the sculpture features an exaggeratedly long and narrow silhouette. Although recalling Mimi Smith’s *Model Dress*, it looks much more attenuated, a result of its length and blackness. When exhibiting it – for example, in the 2001 exhibition *Cathy Daley: Little Black Dress* at The Koffler Gallery, Toronto – Daley hangs the work on a curved metal rod, suspended approximately fifteen feet high.<sup>42</sup> Similar to Semmes’ sculptures, its last two feet form a circular pool on the floor, evoking the lengthy hemlines typical of evening dresses; but the jersey, a weighty knit fabric chosen for its resistance to sagging, maintains uniform narrowness throughout the rest of the work.<sup>43</sup> According to Daley, it

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<sup>40</sup> Fortin, *Le vêtement comme envoûtement: Cathy Daley*, p. 34.

<sup>41</sup> Cathy Daley, interview by Catherine Laird, Toronto, Ont., May 25, 2009.

<sup>42</sup> Farrell, *Cathy Daley: Little Black Dress*, n.p.

<sup>43</sup> Cathy Daley, interview by Catherine Laird, Toronto, Ont., May 25, 2009.

was inspired, in part, by Surrealist sculptor Alberto Giacometti's elongated bronze figures. She had studied the figures, which include *Man Pointing* (1947) and *Standing Woman* (1949), for a class she taught at the Ontario College of Art and Design. And she had experimented with their elongation in a number of drawings that, like *Untitled* (1995), depict over-life-size and narrow dresses. Daley describes the drawings as sculptural; with their almost three-dimensional volume and strong contrast against the vellum background, they appear to exist in space, further inspiring her to bring such a dress fully into reality.<sup>44</sup> Even so, as the title indicates, Daley's primary inspiration was the little black dress itself. She explains that "it intrigues me because it's form-fitting and classic," a body-conscious dress that has remained in women's wardrobes for three generations.<sup>45</sup> Hence, rather than memories of girlhood icons, whose beauty she examined through dresses, some little and black, Daley's sculpture examines the little black dress as another beauty icon – for women, as opposed to girls – in patriarchy.

According to the art historian Anne Hollander, embedded within the little black dress is "a variety of earlier manifestations of black for clothes" and its own history, both of which she expounds in her book *Seeing Through Clothes* (1978).<sup>46</sup> From antiquity to the seventeenth century, women's and men's black evoked the serious states of mourning, religiosity, sobriety, and professionalism. However, in the eighteenth century, dramatic "frivolous black" – worn primarily to accentuate the popular pale, powdered

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Anne Hollander, *Seeing Through Clothes* (New York: Viking Press, 1978), p. 388.

face and hair – appears to have emerged as fashionable.<sup>47</sup> Actresses had adopted it previously:

Tragedy queens and heroines conventionally appeared on the stage in black velvet but otherwise dressed in the height of the mode ... On stage, such use of the color did not so much express the somberness of tragic themes as it corresponded to the exaggerated effects sought in theatrical action and diction.<sup>48</sup>

Now, parlaying the frivolousness and theatricality into the ballroom, a woman dressed in black accentuated her features, as well as contrasted exaggeratedly against any colourful dresses worn by other women, connoting her fashionableness. But, at the same time, a woman dressed in black recalled the *femme fatale* in early Romantic literature, a character who intentionally lures her lovers into deadly situations. Her blackness connoted a “fatal sexuality,” a dangerous sexual power “absent from the black worn by women before the eighteenth century but never entirely missing from it afterward,” particularly at night, the time favoured by the *femme fatale*.<sup>49</sup> While these connotations continued into the late nineteenth century, in the 1920s, women’s black would fall markedly from fashion, and into an anti-fashion, with the little black dress. Designed by the French couturière Gabrielle (Coco) Chanel, it resembled the short shifts worn as uniforms by maids, waitresses, and shop assistants when “pale and gauzy beaded wisps” for evening and bright daywear were in style with most middle and upper-class women.<sup>50</sup> Historically, then, black dresses in general and the little black dress specifically were associated with “fatal sexuality” and anti-fashion, as much as with fashion.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 373.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., pp. 374-377, quotation on p. 376.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 385.

While her *Little Black Dress* implies this history, Daley's examination appears, at least initially, to focus on a contemporary association, alluded to in her explanation of why the beauty icon intrigues her. After rising in popularity through the 1960s, the little black dress has become ubiquitous, so much so that high-fashion magazines refer to it in an anagram, as the LBD. Their articles frequently proclaim that every woman should own one, preferably a few, because it now encompasses a variety of cuts – from the short shift to the long evening dress. However, anagrammed or not, the words 'little black dress' make a much more insidious proclamation: that every woman should also own, or attain, a comparatively little body to wear it. Significantly, the models typically photographed to accompany the articles, clothed in elegant little black dresses, suggest what such a body looks like. It is very tall yet very thin, thereby associating the icon with these almost impossible proportions. But contained within the pages of such widely disseminated magazines, the photographs are internalized by women as representing a beautiful feminine appearance that is possible and even admired.<sup>51</sup> As a result, women are encouraged to understand the display of tallness and thinness in an elegant little black dress as important to normatively constructed femininity. And when they cannot display it, they are encouraged to dislike their bodies. Although women cannot increase their height, aside from wearing often-torturous high heels, they can decrease their weight, through starvation diets.<sup>52</sup> Equally significant, Naomi Wolf suggests that this not only prevents women from finding pleasure in the little black dress – in fashion – but also in

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<sup>51</sup> Susan Bordo, "Anorexia Nervosa: Psychopathology as the Crystallization of Culture," in *Toward a New Psychology of Gender: A Reader*, ed. Mary M. Gergen and Sara N. Davis (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 444.

<sup>52</sup> Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, p. 11.

their sexuality. Starving themselves, they become physically and psychologically asexual; though the former result may be intentional, the latter is less so, disconnecting women from their own desires.<sup>53</sup> Therefore, together, the little black dress and its little model create a seductive but exploitative definition of ‘woman’, of femininity, embodying what Jocelyne Fortin appropriately terms “anorexic elegance.”<sup>54</sup>

Daley states of her sculptural installation that she “didn’t really think of it as being directly related to anorexia.”<sup>55</sup> For her, the eating disorder “is a little more complex than that ... it’s about issues of control ... Sometimes it’s about wanting to stay a child longer.”<sup>56</sup> However, Daley adds that she intends the work to mimic the physical ideal that encourages anorexia in women, playfully repeating its defining features, its proportions. It follows, then, that despite also resembling a fire-charred tree and oil being poured from a can, the sculpture’s narrowness most immediately recalls a model-like body, delineated by a little black evening dress; the jersey’s weightiness, with its lack of sagging, creates the illusion that such a body invisibly fills the dress out. Although the sculpture is not meant to be worn by a real woman, its narrowness is not so absurd that it precludes this. With a circumference of three feet, a markedly thin woman – one with a model-like body – could conceivably fit herself into it. And perhaps some women viewing the work would want to. Its simple, elegant cut almost parallels a dress worn by Audrey Hepburn, in the famous opening scene of her 1961 film *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*. Even so, Daley absurdly exaggerates the sculpture’s length and, as a result, height. At

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 193; Bordo, “Anorexia Nervosa,” p. 438.

<sup>54</sup> Fortin, *Le vêtement comme envoûtement: Cathy Daley*, p. 32.

<sup>55</sup> Cathy Daley, interview by Catherine Laird, Toronto, Ont., May 25, 2009.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

seventeen feet long, it hangs so high above both viewers and the surrounding dress drawings in the Koffler's installation that it reduces them not to the size of children, as with *Untitled* (1997), but to that of the Lilliputians from *Gulliver's Travels*. Further, the pooling fabric, though still evoking the lengthy hemlines of evening dresses in general, suggests that the sculpture's towering tallness would stretch up beyond the bounds of the ceiling, and even endlessly, if allowed to. Hence, regardless of its illusory embodiment, the work is, in fact, empty. The exaggerated length or height, which itself exaggerates the narrowness, renders the little black evening dress and its little model far from little; their proportions become far from possible to embody, even if some women wanted to, and far from admirable.

With these mimetic exaggerations, Daley's *Little Black Dress* distances viewers from the icon's beauty; specifically, the playful – and humorous – repetition modifies its “anorexic elegance,” almost but not really depicting it. Similar to her dress drawings, the sculpture thereby enables viewers, most notably women, to take a “different look” at such a physical ideal and to “think about it.”<sup>57</sup> They may recognize the work's elegant narrowness from the photographs in high-fashion magazines. But seeing it combined with towering tallness confronts women with the ridiculousness of these proportions, which urge them to starve their bodies to attain a beautiful feminine appearance and, because this disconnects them from their own pleasure, to sartorially display it for men's. That is, Daley has removed the little black dress from the glossy magazine pages, as well as from the minds of women who have read their articles and internalized their photographs. And by moving an exaggeration of it out into a gallery, Daley has

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

generated enough distance for women viewers to critically examine the beauty icon, and its “anorexic elegance,” as an impossibility for most and as encouraging a subordinating, eroticizing definition of femininity.

With more concerted looking and thinking, however, the sculpture’s proportions start to evoke the little black dress’s historical, transgressive associations. So long and narrow, lacking all embellishment and accessories, the work is simple to the point of being reductive; it is difficult to imagine as either in or out of style, making it a kind of anti-fashion. More importantly, the sculpture’s narrowness and length generate an alluring but dangerous visual force; it draws viewers towards it but threatens them, recalling the simultaneous allure and danger of the *femme fatale*. Conjuring such a “fatal sexuality,” Daley’s sculpture represents a gesture – a black stroke suspended in front of a white wall – as powerful or masculine as any painted by Kline. Nevertheless, as a dress, it modifies the Abstract Expressionist’s mark-making tradition. So, through *Little Black Dress*, Daley again mimics the “norms and conventions” of a beauty icon and, to a lesser extent, mark-making – creating an alterative, exaggerated language that resubmits, rather than reduces, ‘woman’ to both. Consequently, she destabilizes femininity’s subordinating eroticization, communicated by the little black dress; confronting women viewers with its absurdity and all viewers with the *femme fatale*’s dangerous sexual power, her sculpture thwarts the little black dress’s association with the little model – with becoming a desirable, pleasuring specular object, not a desiring subject.

**The pleasure in film: *Little Black Dress* (2001)**

Four years later, Daley created a short animated film, also titled *Little Black Dress*. Found on her website, it follows the transformations of a black strapless dress

with a heart-shaped neckline.<sup>58</sup> When the film opens, the dress resembles *Untitled* (1995), having hourglass proportions and a slightly trumpeted, floor-length hemline. But within seconds, the dress's features begin to expand and contract radically. Daley first transforms the hips, which bulge out like an inflated balloon, contract, and bulge out again. She then expands the breasts too, so the dress delineates very wide hips, very large breasts, and a nipped-in waist. The bulging hips slide down to the hemline and back up, where they expand enormously, forming a belly that almost fills the entire screen. After moving jollily from side to side, the belly contracts and the bulges reappear; the hips once again slide down to the hemline, but they slide back up all the way to the breasts, causing them to expand even further. This only lasts seconds, however, as the dress then becomes very narrow, swaying from side to side until bulges again reappear at the hips and breasts. As these inflate, they rise above and hover over the dress, melting into a black blob that momentarily consumes it. Emerging out of the blob, the dress is reformed into one with hourglass proportions and a widely trumpeted hemline, which resemble its original features. The hemline slides upward to meet the bodice, becoming tutu-like; but it quickly slides back down, and the dress becomes intermittently voluptuous with moving bulges and narrow with a swaying, squiggly torso. Finally, it collapses into a pool of black and completely disappears. All of this occurs over approximately a minute, to the sounds of a bass clarinet played by the musician Bill

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<sup>58</sup> Cathy Daley, "Movie," *Little Black Dress*, <http://www.cathydaley.com/> (accessed Mar. 1, 2009).

Grove.<sup>59</sup> Rather than accompanying them melodically, Grove makes deep squeaks and squawks almost randomly throughout the transformations.

Explaining her inspiration, Daley states: “I was working with a series of smaller drawings of the little black evening gown ... and there was a row of them, and I realized that it sort of had movement, and it started to animate itself. So, then it was just naturally out of that I got the idea that I think I’d like to make a film.”<sup>60</sup> Confirming and developing the idea, Daley subsequently dreamt that she had already made the film. Upon waking, she remembered it as markedly humorous or goofy, like the 1950s cartoons that she had watched on television every Saturday morning as a girl. Now, inspired again by her memories, she began creating a total of two-hundred-and-fifty dress drawings that could parallel the physical comedy and black-and-white colouration of her favorite characters, for example, Olive Oyl and Felix the Cat.<sup>61</sup> Daley also sought to parallel the cartoons’ “old style,” which she describes as “rough and crude” when compared with contemporary digital animation.<sup>62</sup> Despite using a computer to animate the drawings, she neither smoothed out any rough or jerky movements, nor removed the grayish pastel smudges that surround the dresses, both of which emphasize their classic, hand-drawn quality. And though she thought about employing piano accompaniment, as it is “in keeping with the old style,” she decided on the squeaking and squawking because they recall the strange sounds that often supplement cartoon action.<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, when seen transforming in the film or, at the Koffler’s *Cathy Daley: Little Black Dress*

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<sup>59</sup> Cathy Daley, interview by Catherine Laird, Toronto, Ont., May 25, 2009.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Farrell, *Cathy Daley: Little Black Dress*, n.p.

<sup>62</sup> Cathy Daley, interview by Catherine Laird, Toronto, Ont., May 25, 2009.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

exhibition, as still frames on a white wall, these dress drawings, like Daley's others, evoke the beauty of a girlhood icon in patriarchal society: Betty Boop.

While stating that she was more well known in her mother's generation, Daley describes Betty Boop as "definitely an inspiration or dis-inspiration" for the film.<sup>64</sup> The character has been featured in cartoons since the 1930s; and while she now wears a strapless little red dress that curves around her Monroe-like body, in cartoons from 1932 to 1934, she often wore a strapless little black one, markedly resembling Daley's bulging, voluptuous dresses. Created before the *femme fatale* entered Old-Hollywood cinema in the *film noir* genre of the 1940s and 1950s, Betty Boop does not act dangerously alluring. But she does behave coquettishly aware of her effect on male characters, of her desirability to them, which results from her attainment of a beautiful feminine appearance. For instance, in an episode titled *Betty Boop's Big Boss* (1933), she flirtatiously sits on the boss's knee, prances around on his desk, and sings suggestive lyrics to him in her squeaky little voice as he interviews her, all while wearing her curve-revealing dress. She thereby earns the job, as well as his lecherous gaze – though she herself perpetually rolls her eyes upward, away from him, and bats her eyelashes.<sup>65</sup> So, although it may have been partially necessitated by the black-and-white colouring of all early cartoons, Betty Boop's little black dress, and the body that it delineates, help display her to the male characters as desirable. Consequently, Betty Boop generates a seductive but exploitative definition of 'woman'; she encourages the girls who watch her

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> *Betty Boop's Big Boss*, directed by Dave Fleischer (Paramount Productions, Inc., 1933).

cartoons and internalize her iconic beauty to understand visually pleasuring men as important to normatively constructed femininity.

Because both *Little Black Dress* and *Betty Boop* are rendered in a filmic medium, it is important that early feminist film theorists have argued that traditional narrative cinema constructed such “ways of seeing and pleasure in looking.”<sup>66</sup> In her foundational 1975 article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey uses psychoanalysis, specifically the writings of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, to explain that films offer two kinds of visual pleasure to active spectators, described always and only as men. The first is voyeuristic scopophilia, the “pleasure in looking at another person as object” by watching them without their knowledge.<sup>67</sup> Depicting a world independent of the audience, films create a distance that positions spectators as voyeurs, enabling them to objectify the passive actress with their gaze. The second is narcissistic scopophilia, the “pleasure in looking at another person as object” by recognizing a likeness in them. Spectators recognize themselves in the “more perfect, more complete, more powerful” male protagonist projected onto the screen, who, too, objectifies the actress with his gaze; spectators identify with him as their “ideal ego,” just as the young child in Lacan’s mirror stage recognizes a likeness in his reflection and identifies with it as more capable.<sup>68</sup> So, while cinema constructs voyeuristic scopophilia by creating distance, it constructs narcissistic scopophilia by eliminating it. Mulvey resolves this conflict in her article’s conclusion, stating that the spectator’s gaze, as well as the camera’s, is subordinated to

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<sup>66</sup> Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 834.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 835.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 838.

the gaze of the on-screen characters. That is, the camera's unobtrusiveness and the spectator's neurotic need to fetishize the actress – fixating on her beauty to disavow the castration threat presented by all women's lack of the phallus – strongly eliminate distance. The spectator therefore experiences visual pleasure through fetishism and, more significantly, through the male protagonist; he transfers his gaze to the male protagonist, and together they objectify the actress.<sup>69</sup>

Mulvey's article simultaneously popularized the use of psychoanalysis in feminist film theory and began a decade-long debate, rooted in her denial of the active woman spectator, which she herself would revise in "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'" (1981). Nevertheless, Mary Ann Doane's 1982 essay "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator" provides the most germane revision. Drawing on Irigaray's *This Sex which is not One*, Doane suggests that women are too close to themselves. Most simply, they act as a mirror for man; their objectivity reflects his subjectivity, his desire, his image back to him. But because everything in patriarchy, or the symbolic order, also reflects man back to man, women cannot see their own image as a reflection and, therefore, from a distance.<sup>70</sup> Doane states, then, that "For the female spectator there is a certain overpresence of the image – she *is* the image. Given the closeness of this relationship, the female spectator's desire can be described only in terms of a kind of narcissism."<sup>71</sup> Identifying with her, she can only look at the passive actress

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., pp. 843-844.

<sup>70</sup> Caroline Bainbridge, *A Feminine Cinematics: Luce Irigaray, Women and Film* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 85.

<sup>71</sup> Mary Ann Doane, "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator," in *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 22.

with narcissistic scopophilia, becoming similarly objectified by the male protagonist's and spectator's combined gaze. However, Doane theorizes a solution, which she terms the masquerade. Acknowledging that it very much recalls Irigaray's mimicry,<sup>72</sup> she explains that

The masquerade, in flaunting femininity, holds it at a distance ... [it] involves a realignment of femininity, the recovery, or more accurately, simulation, of the missing gap or distance. To masquerade is to manufacture a lack in the form of a certain distance between oneself and one's image.<sup>73</sup>

Masquerading actresses perform femininity exaggeratedly. They defamiliarize women spectators with the image of 'woman' on the screen, which allows them to more actively look at or critically examine it and to resist objectification through identification. In addition, Catherine Craft-Fairchild, author of the book *Masquerade and Gender: Disguise and Female Identity in Eighteenth-Century Fictions by Women*, states that Doane's masquerade may unsettle the male gaze, by focusing it on the exaggeratedly feminine image and not on the actresses themselves, thus allowing women in cinema to similarly resist objectification.<sup>74</sup>

Considering this, it appears that *Little Black Dress* generates such an unsettling defamiliarization. The film repeats the "rough and crude" rendering and strange sound effects characteristic of all early cartoons, as well as Betty Boop's own strapless little black dress; at the same time, however, it playfully exaggerates her iconic beauty. Most

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<sup>72</sup> Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 182.

<sup>73</sup> Doane, "Film and the Masquerade," pp. 25-26.

<sup>74</sup> Catherine Craft-Fairchild, *Masquerade and Gender: Disguise and Female Identity in Eighteenth-Century Fictions by Women* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), p. 60.

obviously, with the transformations, Daley expands the cartoon character's voluptuous, bulging breasts and hips to the point of explosion. Also obvious, the intermittent contractions evoke but are far more spasmodic than any movements, prancing or otherwise, enacted by her. And the deepening of the Betty-Boop voice into the bass clarinet's squeaks and squawks is similarly evocative but strange. Consequently, Daley's transforming dress begins to recall the masquerading actress, as described by Doane and Craft-Fairchild. Its exaggerations flaunt the features that define Betty Boop's beautiful feminine appearance as visually pleasurable to men, like her cartoon boss, almost but not really depicting them. The resulting absurdness makes these features relatively unfamiliar to women who view the film, generating a distance that allows a critical examination of them. Women viewers are thereby confronted, perhaps not with their internalization of a cartoon character urging them to attain and sartorially display beauty for men, but arguably with the sense that this beauty is ridiculously impossible and encourages a subordinating, eroticizing definition of femininity.

Generating even greater distance, when Daley removed Betty Boop's iconic beauty from the realm of memory, and moved it into the film, she also removed her body. Without it, women viewers cannot really see themselves in the film, on the screen, discouraging them from identifying with the dress as they conceivably would with the cartoon character or an actress. Even so, would it matter if they did? While the transformations do tell the story of an evolving and eventually disappearing dress, Daley's animated short does not contain a typical narrative structure; it neither includes a male protagonist for male viewers to identify with, nor a woman for them to together objectify – only her exaggerated, disembodied image. Through the film, Daley

consequently makes her most full use of mimicry. The two-hundred-and-fifty dress drawings comprising it create, like Daley's earlier ones and her sculptural installation, an alternative, exaggerated language that modifies the "norms and conventions" of a beauty icon and, implicitly, Abstract Expressionist mark-making. This resubmits, without reducing, 'woman' to the subordinating and eroticizing femininity communicated by Betty Boop, destabilizing it for women viewers in particular. But by employing a filmic medium, Daley additionally thwarts the "ways of looking" that render women – in both reality and cinema – passive, desirable specular objects; she unsettles film's construction of the pleasure-seeking male gaze.

Daley's dress-based art strips the eroticization of normatively constructed femininity down to the fashion industry's covert emphasis on attaining and sartorially displaying beauty, uniting the basic dress form with mass-media beauty icons: the Barbie, fairy-tale princess, Old-Hollywood starlet, and ballerina in her *Untitled* drawings, the little black dress and its little model in her *Little Black Dress* sculptural installation, and Betty Boop in her *Little Black Dress* short animated film. In each work, the unions "resubmit" the dress form – a typical symbol of 'woman' – to these icons, which define femininity as eroticizing, as subordinating, for the women who have internalized them. That is, when united, the dress form and the icons' perversely exaggerated defining features destabilize this definition. Subtle yet deeply transgressive, the exaggerations produce mimicries that not only confront women viewers with their internalization, making the covert emphasis more overt, but also distance them from what the icons' beauty communicates about being a woman, being feminine, in patriarchal society. As I interpret them, Daley's drawings, sculpture, and film consequently render femininity re-

definable, opening it to new definitions. And further, by criticizing how beauty icons urge women to become erotic objects, as well as thwarting male viewing pleasure, her works appear to offer one: the redefinition of femininity as “something that you can possess, take power over,” as potentially more pleasurable for oneself than pleasuring for another.<sup>75</sup> Thus, through the dress, Daley, like Sterbak, creates a destabilization and a redefinition that together clearly distinguish her work with the form from that of her peers. Indirectly extending what Sterbak’s dresses achieve – the subversion of women’s self-surveillance as central to femininity itself – Daley’s dresses subvert, at its core, a “mechanism” that helps maintain this self-surveillance and, as a result, patriarchy’s control.

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<sup>75</sup> Cathy Daley, interview by Catherine Laird, Toronto, Ont., May 25, 2009.

## Conclusion

Through their dress-based art, Jana Sterbak and Cathy Daley deeply transgress femininity, symbolically destabilizing its central, subordinating power and pleasure relationships. Their destabilizations ultimately open femininity, which normally characterizes the gender identity ‘woman’, to redefinition – that is, to redressing – as empowering of and pleasurable for women. With visual analysis and the supplementary theories of Michel Foucault on patriarchal society’s power “from below”<sup>1</sup> and Luce Irigaray on mimicry, I have explained how Sterbak and Daley achieve this: their works unite the dress form with either powerfully unfeminine characteristics or with hyper-feminine, hyper-pleasurable ones. Additionally, I have contextualized Sterbak’s and Daley’s dress-based art as but one part of a larger artistic tendency that exploded in the mid 1980s and through the 1990s, discussing comparable works by their most notable peers. While these peers arguably investigate ‘woman’ by examining the constructedness of femininity, Sterbak and Daley use the dress form to delve even deeper. Hence, although employing distinctly different working methods, media, and tactics, their destabilizations and redefinitions together epitomize the transgressive potential of the disembodied or unwearable dress form in contemporary feminist art.

My research in this thesis thereby contributes to the recent literature and dialogue on such art. It has elucidated at length how second-wave feminism’s rising theories on performative gender identity and the central role of clothes in its construction, by Judith Butler and Kaja Silverman, as well as the “formal precedent” established by women

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 167.

artists in the mid 1960s and 1970s, ignited the explosion.<sup>2</sup> More specifically, my research on Sterbak's dresses has expounded how exactly they subvert man's power "from below" – women's disempowering self-surveillance – which curatorial essays and scholarly articles only allude to. And it represents, to my knowledge, the first extensive study of her unofficial dress series as a whole and of her *Chemise de Nuit* in particular. Similarly, although exhibition catalogues discuss them as impossibly and exaggeratedly beautiful, suggesting a hyperbolized feminineness, my research on Daley's dresses has expounded what exactly their impossible exaggerations create: a mimicry that subverts man's pleasure and women's lack of pleasure. Consequently, it represents not only the first interpretation of her works as mimicries, but also the first detailed study of her continuing, more organized dress series.

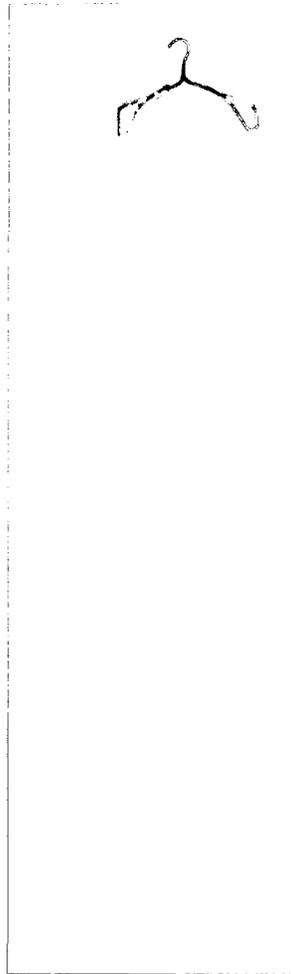
Most importantly, however, these studies have uncovered a connection between Sterbak and Daley, two Canadian women whose work with the dress form has never before been considered together – in either curatorial and scholarly writings or in national and international exhibitions – likely because of their distinct differences. Thus, this thesis furthers the limited research on Sterbak's and Daley's dresses, initiates research into a significant connection between their dresses, and adds to research on the dress form itself. And so, through the work of Sterbak and Daley, I have shown how the dress has become much more than an archetypal piece of women's clothing, worn with little thought to why, or to what it traditionally symbolizes. The dress has become a form that

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<sup>2</sup> Nina Felshin, ed., introduction to "Women's Work: A Lineage, 1966-94," *Art Journal* 54, 1 (spring, 1995): p. 71.

pushes viewers, and especially women, to think and reflect more deeply on what it means to be a woman, on subordination, and on femininity.

**Figures**



**Figure 1.1**  
Mimi Smith, *Model Dress*, 1965,  
re-created in 1993  
Plastic, buttons, and metal hanger  
72 x 18 inches



**Figure 1.2**  
Mimi Smith, *The Wedding*, 1966  
Plastic, carpet runners, tablecloths, fabric, and paper doilies  
12 x 12 x 12 feet

**Figure 1.3**  
Mimi Smith, *Maternity Dress*, 1966  
Plastic, vinyl, zipper, screws, and wood hanger  
45 x 20 x 9 inches



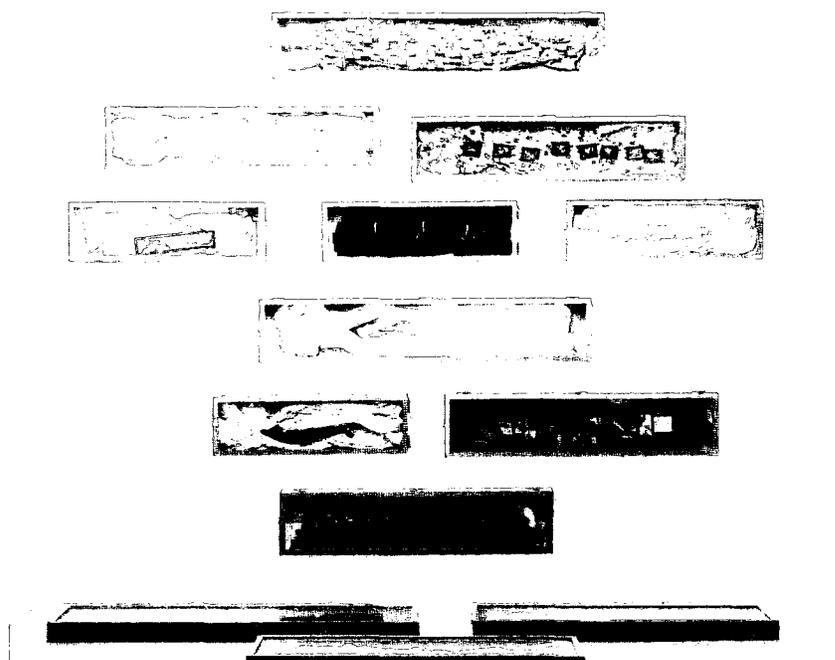
**Figure 1.4**  
Nancy Youdelman, *Button Dress*, 1972  
Mixed media  
54 x 22 x 3 inches



**Figure 1.5**  
Mira Schor, *Dress Books*, "Angel," 1977  
Mixed media on rice paper  
63 x 15 x 7 inches



**Figure 1.6**  
Rebecca Belmore, *Rising to the Occasion*, 1987,  
in the performance *Twelve Angry Crinolines*  
Mixed media  
78.7 x 47.2 x 47.2 inches  
Image courtesy of the artist



**Figure 1.7**  
Annette Messenger, *Histoire des Robes/Story of Dresses*, c. 1990  
Mixed media  
Installation dimensions vary  
Installation view at Arc-Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris, France

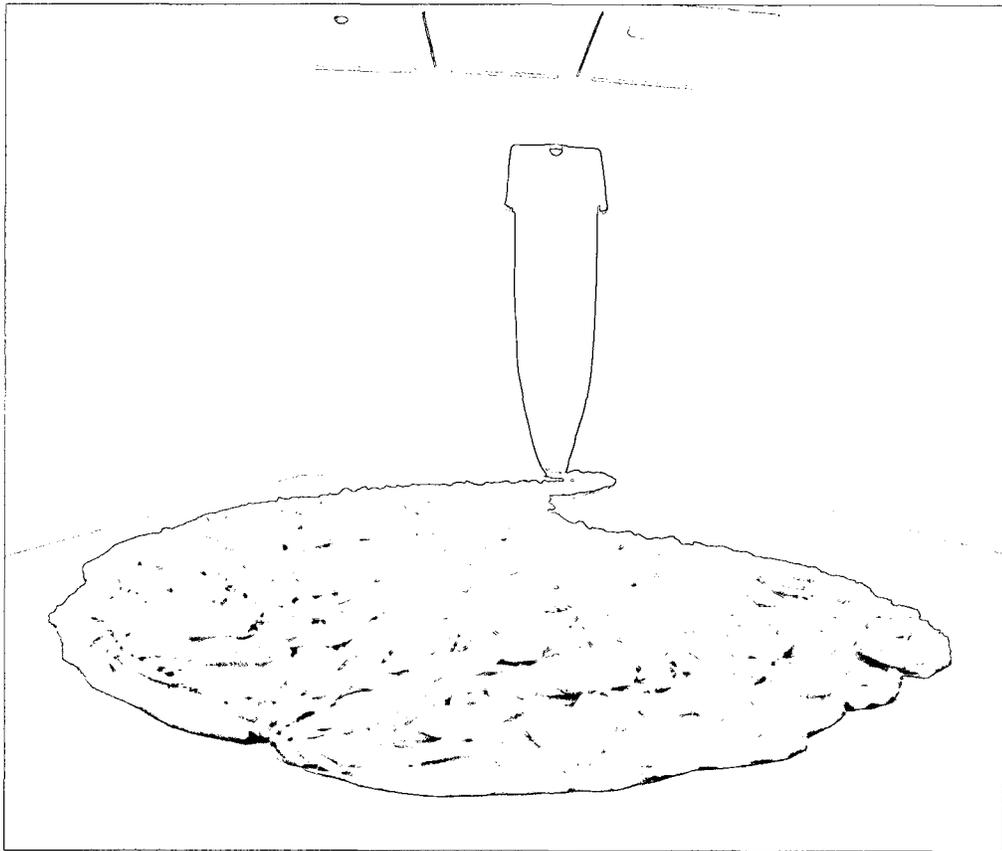
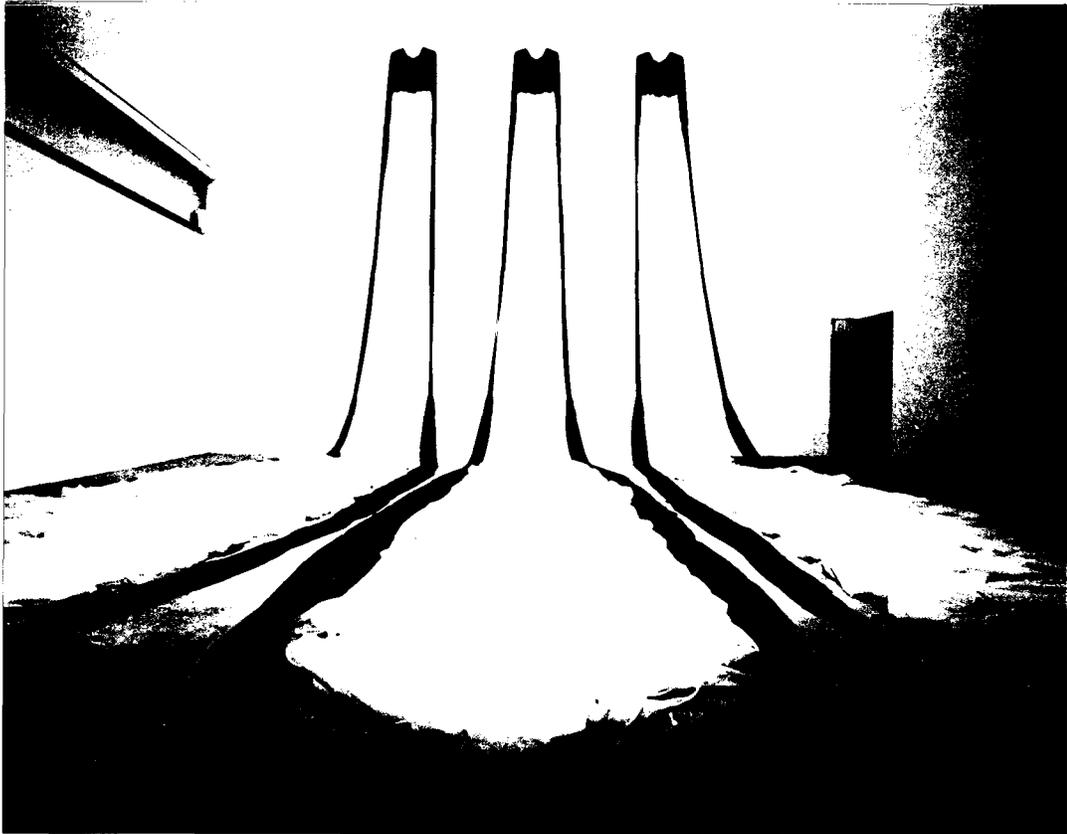


Figure 1.8  
Beverly Semmes, *Red Dress*, 1992  
Velvet, wood and metal hanger  
Approximately 12 x 10.5 x 45.5 feet  
Image courtesy of the artist



**Figure 1.9**

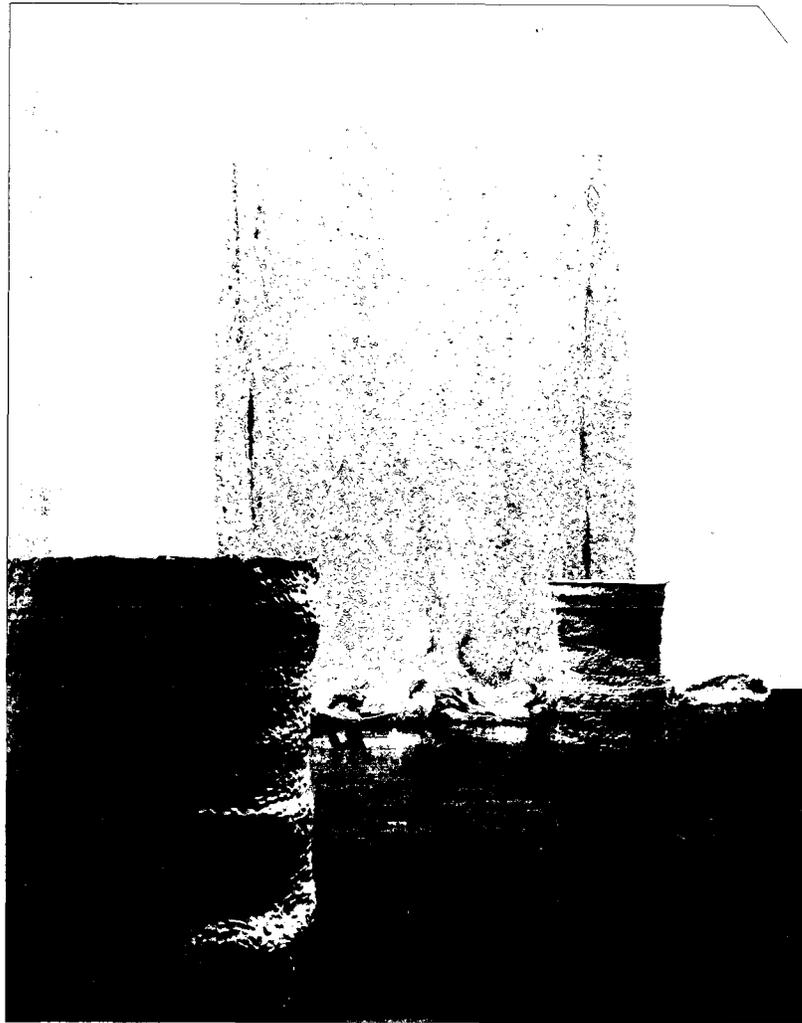
Beverly Semmes, *Blue Gowns*, 1993

Organza and velvet

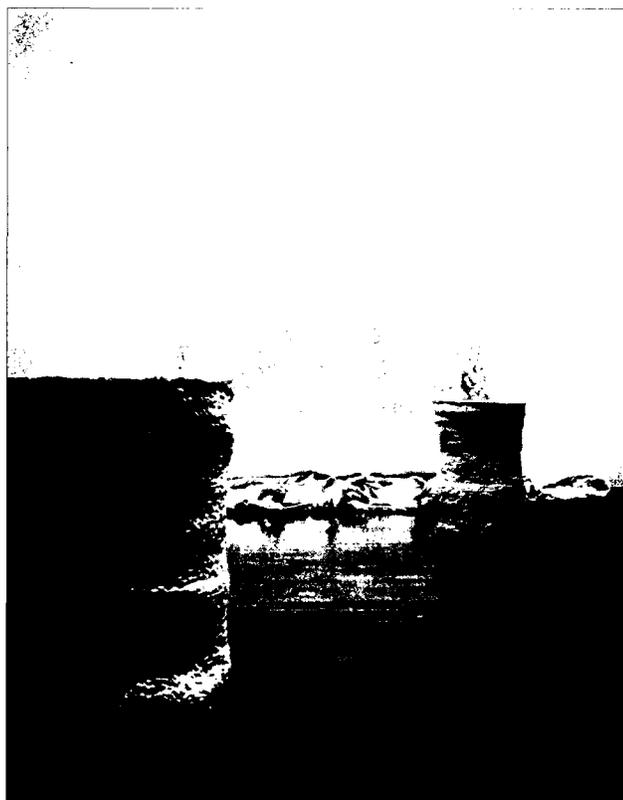
Approximately 29.5 x 31 x 29.5 feet

Installation view at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia

Image courtesy of the artist



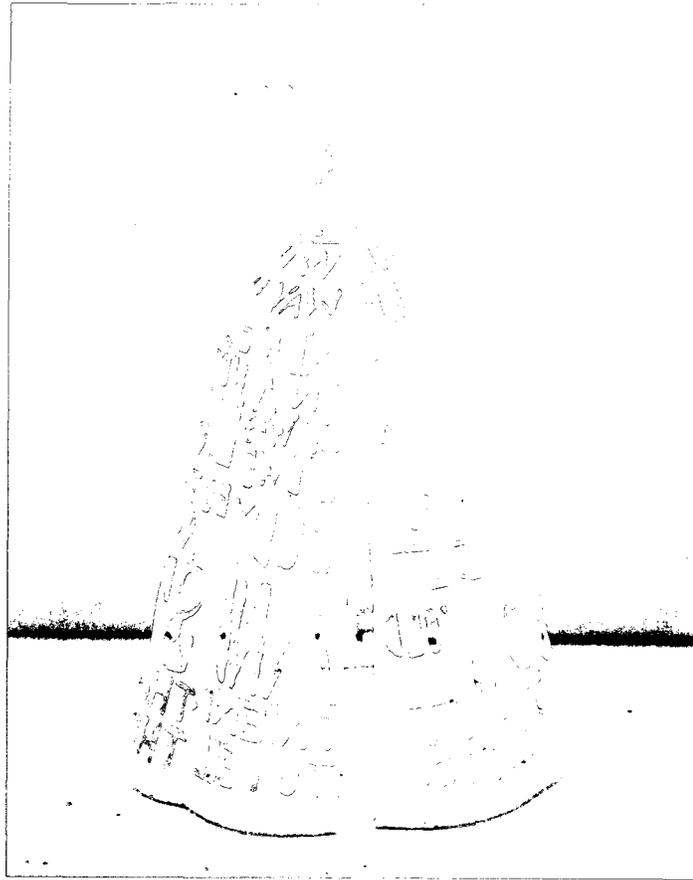
**Figure 1.10**  
Beverly Semmes, *Big Silver*, 1996  
Crushed lamé, motor, pulleys, and terra cotta ceramics  
Installation dimensions vary  
Image courtesy of the artist



**Figure 1.11**  
Beverly Semmes, *Big Silver*, 1996 (mid descent)  
Image courtesy of the artist



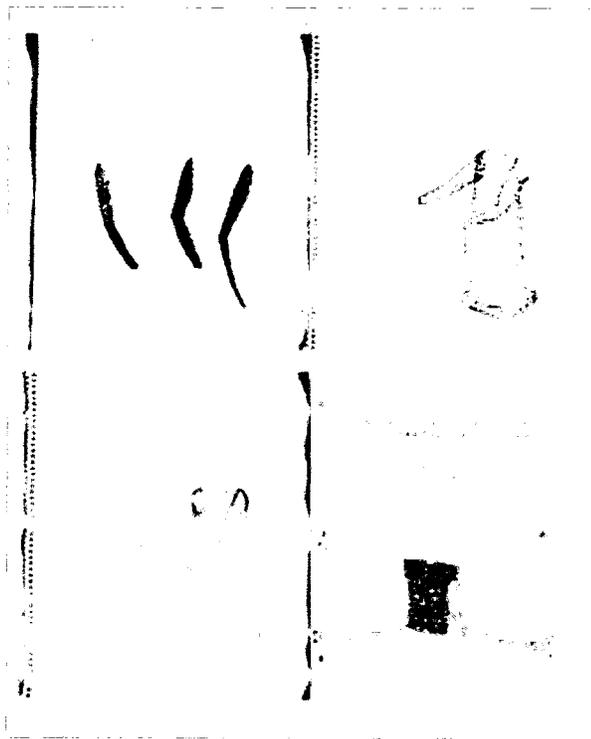
**Figure 1.12**  
Beverly Semmes, *Big Silver*, 1996 (full descent)  
Image courtesy of the artist



**Figure 1.13**  
Lesley Dill, *White Hinged Poem Dress*, 1992  
Mixed media  
Installation dimensions vary



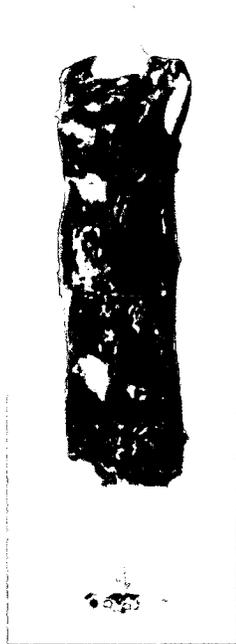
**Figure 1.14**  
Gathie Falk, *Dress with Boy*, 1997  
Papier-mâché, acrylic paint, and varnish  
33 x 25 x 18 inches  
Image courtesy of Equinox Gallery, Vancouver



**Figure 2.1**

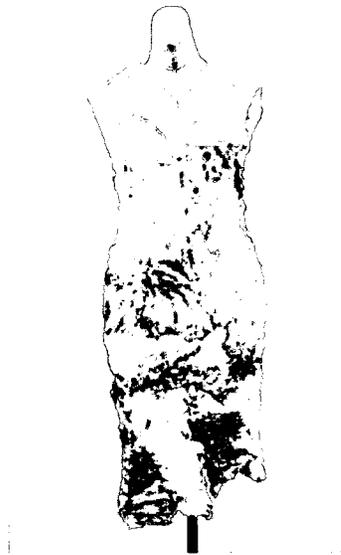
Jana Sterbak, *I Want You to Feel the Way I Do ... (The Dress)*, 1984-1985  
(preparatory drawings)

Each sheet approximately 8.5 x 11 inches



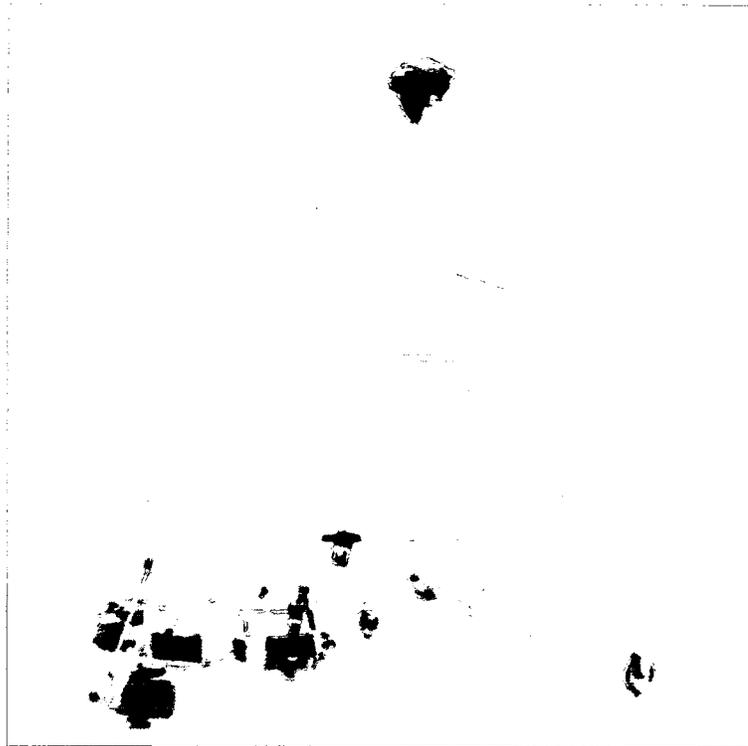
**Figure 2.2**

Jana Sterbak, *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic*, 1987 (fresh)  
Flank steak, mannequin, salt, thread, and colour photograph  
Installation dimensions vary

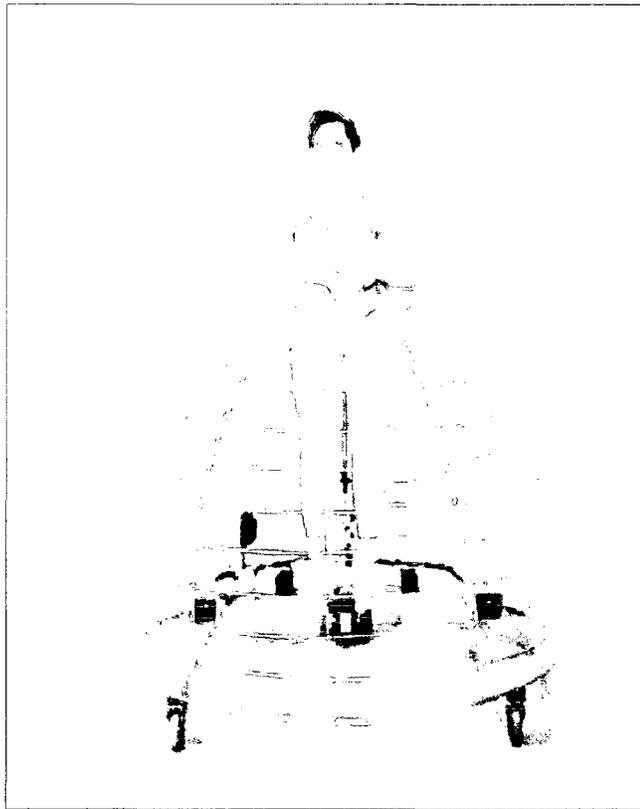


**Figure 2.3**

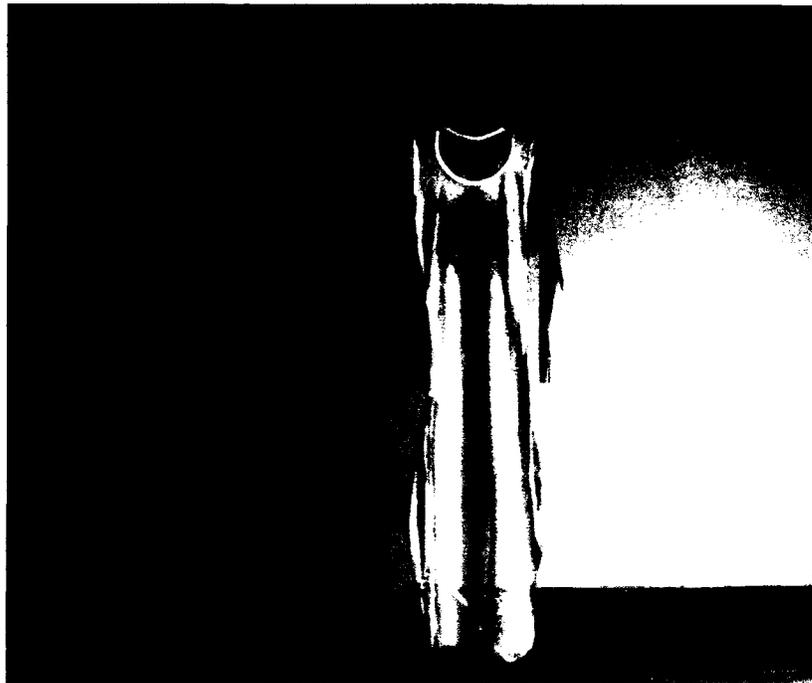
Jana Sterbak, *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic*, 1987 (dried)



**Figure 2.4**  
Jana Sterbak, *Remote Control I*, 1989  
Aluminum, canvas, motorized wheels, casters, batteries, and video  
59.1 x 76.8 inches



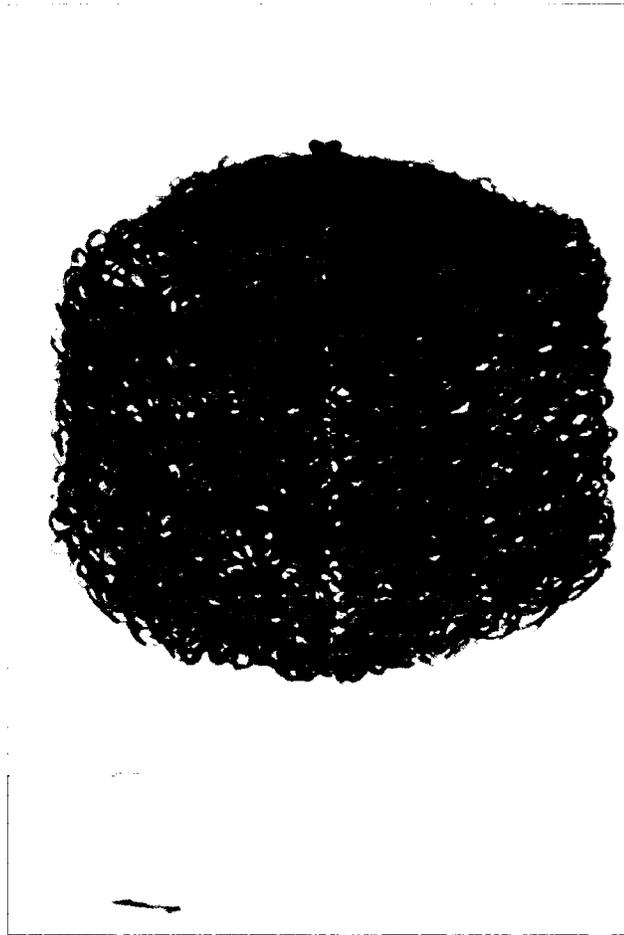
**Figure 2.5**  
Jana Sterbak, *Remote Control II*, 1989  
Aluminum, canvas, motorized wheels, casters, batteries, and video  
61 x 62 x 62 inches



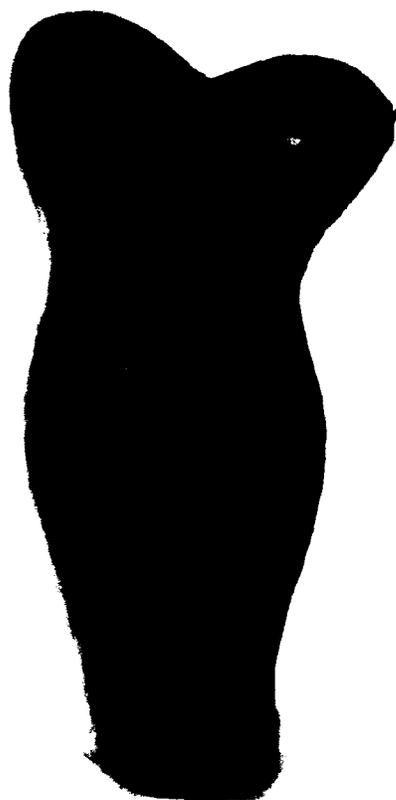
**Figure 2.6**  
Jana Sterbak, *Chemise de Nuit*, 1993  
Organza silk, human body hair, and perfume scent  
Installation dimensions vary



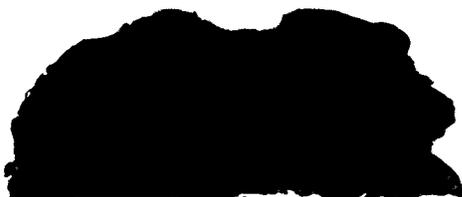
**Figure 3.1**  
Cathy Daley, *Untitled*, 1995  
Pastel on vellum  
92 x 42 inches



**Figure 3.2**  
Cathy Daley, *Untitled*, 1997  
Pastel on vellum  
94 x 84 inches



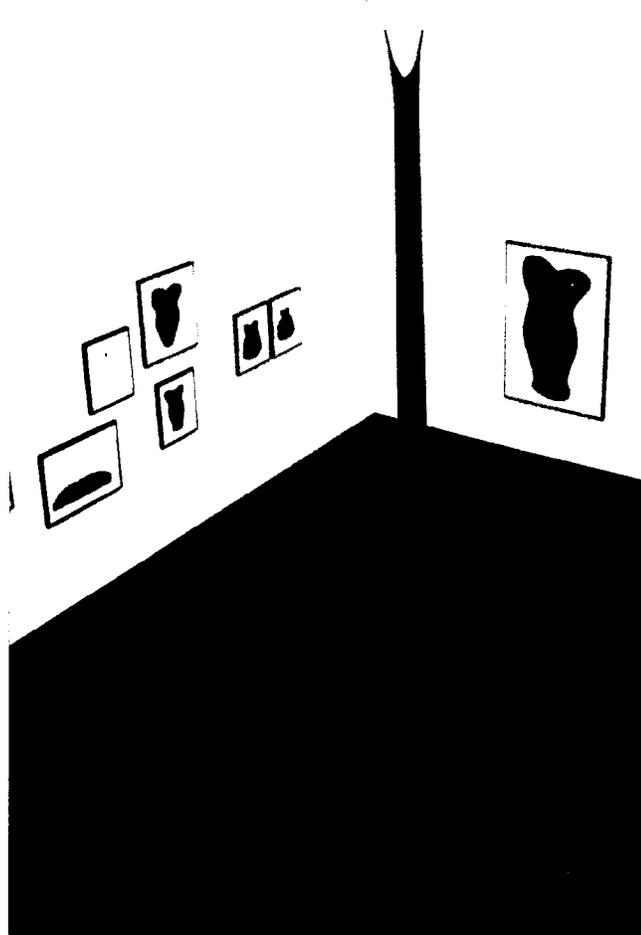
**Figure 3.3**  
Cathy Daley, *Untitled*, 1998  
Pastel on vellum  
55 x 36 inches



**Figure 3.4**  
Cathy Daley, *Untitled*, 2001  
Pastel on vellum  
14 x 11 inches



**Figure 3.5**  
Cathy Daley, *Untitled*, 2004  
Pastel on vellum  
24 x 19 inches



**Figure 3.6**  
Cathy Daley, *Little Black Dress*, 1997  
Black cotton jersey and metal hanger  
17 x 3 feet  
Installation view at The Koffler Gallery, Toronto  
Image courtesy of the artist

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