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Why does terror seem so intimate?

Sarah Stevenson, 2089 West Sainte-Catherine Street, in
conjunction with the Saidye Bronfman Centre. 7 - 28 October
2000

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[See table of contents](#)

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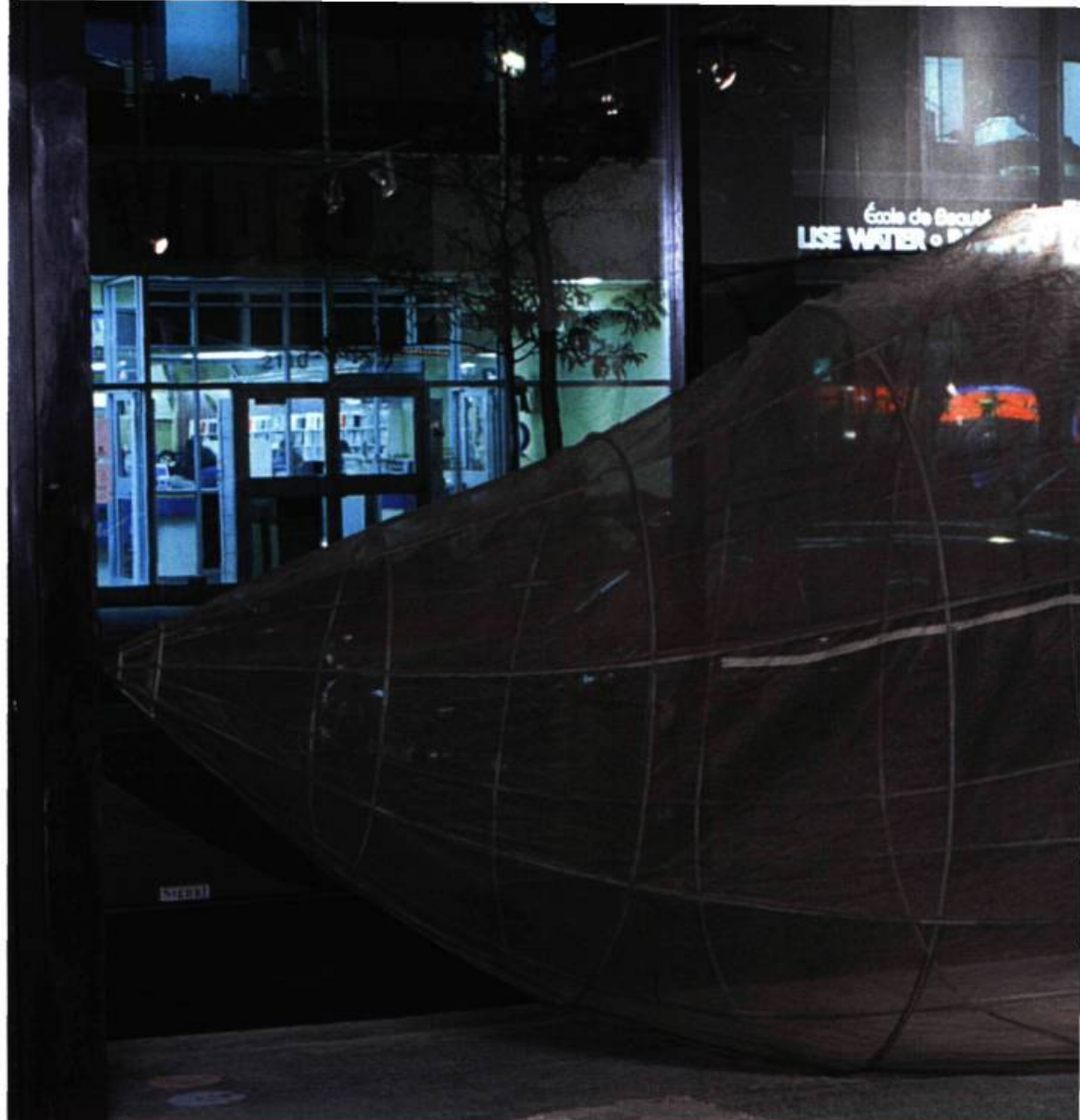
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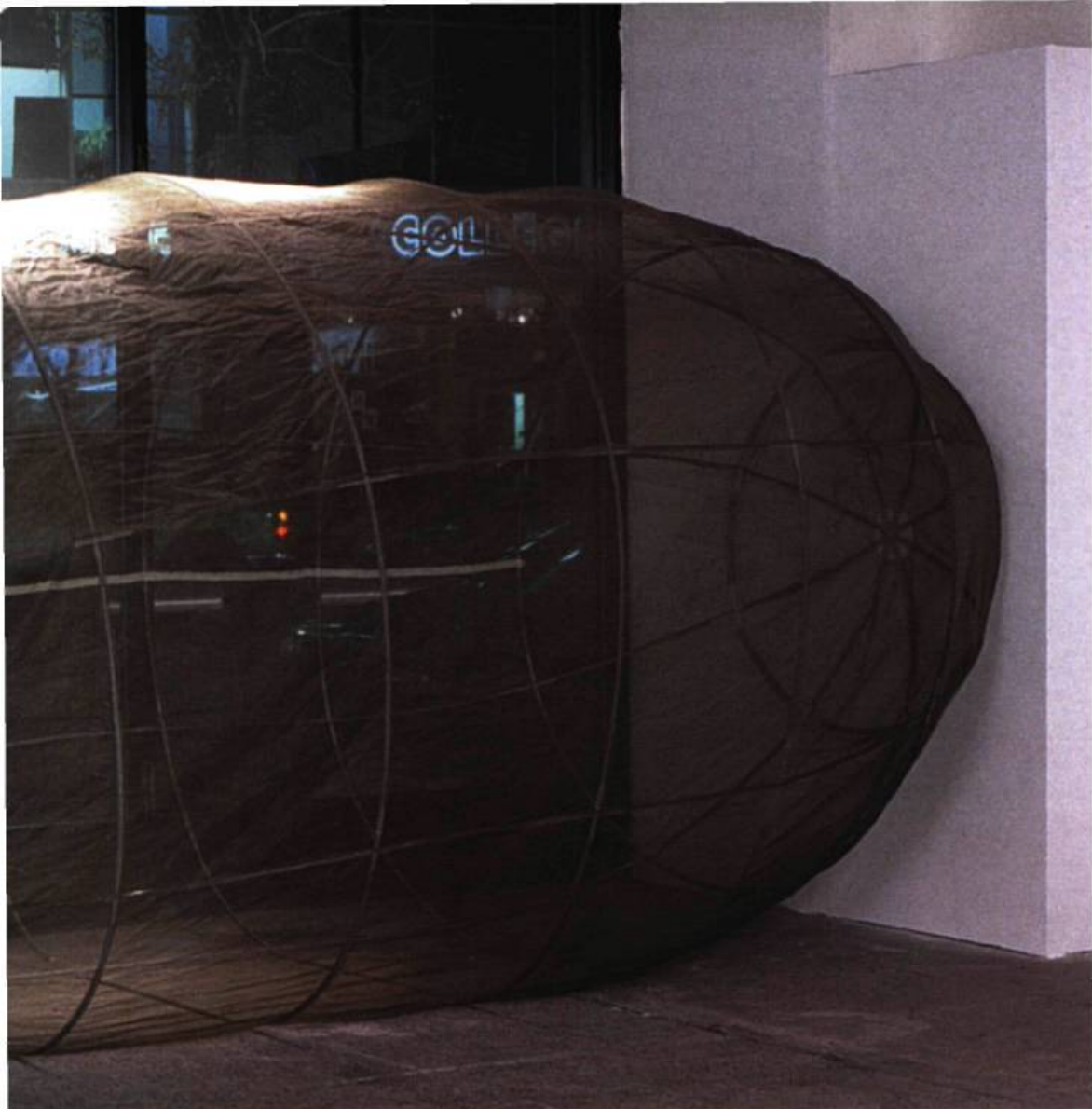
WHY DOES TERROR SEEM SO INTIMATE?

Sarah Stevenson, 2089 West Sainte-Catherine Street, in conjunction with the Saidye Bronfman Centre. 7 - 28 October 2000

Very suddenly there came back to my soul motion and sound – the tumultuous motion of the heart, and in my ears the sound of its beating. Then a pause in which all is blank. Then again sound, and motion and touch – a tingling sensation pervading my frame. Then the mere consciousness of existence, without thought – a condition which lasted long. Then, very suddenly, thought, and shuddering terror, and earnest endeavor to comprehend my true state. Then a strong desire to lapse into insensibility. Then a rushing revival of soul and a successful effort to move. And now a full memory...

Edgar Allan Poe, *The Pit and the Pendulum*, Airmont Classic ed., 1962, p. 159.

With these few words Poe induces in his reader that oscillating experience of suffocating tension, insensible sensation and clarity of thought that constitutes pure terror. Terror – and Pity, the twin elements of the tragic form. What is this terror, and why does it seem so familiar? And why, entering 2089 rue Sainte-Catherine Ouest and confronted with Sarah Stevenson's apparently lyric works, do I find myself suddenly and at the edge of consciousness so aware of a fearful namelessness, of the presence of an abyss. Why at that instant does all my thought crystallize into Poe's? The moment passes, of course, and I am left with the question, while Stevenson's work resumes its logical and ordered form: extensive, lightweight, self-sup-



Sarah Stevenson, *Pod*, 2000. Mosquito screening, plastic; 225 x 532 x 225 cm. Photo: Richard-Max Tremblay.

porting, elegantly awkward volumetric shapes. Symptomatically vulnerable, these shapes are themselves the consequence of pushing material to its limits. And while I find myself admiring Stevenson's work for its marvelous engineering, I am most aware of an uncomfortable edge that implacably frames not just the void within her shapes, but the very myth of technical, material, progress that constitutes the solidity of our Western secular normality. The *new* and the *exotic* have become false strategies of control out of which we have come to construct our pre-eminent daydream. And then it comes to me that, indeed, Stevenson presents me with an antipode, the darkness at the limits of our vision. This work, so close to being a lullaby, delivers the night-dream of frozen fear! Again, that question : why does terror seem so inti-

mate, and what is it about Sarah Stevenson's work that shapes its name ? It seems useful to begin with the work.

They are large, room-sized, and there are three of them. In fact, their paradoxical fragility exerts an oppressive quasi-architectonic force on the body. Constructed from transparent nylon gauze, dyed dark, their shapes are held in place by barely visible nylon rods and almost invisible nylon threads that keep the fragile skin suspended under carefully manipulated tensions. They are magical. Seductive. Their structures court our gaze, our desire for the poetic and mysterious, fixing a longing that is only intensified by a gradual revelation of their tensile limits. Or should I speak about this work as breath suspended? As breath caught in an avalanche of frozen

air? As life force arrested at that moment between dream and nightmare? A deadly and vertiginous seduction?

I know not how it was – but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit. I say insufferable; for the feelings unrelieved by any of that half-pleasurable, because poetic, sentiment with which the mind usually receives even the sternest natural image of the desolate or terrible – bleak walls – upon the vacant eye-like windows. (Poe p. 29)

The vertigo, as I consider my question, is as old as the Modern Age, as old as Blake's 'fearful symmetry'. In Stevenson's three volumes, and the temptation to read these works linguistically cannot be denied, there is a variation on a single shape. And that shape? It is of course the shape of fear, its oppressive triangulation an exacerbation of our gnawing sense of over-extended limits, of that breaking point which seems increasingly imminent in both our material and psychological realities. As Virilio's speed surpasses the capability of our neural pathways, Blake's Tyger becomes Freud's nightmare, the failed dream of modernity.

The space is an L. L for language? L is an interesting shape, enclosing both panopticon and hidden recess. In the middle of this ambiguous space rests an ambiguous object, perhaps five meters in diameter and three in height, formed of translucent terracotta-coloured material, and describing a slightly absurd image rather like a pointed tomato or a giant frozen breath. It is at once full and empty, transparent and obliquely solid, soft and embracing, almost inviting but aloof. We can visually penetrate its internal structure and, while accepting that its plastic ribs support it, we simultaneously and subliminally realize that it is the near invisible tension of the threads that keeps the form afloat. A second object, a variation, taller, grey and much less wide stands miraculously upright. A single tear, a single drop of rain held suspended. But it is the third, an oblong shape, this one pressed between the walls on either side, that triggers that visceral awe that Poe voiced. Stuck, stranded, its presence the verge between collapse and defiance, it articulates in form the articulation of thought. Its preci-

sion forms the words, my words, as they unconsciously trace the familiar lines of Poe's descent into the pit, his elegy on that duress that makes us helpless witness to events beyond our control. Together, these three object shapes, these daemons which in fact are one – the same shape stretched, pulled, pressed – this Trinity betrays our assurance of that control, unmasking the fascination and repulsion with which we entertain our own destruction.

The vibration of the pendulum was at right angles to my length... Down – steadily down it crept. I took a frenzied pleasure in contrasting its downward with its lateral velocity... Down – certainly relentlessly down ! It vibrated within three inches of my bosom ! (Poe p. 165)

And there we are, on the edge of the abyss. Cast between Pity and Terror, Stevenson's work, like Poe's, induces that recognition of tragedy that is the hallmark of our present Age of Anxiety, our postmodern enigma, as it appears to hurtle out of control towards a destiny that divides body from soul, like the pendulum, like a sword of Damocles. It seems fitting, only logical, that confronted with this we turn, return, to the body itself, to its sinews, ligaments and nerve networks, its anatomy, as we search for what we may again call our soul. In the end, it is Stevenson's anatomy, her probing of the body's interiority in this trinity of shape, that promises the salvation from catastrophe that Poe anticipated for us at the dawn of our very modern era :

Very suddenly there came back to my soul motion and sound – tumultuous motion of the heart, and, in my ears, the sound of its beating. Then a pause in which all is blank. Then again sound, and motion, and touch – a tingling sensation pervading my frame... (Poe)

YVONNE LAMMERICH

