

Baroque Diffractions in the Work of Jana Sterbak

Walter Moser

With every installation and performance, Jana Sterbak surprises us. With every work, she shifts her focus, placing it somewhere we did not expect it. In looking over her already considerable body of work, which spans more than twenty years, we are first struck by its vitality: its conceptual inventiveness, its aesthetic agility, the continual surprise effect.

And yet we have an equal impression that this work develops its own constants, that certain issues keep returning and asserting themselves, however varied their concrete manifestations may be. An artist's path, ascribable to a signature, thus takes shape and establishes itself. Several main themes have been observed in Sterbak's work: recurring topics (the human body and its "envelopes"); the precarious constitution of the subject and the fragility of intersubjectivities; humans grappling with technological devices, and their ironic "control/dependence" in relation to all kinds of frameworks¹ – from the simplest to the most sophisticated – about which we do not know if they are added, and hence detachable, or form an integral part of our historical condition.

Echoes of certain traditions of aesthetic modernity have also been noted in this work: It is post-avant-garde while taking inspiration from particular gestures of the historical avant-gardes; its economical application of means to convey an artistic intention enters into dialogue with a minimalist aesthetic, although it does not adopt the project of a historically established school; and it remains faithful, throughout its variations, to the conceptualist principle that places the workings of the idea in a setting where our senses come into contact with a material world skilfully "installed" by the artist. Finally, also seen in her work is a tradition of humour and irony with a hint of Mitteleuropa which some critics have related to Sterbak's Czech origin.

Diffractions of the power of the baroque

I would like to trace another powerful tradition that underlies and runs through Jana Sterbak's work, not as a weighty, even paralysing,² influence, still less as a model

¹ Here I am trying to render the term *Gestell* used by Heidegger in "The Age of the World Picture" (essay published in *Heidegger: Off the Beaten Track*) to sum up the status of modern technology in our ontic situation. I am thinking in particular of the frameworks in which a male human subject (*Sisyphus II, Condition*) or more often, a female (*Remote Control*), is held, without being able to get out.

² Jana Sterbak herself has given artistic form to this type of "anxiety of influence" (see Harold Bloom, *Anxiety of Influence* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973]) in her works *Why Can't I Be Giacometti?* and *Absorption: Work in Progress*, 1995, in which she depicts her complex relationship with the legacy of Joseph Beuys.

to be followed, but rather as a fundamental strategy the relics of which are intermittently brought to life in this multifaceted work. This tradition is the baroque aesthetic, whose modes of manifestation I propose to capture here through the concept of diffraction. But how can we link an approach which I have just described as post-avant-gardist with a pre-modern aesthetic? In fact, there is a major narrative of cultural history that identifies the baroque as the other side of modernity, an aesthetic otherness exploited in the seventeenth century by forces opposed to modernity (the aristocracy, the Counter-Reformation, the monarchy). By establishing its own aesthetic project, modernity seems to have then suppressed this otherness as its irrational, pathetic, if not pathogenic, other. It is just recently that other narratives have been developed, allowing us to think of the baroque differently: for example, as a major aesthetic revolution, an aesthetic modernity that radically changed the conception of the art work itself, and especially the interaction which the work is able to establish with its receiver. In either case, we recognize in the baroque a performativeness that actually allows this movement to be related to contemporary trends without turning to the major narrative of the renewed suppressing of modernity.

Consequently, I will instead employ the narrative of an “intermittent persistence” of the baroque, meaning that it would be in effect continuously, even though at times it was out of favour or deliberately overlooked; the aesthetic baroque would thus be historically present in the form of an alternation between disappearance and resurgence.³ It is recognized as having a power⁴ capable of action beyond the age when it emerged, a power that has not exhausted the full potential of its historical revivals. Adopting a bolder (because slightly anachronistic) argument, we may even assert that, on the contrary, this power will only be wholly developed and fulfilled through the modern technologies that give it access to aesthetic works that live up to the original project.

To speak of baroque diffractions in the work of Jana Sterbak is thus to assign it a historical depth well beyond the avant-gardes and other artistic movements of the twentieth century, while also affirming its radical aesthetic contemporaneity, seen then as the intermittent revival of very specific aspects of baroque power. To clarify the issues involved, we must acknowledge that Sterbak has not herself claimed kinship with the baroque aesthetic, in the form of either a return to the baroque or a return of the baroque, as has been expressed and accepted by such diverse artists as filmmakers Derek Jarman, Peter Greenaway and Raul Ruiz, writers Severo Sarduy and Alejo Carpentier, and the Latin American artists who took part, in 2000, in the exhibition *Ultra Baroque. Aspects of Latin American Art* at the Museum of

³ See *Résurgences baroques. Les trajectoires d'un parcours transculturel*, edited by Nicolas Goyer and Walter Moser (Brussels: La Lettre Volée, 2001).

⁴ See *Puissance du baroque. Les forces, les formes, les rationalités*, edited by Else Marie Bukdahl and Carsten Juhl (Paris: Galilée, 1996).

Contemporary Art in San Diego.⁵ And yet, the artist herself invites us to elaborate such a reading of her work through the veiled references she makes to various aesthetic traditions. These references are most explicit in her titles. For example, the word “vanitas,” in the title *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic*, refers directly to a topos by which the baroque era designated the ontological instability brought out by its works. The second, more biographical, element of the title recontextualizes the baroque element by relating it to a psycho-cultural pathology decidedly of our time.

A dissonant emblematics

Most of Sterbak’s titles are semantically laden and are not mere numbering systems or identification labels. Nor are they superfluous additions to the work. Rather, they are full participants in the production of meaning that takes place. In this, they revive the tradition of baroque emblematics. The emblem is a mixed genre that lies between language and image. It consists of an *inscriptio* that states its theme or device, an image (*pictura*) that offers a visual representation of it, often drawn from an iconic repertoire inspired by distant relics, and a *subscriptio* that explains, in the medium of language, the relationship between *inscriptio* and *pictura* in narrative or even dramatic mode. The three elements of the emblem are not detachable, but are one. In Sterbak’s practice, the title and other elements of the work also act as one. The title nevertheless often absorbs and combines the functions of *inscriptio* and *subscriptio*, especially in dual titles: *Corona Laurea: Noli me tangere* (1983), *Golem: Objects as Sensations* (1979-1982) and *House of Pain: A Relationship* (1987).

Other examples feature a simpler title that serves as an *inscriptio*: *Condition or Dissolution*. The other two parts of the emblem are then contained and distributed throughout the rest of the work. The title is by definition formed of language; it therefore always introduces a semantic element that makes an explicit contribution to the conceptual aspect displayed by the work. As for the rest, it is up to the reader/spectator who, with Sterbak, is always called upon very directly to discover the work’s mode of operation and so play an active part in its production of meaning.

In general, in the baroque emblem, the three elements are expressed in assonance. However complex their relations may be, they must lead to an alignment of the elements that gives rise to a convergence of meaning. With Sterbak, however, the process is quite different. She introduces tensions between the elements, and articulates them in such a way as to make it difficult for the

⁵ The catalogue of the same name was put together by Elizabeth Armstrong and Victor Zamudio-Taylor (San Diego: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2000).

receiver, since she favours ironical, nearly paradoxical relations. As a result, her works often have a rhetoric of provocation as their *modus operandi*.

Historically speaking, the baroque emblem is a combination of words and image; it produces a homogeneous meaning that fits into the cultural consensus of the time. Sterbak introduces conceptual dissonance into it. Added to this complexification of the relationship between language and image are all the other elements, either in her installations or in her performances: the objects and materials, their layout in a limited space and lastly, especially for performance, the human actors and, more specifically, the human body. Quite clearly, the emblematic tradition is transformed, if not outstripped, by these elaborations; but, with the rhetoric of each work expressed this way, it still seems to form a core which the receiver must penetrate in order to participate in the conceptual aspect of the work.

Two examples immediately come to mind: In *Attitudes*, 1987, we first find abstract terms such as “avarice,” “reputation,” “sexual fantasies” and “disease” presented literally as inscriptions. However, they are not placed over a *pictura*, but embroidered on pillowcases, in calligraphic letters reminiscent of our grandmothers’ embroidery work. The materialization of the inscription updates a potentially idyllic past, in contradiction with the semantic content of the inscribed terms. In addition, the installation itself – the pillows are placed on beds, the perfect epitome of a scene of intimacy – clashes with the semantic field of the inscribed terms. If we take the installation itself as offering a *subscriptio*, it becomes almost the antiphrasis of the *inscriptio* or the various inscriptions.

We might also recall the complexity of these relationships in the much-analysed case of *Vanitas*. This inscription in baroque devices was often represented in a *pictura* that showed that beneath (surface) beauty lay a deep-seated truth: Physical beauty is deceptive because it is bound to decay and, even more concretely, the fate of all flesh is decomposition and rot. In an initial reversal, that which, in the baroque emblem, was hidden beneath the apparent beauty of the skin now lies on top of the skin. Inside becomes outside, and the flesh itself becomes the envelope; that which was supposed to be protected by the skin becomes the second skin, which is the dress. But since this second skin is made of flesh, it cannot protect the body, given that, as flesh, it is destined to deteriorate. Yet another reversal occurs, involving a new categorization of flesh, of food as clothing and vice versa – and that, incidentally, is what caused the greatest scandal. Food has become clothing, but is unable to take on this role, given its ephemeral, precarious nature. Instead of being the device that allows an obvious meaning to be presented and disclosed in a coded relationship between words and image, the emblem has become a problem. The production of meaning becomes a challenge for the receiver.

The reference to anorexia in the subtitle opens up a totally different semantic field and makes the rhetoric of the work even more complex. It thus thematizes a disease that has the effect of making the body (especially the female body) grow

thinner. And yet, the body of the model in the performance version literally holds an abundance of flesh – that is, food – albeit in the form of a dress. Excess and lack thus stand side by side in the work's various layers of meaning. This dialectic of too much and too little also highlights the pathological relationship between anorexia and bulimia. If we had to sum up the effort required of viewers, treated roughly by so many inversions and reversals, we could say that the artist invites them to transpose the motif of the baroque *vanitas* to a contemporary version, namely anorexia.

The rhetoric of wit

As the case of *Vanitas* has shown, we need to build up a long series of statements and arguments to be able to describe this constructed, momentary singularity of the work/installation in which logic, semantics, the pictorial and the material are intertwined. A critical, interpretative commentary consequently must develop in the simple linearity of a discursive succession which the work condenses into the folds of a complex instantaneity. Another baroque diffraction comes into play here, namely the *Agudeza y arte del ingenio* (The Mind's Wit and Art), to quote the title of a 1647 book by Baltasar Gracián. In a recent French-language edition, Benito Pelegrin translates this title as *Art et figures de l'esprit*, but in his introduction he broaches the plurality of meanings contained in the term *agudeza*: "sharp wit, gibe, pointed saying, scathing comment, dig, shaft, keen remark, cutting retort, words etched to a point, stiletto honed by elegance."⁶

I will not elaborate here on the question of knowing to what extent baroque conceptism is a predecessor of twentieth-century aesthetic conceptualism. What is more important is to see how Sterbak revives the power of what, for Gracián, was both an aesthetic and a rhetoric of wit or, in other words, of the application of the concept. However, this is a "keen" application with a caustic, cutting effect, the energy of which is concentrated in a pointed saying. In Sterbak's work, we find the same principle of an aesthetic meeting the twofold requirement of economy of means and intensity of their deployment. In rare cases, her art provides the spectator with the comfort of quiet contemplation. Much more often, this viewer is instantly drawn in by the workings of the idea which literally explodes in the device used by the installation.

This device, contrary to the words of Gracián, who aimed for an art of words, makes use of an enormous variety of materials. Here, while a connection with baroque art can still be drawn, we should instead note a strong tendency towards what today we call multimedia, and which we can find in such places as opera and baroque celebrations. We could say that Sterbak has managed to introduce this

⁶ Translated from Baltasar Gracián, *Art et figures de l'esprit*, trans., intro. and notes by Benito Pelegrin (Paris: Seuil, 1983, p. 14).

multimedia principle into the often very narrow space of her sculptures and installations. In some of her works, she even leans towards miniaturization, for instance in *Perspiration: Olfactory Portrait, Untitled* (1993) – the fountain pen filled with blood – and the body parts in *Golem: Objects as Sensations*. We consequently observe at the same time an expansion of the range of means and materials used, and especially of their variety, and a tightening of their articulation. The subject of the work tends to be concentrated in a specific singularity (such as the antinomy of the ball filled with lead in *Condensed*), though some performances may also make use of repetition and duration (for example, *Remote Control*, *Sisyphé I* and *Baldacchino*). From one work to the next, the artist thus provides aesthetic responses to the same (baroque) requirement for sharpness of wit, while enriching her work with the great variety of means applied.

The aesthetic intensity of precarious materials

Let us take a closer look at one of these means: materials. Their selection is certainly one of the distinctive traits of Sterbak's art. It is mainly in this act that she never ceases to surprise us, to the point of disconcerting us. Nothing is ruled out a priori; everything can become raw material for her works. She gives us a clear demonstration of this in *Golem: Objects as Sensations*, in which the materials forming the small statues of "organs without bodies"⁷ range from bronze to lead and rubber.

With such an eclectic display of materials for artistic purposes, we are nevertheless very far from an art defined by the nobility of its materials. And indeed, while the artist does not avoid so-called noble materials, she adds such a variety of other materials, each more surprising than the next, that it is more a transgression of aesthetic codes demanding the use of these noble materials that is affirmed as a result. The conceptualization and realization of Sterbak's works involve, among other things, minerals (the literalization of Sisyphus's stone in *Sisyphé Sport* becomes practically a tongue-in-cheek irony) and metals;⁸ synthetic materials produced by the latest technology;⁹ technical-looking apparatus (for instance in *Hot Crown*, *Seduction Couch* and *I Want You to Feel the Way I Do*) and media devices (for example in *Declaration*), as well as mechanical structures surrounding – or encumbering – the human body (*Sisyphé I* and *II*). We also find textiles (*Absorption: Work in Progress*). But the most amazing materials are those that are unstable (the ice in *Dissolution*) or organic (bread, cake, blood, perspiration, flesh,

⁷ An inversion of Deleuze and Guattari's notion of "bodies without organs."

⁸ Note the use of lead, the saturnine metal (in *Condensed* and *Golem: Objects as Sensations*), which may also be found in a certain phase of Anselm Kiefer's work.

⁹ See the care Sterbak takes in explaining the selection and technological qualities of the material in *Oasis*.

hair). The inventory even extends to living animals (*Combat Cricket Compartment* and *Pli a Slecna [Defence]*).

These materials should not be confused with the raw material out of which, and against which, the artist's idea is shaped and imprinted, and which enables her project to take shape. No, the material as such acts as a constituent part of the workings of the piece. It both conveys and expresses ideas, as well as providing the ideas with materiality. To begin with, however, its material concreteness appeals to our senses and therefore lies at the origin of the aesthetic experience offered by the work. Sterbak's art is first of all based on this intense aesthetic appeal. In this, it fits into the tradition of the baroque aesthetic which is directed towards the effect to be produced, the emotion to be conveyed and the pathos to be aroused. With the help of the whole array of modern technological means, artists today are able to fully realize the power of the baroque in this regard. Jana Sterbak fits into the scenario of the contemporary fulfilment of the baroque, even though she is drawn much more to the use of new technologies than other artists (such as Janet Cardiff or Gary Hill).

We could even say that, in Sterbak's work, the most aesthetically interesting materials are the least technological. I am thinking, in particular, of perishable materials, which undergo a process of deterioration during the time the work is on display. This deterioration is an integral part of the aesthetic project. It can even be central to this project, by injecting into it an idea/material that becomes decisive for the work as a whole.

The temporal life of the work

Accordingly, whenever the material contains the precariousness of an irreversible deterioration, it gives the work a temporality that is opposite to the injunction that long prevailed in the West: *ars longa, vita brevis*. The function of art was to rescue the work from the ephemeral condition of the biological and let it triumph over the contingency of the transient things of this life. Art became, in this sense, a project that was opposite to life; it stemmed from a strategy for controlling contingency. In some of Sterbak's works, we see clearly that this function has been rejected, by the fact that the art work follows the fate of the precarious material it is made of. The "life of the work," from being a metaphor, takes on a literal sense. The material transmits its constitutive instability to the work, in the dynamics of its inexorable deterioration. This radically changes the aesthetic paradigm in which we operate. From an aesthetic of completed work, of an object destined to achieve perpetuity, perhaps stand even outside time, we move on to a paradigm in which the work is process, hence transformation, if not decline. Sterbak's most interesting works come under this last aesthetic paradigm.

In this, she captures another diffraction of the aesthetic revolution of the baroque. This revolution, which added a dynamic principle to the art work itself, has been the subject of fierce debate. The opponents, in the name of a classical art that may never have existed as a governing ideal, saw in this dynamic principle only irregularity, decadence, ruin and decline. The others – who would only be called baroque two centuries later – saw in it vitality, progressiveness and the crest of the advancing wave of time.¹⁰ Today, the principle of the baroque aesthetic revolution seems to be gaining a hegemonic position, even when the baroque is not the subject. This dynamic is described in such terms as evolution, metamorphosis, virtuality and movement. Sterbak's choice of certain materials, materials that contain this dynamic and transmit it to the work in the form of a process of deterioration or dissolution, seems to form a part of the power of the baroque while also contributing to its contemporary revival.¹¹

The temporality of the work is consequently radically transformed, as Jean Rousset had already foreseen – in his 1954 book which marked the “discovery” of the French literary baroque – in speaking of “the presence of time, which is engaged and made perceptible in the work.”¹² It is especially wherever the material is biological in nature that a time of disintegration will become the time of the work of art, which will now spark a realization of the transitory nature of its condition more than it can claim to triumph over the precariousness of life.¹³ This is plainly the case in the works in which Sterbak uses the most organic material possible: flesh (in *Vanitas* and *Chair Apollinaire*).

The same aesthetic principle comes into play in a more recent installation: *Dissolution*. This installation comprises a group of chairs set in an empty space. The distinguishing feature of these chairs is that their legs and uprights are made of metal tubing, a solid material that corresponds to the stability demanded of a chair. The seat itself and the back, however, are made of ice. This second material entails a particular temporality since, at room temperature, the ice will melt. Within a few hours, its solidity will dissolve into liquidity. As a result of the instability and transience of the ice, the entire installation contains a negative dynamic: The chairs will self-destruct by dissolution. This process takes place right before the spectators' eyes and will be incorporated into their aesthetic experience. The work is suspended between solid and liquid, between stability and dissolution; it

¹⁰ On this subject, the article by Marshall Brown continues to open up new perspectives. “The Classic is the Baroque. On the Principle of Wölfflin's Art History,” *Critical Inquiry* 9 (1982), p. 379-404.

¹¹ In her recent book *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999), Mieke Bal expresses similar thoughts on precarious materials and their link with the baroque.

¹² Translated from *La Littérature baroque en France* (Paris: José Corti, 1954), p. 232.

¹³ This realization is central to the concept of “baroque” in Walter Benjamin's *Barockbuch (The Origin of German Tragic Drama)* (London: NLB, 1977).

presents a passage, which has become a metaphor for the transitory. At first sight totally static, this work lives on the temporal/material dynamics contained in the choice of ice as material and its ironic or even rhetorically paradoxical expression, in relation to the expectation of stability and permanence associated both with the chair and, traditionally, with the work of art.

A final example, *Catacombes*, presents the same type of work on a material/idea that introduces a subtle play of temporality into the work. This installation, in its rather unspectacular bareness, brings together the complexity – wherein lies the sharpness of its wit – of the baroque diffractions I have traced in the work of Jana Sterbak. The baroque emblem readily recognized in it is turned upside down and becomes dissonant, particularly through the choice of material: chocolate. The bones, traditionally used as the *pictura* in a *memento mori*, are the part of the body that endures well beyond its physical decline. However, moulded out of a material that is not only perishable (undermining their ability to signify the eternity of death) but edible, too (means of subsistence allowing that which is most precarious – life – to last), they no longer support the ponderous construction of baroque transcendence. The material chosen by the artist introduces an immanence that subverts the *subscriptio* into a statement of the type: “Death sustains life.” And it does so with a certain nod towards Mexico, the country that establishes its cultural identity by affirming the baroque within the vitality of its popular culture, while reinserting the *memento mori* into the cycle of life.