

Jan Fabre

From the Feet to the Brain

June 6 to September 20, 2009

Curator: Eckhard Schneider
Inviting curator: Giacinto Di Pietrantonio

Press conference: Friday, June 5, 2009, 12.30 noon
with lunch at 1.30 p.m.

Opening: Friday, June 5, 2009, 6 to 10 p.m.

Jan Fabre's new work series "From the Cellar to the Attic – From the Feet to the Brain," which he elaborated for the Kunsthaus Bregenz in 2008, represented an important step in his work development. With five room-filling sculptural tableaus, Fabre created a mythical world of horror, beauty, and metamorphosis that was hardly conceivable in conventional artistic terms and constantly alternated between reality and dream. The installation followed the layout of the human body. Five exhibition levels with metaphoric titles borrowed from different zones of the body – starting with the feet in the basement and ending with the brain on the upper level – created a gesamtkunstwerk of mysterious complexity.

Thanks to the cooperation of the Galleria d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea di Bergamo (GAMeC), Studio Fabre, the Kunsthaus Bregenz and the support of Linda and Guy Pieters, Jan Fabre will be installing his five sculptural tableaus at the 53rd Venice Biennale, giving a broad international art audience the chance to rediscover this gesamtkunstwerk.

With the installation "From the Feet to the Brain," Fabre ponders the artistic rules of his work and the bounds of his previous artistic practice. His basic principles can be broken down as follows: 1. the awareness of the power of the images of the real that was discovered in the Flemish Primitives, further developed through the visual force of performances and theater, and finally emerged in the form of sculptural tableaus; 2. the extreme concentration on the body as the crystallization point between life and death, agony and fulfillment; 3. the fascination for the insect as a symbol of metamorphosis, as the subject of intense investigations, and as an important material for drawings, objects, and wall and room-filling installations; 4. the constant

application of the mechanical, self-driven principle in all artistic activities, a principle that originates from the discovery of the body and the behavior of insects; 5. the fascination for mirroring and doubling, which is the point of departure for many works.

“The Feet,” “The Sex,” “The Belly,” “The Heart,” and “The Brain” – these five elements, each in its own way visually overwhelming, will be presented anew in the halls of the Arsenale Novissimo. Never before has Jan Fabre so radically made the human body the main motif of both the overall composition and the individual parts of a work. At the Kunsthhaus Bregenz the tableaus were arranged vertically; here, they are set up horizontally. With the pictorial interpretation of the theme, Fabre exhausts all the aesthetic freedoms introduced in his work and at the same time focuses on perhaps the most dominant theme of his oeuvre: his own body. “From the Feet to the Brain” shows us the artist’s ideal vision of life and more clearly than ever before reveals the consciously chosen artistic anachronism that constitutes his specific and sometimes also misunderstood artistic uniqueness.

In 1978, Jan Fabre (*1958 in Antwerp/Belgium) erected a tent on his parents’ property, which was to serve as his bedroom, laboratory, studio, retreat, and private universe for a long time to come. This work called “De Neus/Neuslaboratorium” (The Nose/Nose Lab) can be considered the nucleus of his oeuvre. Three tent poles, a blanket thrown over them, a flat desk, a blue leather satchel, an assortment of bottles containing tinctures and insects, and a microscope make up the laboratory. Inside there is just enough room for one person. Inspired by the passion of his great-grandfather, the famous entomologist Jean-Henri Fabre, everything seemed to revolve around the systematic method of investigation, killing, pinning, preserving, and categorizing insects, at first.

The tent soon became a small studio. The territory through which Jan Fabre has moved from then on is the black area of the extinguished, an abstraction under which instinct is free to play out its obsessions. The tent not only stands for a protective space but is also an archetype of risk, threat, and loss, embodying the artist’s loneliness. If looking outward fails to sharpen one’s perception for the things of this world, there is always the parallel path into the fathomless inner pool of dreams and visions one can resort to.

In these years, Jan Fabre completed a number of drawings, which he published in his “Book of Insects” in 1990. One drawing hints at the direction Fabre’s work would take. The DIN A5 sheet of paper is blacked out with only a small window left open in which there is the word “L’instinct.” In the upper margin, “zwarte neon in nachtelijk grondgebied” (black neon in nocturnal territory) has been written by hand. In the bottom third of the sheet are two

noses that form a kind of tent, “tentje van neuzen voor nachtelijk grondgebied” (little tent of noses for nocturnal territory). The black extinguishes what has been, making room for instinct and dream to take effect. Significantly, the tent consists of two noses – if you can no longer trust your eyes alone, you rely on your nose.

Two years before erecting his tent, Jan Fabre had gone to Bruges, where he discovered the Flemish masters for himself. Fabre did not regard their paintings as works upon which one has only to gaze long enough in order to be able to understand all their secrets. Rather, he experienced a reversal of the usual relationship between the work and the viewer: that not only does he gaze at the work, but the work also gazes at him. Fabre was so moved by the Flemish masters’ directness in displaying the body, suffering, and torture that, as he puts it, body art and performance became the main elements of his work from then on.

This concept of the body associated with subjecting the physical self to danger and ultimately with death, is juxtaposed by Fabre, particularly in his theater pieces, against the idea of a body consisting of muscles, effort, and concentration and controlled by willpower. Like insects flying again and again toward a source of light until they grow weary and collapse, the dancers in his theater cover the hermetic box-like space of the stage with the regular staccato of their movements.

Eckhard Schneider, General Director of the PinchukArtCentre, Kiev

The five installations at the Venice Biennale 2009

The belly:

Ik heb een stuk van het plafond van het koninklijk paleis moeten uitbreken omdat er iets uitgroeide, 2008

I had to break down a part of the ceiling of the Royal Palace because there was something growing out of it

Fabre copied a fragment of the permanent installation he made in the Mirror Room of the Royal Palace in Brussels. For that installation, Fabre covered the ceiling of the room using more than 1,000,000 wings of the jewel beetle. Before Fabre's intervention, this room was meant to be decorated in honor of Leopold II and his accomplishments in the old Belgian colony of Congo. In a reaction to this permanent work created in 2001, Fabre "breaks down" a part of the ceiling because something – history, represented by a black (Congolese) man – is growing out of it. He turned this part of the ceiling upside down, creating a monumental 10 × 10 m installation.

The feet:

Schuilkelder-atelier voor de kunstenaar-krijger, 2009
Shelter-studio for the artist-warrior

Fabre created a shelter-atelier comprising different thinking models he made in the 90s. The shelter-atelier (which is a cement cube) is composed of an entrance space, an official space, and the artist's secret studio. In the first space, the corridor to the official space, Fabre presents 3 lambs growing from the ceiling. These lambs refer to the baptism, the spiritual cleansing of Christ. In the official space, Fabre installs 7 tin baths painted with blue BIC ink and two "brain-legs" coming down from the ceiling. The baths symbolize the ritual place of purification but also refer to Fabre's insomnia; he uses his bathtub as a sarcophagus where he calms down to draw and work. The "brain-legs" on the other hand represent the memory of the feet, the feet as a brain. The secret space is a studio filled with ammunition and experimental organic material. This is the artist's lab, a place to hide and work.

The sex:**Fontein van de wereld (als jonge kunstenaar), 2008
Fountain of the world (as a young artist)**

For Fabre, this installation represents the sex and therefore the force of his creative potential. He presents himself as a young man with a constant erection lying on a bed of 150 gravestones. The man symbolizes a fountain ejaculating a sperm-like fluid in a constant rhythm. The gravestones on which he is positioned are engraved with names of insects that refer to artists, philosophers, and writers who, according to Fabre, are or will become part of the history of the world. In a way, he is surrounding himself with friends who support and influence him in a spiritual and artistic way. The installation is part of a series of self-portraits in which Fabre discovers and explores the fluids of the body, as he has done in his blood, sperm, tear and urine drawings. Around this, the early drawings Fountain of the World are shown. These drawings have served as a thinking model for this work.

The heart:**Het toekomstige hart van barmhartigheid voor mannen en vrouwen, 2008
The future merciful heart for men and women.**

Fabre creates a poetic installation, using 3,000 human bones and 10 skulls made out of Murano glass to create two altars facing each other. Some of the skulls and bones are painted with BIC-blue ballpoint ink, which makes reference to the baths in the shelter-atelier. The color blue represents the hour blue, the mystical moment of the day when nocturnal animals go to sleep and diurnal animals wake up. On the one altar/sarcophagus, Fabre presents a male heart, which is closed. On the other, we find a slightly smaller and more elegant female heart, which is open. These hearts are made out of a mosaic of human bones and represent a model of the future heart of mankind: a merciful heart that cannot bleed.

The brain:

In de loopgraven van het brein als kunstenaar-lilliputter, 2008

In the trenches of the brain as an artist-Lilliputian

From a wooden balcony inspired by Flemish staircases Fabre offers a view of a timeless battlefield with 4 trenches leading to one big crater. In this crater we discover the skinless head of a giant. On this head stands the artist, presenting himself as a Lilliputian, digging his way through the brain, discovering not only the structural physiognomy of the face but the terra incognita of the brain. Whereas sex represents the force of the artist's creative potential, the brain is the place where it happens. This is why Fabre regards the brain as "the most sexy part of the body."

KUB-Publications

Jan Fabre

From the Feet to the Brain

Designed in close collaboration with Jan Fabre, the catalogue presents the five works on display in Bregenz, sculptural tableaus that make good use of puns and symbolism. In his introduction, Eckhard Schneider addresses the idea of sculptural tableaus and its implementation and interpretation in the works created especially for the Kunsthhaus Bregenz.

In knowledgeable essays the internationally renowned curators and authors Vincent Huguet, Philippe Van Cauteren, Katerina Koskina, Yuko Hasegawa, and Bart Verschaffel elucidate each of the expansive floor-filling ensembles. With its numerous foldouts and large-format installation photographs, this catalogue shows the complexity of one of the most unusual artists of our age.

This book has been republished at the occasion of the Venice Biennial 09.

Jan Fabre

From the Feet to the Brain

Italien/English

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Kunsthaus Bregenz

Kunsthaus Bregenz
Karl Tizian Platz
A-6900 Bregenz

Artistic Consultant
Eckhard Schneider

Chief executive
Artur Vonblon

Curator:
Rudolf Sagmeister

Press and public relations:
Birgit Albers
Phone: (+43-55 74) 4 85 94-413
Fax: (+43-55 74) 4 85 94-408
b.albers@kunsthaus-bregenz.at

Press photos to download:
www.kunsthaus-bregenz.at

Art Education:
Winfried Nußbaumüller
Phone: (+43-55 74) 4 85 94-417
Fax: (+43-55 74) 4 85 94-408
w.nussbaumueller@kunsthaus-
bregenz.at

Publications:
Katrin Wiethege
Phone: (+43-55 74) 4 85 94-416
Fax: (+43-55 74) 4 85 94-408
k.wiethege@kunsthaus-bregenz.at

Editions:
Caroline Schneider
Phone: (+43-55 74) 4 85 94-444
Fax: (+43-55 74) 4 85 94-408
c.schneider@kunsthaus-bregenz.at