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Jan Fabre

Stigmata

Actions & Performances 1976-2013

SKIRA

- G. Celant** The history of artistic endeavour increasingly seems to become a history of those who attempt to construct a canvas of stories regarding their own biographies. It is identity made painting, or sculpture, or performance, an identity that the creator tends to impersonate in front of others. The personification of a narrative that, as we are trying to do now with your individual actions from the 1970s to the present, in retrospect becomes a useful means to understand your past and present work, both in the visual arts and in theatre. What remains of these unique and unrepeatable moments are images and traces, objects and films, collected in this publication; from these it is possible to 'reconstruct' your figure as an artist. To begin retracing this 'history' on the basis of fragments and documents, we will see if it is possible to shed light on the reasons and the times.
- I would like to start at the beginning, 1976, and ask you to recount your memories of that time. How old were you? What kind of identity were you in search of? What was the cultural and social context in which you began to work? What knowledge did you have of the history of contemporary art of around 1968–1969, when a linguistic split opened up all kinds of media, including the body?
- J. Fabre** I was 18 and going to two art schools, because my parents said I had to learn a trade. I was secretly going to the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, but I also had to go to a city school to learn a trade. I chose the course in Window Display at the Municipal Institute of Decorative Arts and Crafts where I learnt the basis of photography, how to paint billboards for movie houses, how to drape clothes on window mannequins, design ads, scale models, etc. Because I was very quick at learning and finishing my tasks, I had enough time left to go to the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, where I took Drawing and Painting. It took the staff of each school three years to find out that I was a student at both art schools. (*Chuckles.*)
- GC** And it was legal?
- JF** No! It was illegal. You couldn't be enrolled in two day-schools at the same time and I had to hide it from my parents.
- GC** They were concerned, like all the parents, that the artistic profession was not a job, it was considered a way of dropping out of a serious engagement with life.

JF Yes, and it also had a little to do with my father's background, coming from a poor communist family. As a young man he was artistically inspired by his elder brother, my uncle Jaak, who was an actor and later became the founder of the National Flemish Youth Theatre. My father started at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp, but had to quit and start working to support the family. Much later in life he became a botanical specialist.

I always sensed a certain envy from my father because he could not finish the Royal Academy, and both of my parents believed that there was no financial security to build up a life as an artist.

GC It was like that also for my father, who wished to become an engineer, but was forbidden from doing so by my grandfather. My first studies, therefore, were directed at engineering, which I did for two years until it became clear to me that this wasn't my field. Since I was 18 years old I have always had poets and artists as friends, so that at a certain point I switched to the Faculty of Arts, where together with my professor Eugenio Battisti I built the first museum of contemporary arts in Genoa. At the same time I managed to survive and earn a living by playing billiards professionally, which allowed me to contribute as editor to the foundation of an important journal, *Marcatrè*, as well as organise cinema festivals, first Latin-American and later African. It is interesting to see how the urge to construct an identity clashes with a schizophrenic moment, with on the one hand the demands of the family, and on the other the need for freedom of expression: a conflict between work and pleasure that, if one manages to combine them, leads to a completed person.

It seems clear that the turning point for you came when you were 18 years old, when you began to 'produce' something that you recognised as being personal and autobiographical, able to be representative of you. At the same time the desire to be someone will not allow one to survive. So, how did you support yourself, or how did you manage to get by, economically speaking, without relying on your family?

JF I had to be active in different realities because at home there was no money to support going to the Royal Academy of Fine Arts. So as a young guy I was raised on the street; to survive and to pay for all my materials for the Academy I went to work in the weekends in restaurants and also became a small resourceful gangster—breaking into villas and taking whatever valuables I could carry.

GC And you sold them on the black market?

JF I sold them on the street and in all-night bars.

GC Were you alone or were you in some sort of gang?

JF Some things I did alone. For example, I discovered that it was very easy to break into small window display boxes to steal cameras. Some of them I used for myself and others I sold in the night life. Already years before I went to the Academy, when I was around 13 or 14 years old, I'd created my own gang, the Gang of Cartouche, inspired by a French movie entitled *Cartouche* (1962) in which the main character was a pirate who stole from the rich to give to the poor. With my gang I committed a lot of thefts in the docks of Antwerp, where we stole radios, cigarettes, coffee makers, and so forth.

GC A typical story for the docklands. Also in Genoa many of my friends supported themselves by working in the port, where shipping crates were dropped during the unloading and the goods taken and sold on the black market. The products were said to be 'crate brand' to indicate their not quite legal origins. Antwerp and Genoa share this port life and both have historical city centres dominated by a certain sense of illicitness. This situation was our heritage from the years after the end of the war, when the only means of existence from Amsterdam to Naples were connected to contraband. Given this, one can understand how living conditions characterised by a survival instinct, often closely interconnected with violence, pushed you towards projecting a 'purified' universe, one of art and performance. The complexity of having to fight against a society, both physically and intellectually, led you to fight yourself. You opened up a dimension that is mentally and behaviourally different and that the art world has designated 'performance'. You pushed yourself to find an 'other' in yourself that was not violent or aggressive. This is a way to impose oneself over an adversary, which is the context in which one grew up. Placing oneself opposite that, both as a person and as a body.

JF To be honest I didn't know anything about performance. Basically there are four different reasons why I started with performances. The first reason was my background in street culture: the poetry and style of street fighting, the street law of physical and mental strength, the honour code of the street. And of course the beautiful and dangerous risks of thefts, and so on.

GC Did you fight with other people?

JF I was quite a good street fighter. I was forced to be a good street fighter in the neighbourhood where I was born. Because I was the smallest with the biggest mouth, I got a lot of beatings. (*Chuckles.*) But I was never afraid and through those fights I learned to position myself.

The second reason I started with performance is that I have always had the feeling that I'm living on borrowed time. As a young man I was twice in coma. This post-mortem stage of life impregnates all my work.

The third thing that drove me to performance was the exercises in the second year at the Municipal Institute of Decorative Arts and Crafts: we had to go out of school to make window displays, for example at the big department store Grand Bazar on the Groenplaats, where the Rubens statue is. This inspired me to take the mannequins out of the window and replace them with my own body. In one of my first public actions, *Delusion of the Day* (1977, No. 5), I dressed myself in a costume made from newspapers, the costume as a body that is flirting with propaganda and the body as a costume that is assuming information. In the window I did different kinds of actions to criticize and question the power of display and selling.

The fourth thing is that around that same period I visited an exhibition about anonymous Flemish masters at the Groeningemuseum in Bruges, where I discovered several paintings on the theme of stigmata and flagellation. This was such a physical and mental shock. I saw performance before I could even describe what the word 'performance' meant. Those paintings inspired me to buy Gillette razor blades and start cutting myself. I made my first blood drawings in a hotel room in Bruges where I cut my forehead with a razor blade: almost with the idea of making drawings with the drops

of blood of my thinking. These drawings are lost and didn't survive my personal chaos.

You could say that this action was the first step to accepting the physicality of my own body and the penetration of my own body; and through this penetration to try to understand this strange shell in which we awake each morning. I think this combination of four things—my street culture, my coma experiences, my window displays, and the discovery of the meaning of blood sacrifice—pushed me in the direction of performance. And of course I was driven by my own high energy, nervousness and curiosity.

GC Did you already get somebody to take pictures? Or did you man the camera yourself?

JF The first years I photographed myself with a self-timer and later, for example the series of blood drawings from the performance *My body, my blood, my landscape* (1978, No. 8) it was done by a friend who was a photographer.

GC The use of photography implies a strong self-awareness in terms of exposing and expressing oneself. At that time you began to understand that the translation into images, whether fixed or fleeting, was a form of narration that needed to be shared with others. You were aware that there was authenticity in what you were doing, in what you experienced personally as well as publicly. Photography, then, becomes a shared contextual and relational space to show that you were an 'other' person. It's giving birth to an imaginary space that could be shared with an audience.

JF Some of the actions I did on purpose as private performances for my own camera. And sometimes, when I had the money, I asked friends who were photographers to take pictures.

GC The photographs in which we see you as an Arabian prince, how were they made?

JF I photographed them myself with my first Zenith camera with a self-timer. My first official girlfriend was Gerda Van Hoof, she was studying to become a beauty and make-up specialist. She always asked me to be her model for her make-up exercises. This was ideal business for me, (*chuckles*) because in this way I could connect it with my interest in the idea of self-metamorphoses. So I asked Gerda to make me up as the French gangster Mesrine, as Jules Verne, Jim Morrison, Joan of Arc, and so on. And of course also as Fred Astaire.

(*JF lights a cigarette.*)

GC Why Fred Astaire?

JF I was always a big fan of Fred Astaire. As a young boy I saw all the black and white movies starring Fred Astaire on the many Saturday afternoons when it was this typical Belgian weather, horizontal rain. For me Fred Astaire symbolizes and embodies the grace and the style of discipline. When they asked Fred Astaire in interviews: 'Mr. Astaire how come everything looks so natural when you dance?' he answered: 'I do every movement ten thousand times a day.' When my mother and father made a little bit of money they bought a house in the Lange Beeldekensstraat, a house that had

previously been a photographic shop and studio, which is why we had a big staircase. As a young guy I was always imitating Fred Astaire on this staircase. I made my own costume with my old Zorro cape, painted a part of a broomstick black and made a high hat out of cardboard.

GC Cool!

JF That was why I made the 1979 performance *Tonight I want to be Fred Astaire. Tonight I want to be a killer* (No. 26). This performance was inspired by Philippe Halsman's famous picture *Dali Atomicus* (1948). For me Fred Astaire had the softness and the sharpness of the claws of cats. His movements had the sexy *souplesse* and the razor-blade sharpness of a natural killer. This performance was a first attempt to metamorphose from animal to human and from human to animal. A kind of celebration of the sexual suspense of the killer instinct of man and animal. This reminds me of the beautiful and sexy blonde Lucienne, who was a friend of my mother and my father. I will never forget her. She was always dressed up with a black dress with an open back, black silk stockings and black high heels. When I was 15 or 16 years old, my parents never had money left towards the end of the month, I had to jump on my bicycle and ride to the centre of Brasschaat (a chic bourgeois suburb of Antwerp) where Lucienne was living and I always had a small letter with me to ask her for money. And after going there several times I got the feeling she physically liked me. And slowly she introduced and taught me the power of sexuality. I could do everything with her and she let me experience different times 'golden showers'. She was the private inspiration for my series of works *Fountain of the world* (1979, No. 18). The drawings of this series were based on actions I did with a lot of my later girlfriends. (*Chuckles.*) By the way, these series were made in small photo albums, with spider paper in between, which I had found when my parents bought the house of the photographer in the Lange Beeldekensstraat.

GC It was already a kind of 'make-up' action. Considering the fact that we are at the end of the 1970s and the story of the physical use of one's own body—from Vito Acconci to Joseph Beuys, from Bruce Nauman to Chris Burden—has already on the one hand crossed the primal, brutalist boundary of a carnal condition subjected to stress, humiliation, negation and torture such as bites and crucifixions, and on the other hand also arrived at the sensual and sexual exaltation of Robert Mapplethorpe and Cindy Sherman, your own position seems to project beyond that. Your direction is one of transvestism, performed through the mask; no longer the display of one's own body, but the resurrection of the body in a different appearance, imbued with a stylistic unity that is constructed also by means of make-up. In fact it is an attempt to take the performance outside of its sacrificial extremes, of the cut and quartered body, to lead it to a more balanced condition where it is possible for harmony between the internal and the external, between flesh and mind, to come true.

JF You can put it like this. As a young artist I was also influenced by David Bowie and the idea of the 'chameleon' character. I did these kinds of actions in the city when Gerda gave me a make-over. One time I went to a vegetable and fruit market in Antwerp run by a Muslim family dressed as *The Arabian Prince from the Tales of a Thousand and One Nights* (1978, No. 9). And I replaced some vegetables and fruits with

hand grenades. I started throwing fruit around so the fruit became a dangerous weapon and I told the family that they could sell my hand grenades. This was based on the fairy tales from the *Thousand and One Nights*. These cultivated Muslim people could laugh at it and saw the irony. Imagine if I were to do this same action today, probably some extremist Muslim organisation in Belgium would issue a fatwa against me.

GC The attempt to recall the fanciful memories of the fairy tale with its classic mysteries was seen as a blasphemy on the one hand and as the exaltation of the obscure aspect of a different world on the other.

JF In those days there were more small outbursts of aggression from young Moroccan and Turkish gangs, but far more aggression from the extreme right wing movements. A couple of times I was beaten up during or after performances and actions that I did in my city. For example the action *Unmasking Hendrik Conscience* (1981, No. 51), which I did in the centre of the city near the public library in front of the Hendrik Conscience statue. This writer wrote a famous novel, *De Leeuw van Vlaanderen* (The Lion of Flanders) (1838) and it is said that he taught the Flemish people to read. For me this writer became a symbol of the bad side of the Flemish movement. In my action I was yelling at him and calling him every name under the sun. Suddenly people who were watching and listening started beating me up and I ended up in the hospital. Another example was during the first *Money Performance* I did in 1979 (No. 24). In this performance I did ridiculous, funny and serious actions with coins and banknotes, the entrance fee of the public. I was eating money, I was putting money in my ears, in my shoes, in my underpants, I was ripping and cutting money into pieces, making collages with money, etc. At the end of the performance I burned all the money and with the ashes I made drawings. And then the public came to the stage and started beating me up.

Because of this, there was so much press coverage that I was asked to do a second money performance. Everybody thought I would do exactly the same in *The Rea(dy)-make of the Money Performance* (1980, No. 32). I started the performance in the same way, counting the entrance fee, but instead of doing actions with the money, I just put the money in my pocket. Then I made a kind of installation, instant exhibition, with the artefacts of the previous *Money Performance*. People were again angry and scandalized, because they didn't get what they expected to get for their money.

GC In effect you transformed what could have been a poetic intervention, which the public was expecting from your performance, into a practical and vulgar action—vulgar as in the Latin *vulgus* or 'common'. Through this gesture a concrete vision was restored to the artistic action, a way of 'politicising' it again, projecting it into the context of real life. By subverting the relation between imaginary expectation and the brutality of the monetary confiscation by the artist, you connected creativity—which is traditionally considered to be ideal and immaterial—to material survival. You dissolved the imaginary, criticising the reasons for creating a 'spectacle', which cannot be considered 'revolutionary' but merely anticipatory, tied to the reasons for being the individual that professes it. It is the end of the avant-garde's dream, its pointlessness has become business.

JF I was fascinated by the relationship between art and capitalism. For that reason I was also in problems with the police, because money is of course national property and you cannot destroy national property. The performance had also a political dimension for me. For example, I also made some paper airplanes with the money which I threw into the audience and burned as a kind of answer to the Belgian policy of investing in warplanes. There are still some 8mm films of this performance. I used my parents' 8mm camera to record it. We could only record some parts of the performance, because each spool of film was only three minutes long. You have to understand that in those days only wealthy artists could afford to use video. But I didn't mind, because I always liked the light and the chemical quality of the *pellicule* and I also took a lot of pleasure from splicing the small films myself. I kept on doing this during the later years, that's the reason why several of my actions and performances were shot on 8mm, 16mm and 35mm film.

GC Why did you seclude yourself in your parents' garden? Was it experimentation or isolation?

JF Essentially my drive was, and still is today, my curiosity. I was always fascinated to do what might be called 'forbidden experiments'. As a young artist, I know it's now politically incorrect, I was pulling out the legs of house-spiders. I pulled out first one leg and observed how they walked, then a second one, a third one. I was always interested in the mechanics of life and movement. My first chemical laboratory was in the basement of my parents' house and my second laboratory, where I worked in the years 1978–1979, was in my parents' garden. It was a tent in the shape of two noses. I've named those private performances *Project for Nocturnal Territory* (No. 15). The drawings and small *Fantasy-insect-sculptures* (1976–1979) that I created in that 'Nose Laboratory' were all based on the idea of smell, 'good art has to stink'. For example I dug for earthworms, caught flies and mosquitos and cut their wings to place inside the body of the earthworms. I was creating new life, in those days I behaved a bit as a young Dr. Frankenstein. The pleasure of the *gaia scienza*. I remember my uncle Jaak, my father's brother, came by and saw me sitting there in my 'Nose Laboratory' and he said to me: 'But Jan, do you know that someone in the family was busy with insects?' The next time he came by he brought me books and manuscripts of the famous entomologist Jean-Henri Fabre. This is how I discovered the work of Jean-Henri Fabre and this opened a new world for me that has influenced me a lot throughout my own artistic universe.

GC And then the house: the photographs of the living room, is that the house of your parents?

JF Yes. But these photographs were made much later, in 1999. Hans Ulrich Obrist made the exhibition *Laboratorium* and invited me to re-install my 'Nose Laboratory' in my parents' garden and present the drawings I had made during that project in the living room. What I still remember from that period was the press coverage saying I was so extreme that I even faked the name 'Troubleyn' (which was at that time already the name of my theatre company, founded in 1986) on the doorbell.

GC Beautiful! So the name of your theatre company 'Troubleyn' was based on your mother's name?

JF My mother's name is Helena Troubleyn. I think it is a very beautiful name. 'Troubleyn' is old Flemish for *Trouw blijven*, which means 'to stay faithful'. As an artist I always was and will be faithful to beauty. I'm a servant of beauty.

GC So in your performances you were dealing with private and public environment.

JF Looking back on what I was doing as a young artist, I feel I was trying to engrave myself in the tradition, wanting to be part of history and maybe trying to get myself famous. (*Chuckles.*) I for example changed the street name of the street where I was living. The 'Lange Beeldekenstraat' was an old Flemish word for 'Long Street of Images'. I took the street sign away and I made it *Jan Fabrestraat* (1977, No. 4). For example another action that I did in the same street was hanging over the sign of the Van Gogh house my own copper sign with the text 'Here lives and works Jan Fabre'. Van Gogh had lived in Antwerp and was a student at the Royal Academy.

GC As a researcher and as a person the intent was to adapt to a territory of knowing and seeing, evoking their memory. Art is the result of a sedimentation in a particular place and moment, but by their very nature these possess an already configured time: the past. It is natural, therefore, that a young artist seeks to ground his own development on a historical condition, which also comprises ghosts like Van Gogh. Bringing them back to life as voices of time allows you to continue the dynamic of art in your present.

JF My first actions and performances in the windows were more about the excitement and the thrill of being on display in front of a public. (*JF lights a cigarette.*) There was not such a strong notion of Art History yet. As a reaction people started telling me: 'Jan, you know what you are doing? You are doing Performance art.' And of course, curious as I am, I straightaway went to read books and articles about Performance art. It was then that I discovered Dada, artists such as Tristan Tzara, Hugo Ball and Marcel Duchamp. I wanted to learn everything about them. Because in both art schools I'd been to, the Art History education stopped with the Impressionists.

GC The interest in physicality, fed by the energy of a vital fire that can either be negative as in the case of Dada or positive as in Surrealism, reveals a propensity towards narcissism, fuelled by a force from below that is the source of all human action. It is also a way to regenerate oneself organically, to become wholly immersed in oneself. This attitude is the typical thievery of many performers, from Gina Pane to Marina Abramović, who sought out the zero point of their physical and psychological limits in order to be reborn; in fact an attempt to 'give birth to themselves'. Which other artists did you know at the time that aspired to living in a 'purifying' condition, seeking a union with their own body? And if these weren't yet famous, what were the visual artists that you knew and followed, with whom you exchanged ideas and artistic complicity? Or did all of your knowledge come from your teachers?

JF In the Municipal Institute of Decorative Arts and Crafts there were two contemporary artists teaching who influenced me as a young artist. One of them was Hans Persoons, who in those days was represented in the Belgian pavilion at the Venice Bien-

nale, together with the painters Raoul De Keyser and Roger Raveel. He made a lot of paintings and objects in which he used melted and burned children's puppets. Another teacher of mine was Guido Baekelmans, who was one of the best constructivist painters from the Belgian art scene. Both talked a lot with me and stimulated me to develop my own projects and ideas. In the Royal Academy of Fine Arts the professors who taught Painting and Drawing were very conservative. They gave me the knowledge and passion for tradition.

After finishing my two art schools I met the two guys who were to influence me the most: the art dealer Jan De Zak and the Antwerp artist Panamarenko. I met them in a small gallery in Antwerp that was called The Printshop; I was making my first prints there and in that gallery Jan De Zak produced a lot of multiples of Panamarenko. Through Jan De Zak I also met the British artist Mel Ramsden from the group Art and Language as well as Maria Gilissen, the widow of Marcel Broodthaers.

GC What were your discussions about? Did you visit museums together? If so, which ones?

JF Jan De Zak, Panamarenko and myself, we saw each other regularly in a café in Wilrijk (Antwerp): we laughed, drank and gambled a lot. And I remember vividly our discussions about the two brilliant French philosophers Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes. Another thing that is engraved under my skin is a witticism of Jan De Zak, saying: 'There is only one field important for an artist, the specialisation of curiosity.'

But essentially it was foremost my father who influenced me a lot as an artist. First of all my father was a good classical draftsman himself. As a young boy he took me to the Zoo where he showed me the work of the aquarellist and draftsman Alfred Ost and the animal painter, and later director of the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, Karel Verlat. These two artists led me to study the kinetic intelligence of animals. I always had a strong fascination for animals. The idea of the metamorphosis of animals, the speed of animals, the intelligence of animals. Because for me animals were always the best doctors and the best philosophers in the world.

It was also at the Zoo that my father taught me to make drawings of animals and people, and to observe the similarities between animals and humans. In this way my father introduced me to the basics of physiognomy.

GC Physiognomy?

JF Yes, the teaching of Lavater's physiognomy. And later my father took me to the Rubens House to explain his work and genius to me, and my father gave me a kind of discipline to copy drawings and paintings by Rubens, to exercise myself in craftsmanship and learn the difference in the anatomy of the body in different periods. Essentially, my father gave me the passion and the love for the image and the body. My father came from a poor Communist background. My mother came from a rich Catholic French-speaking bourgeois family. In the evening over dinner she was constantly recounting her own interpretations of biblical stories and she was very superstitious. All her life she was putting scissors under the doormat. The scissors in the form of a cross, to keep the bad spirits away. So the scissors, the cross and the tree of life: these objects and symbols you will often see returning in different works of mine. All her life when I left to some place she would burn a candle. My mother was a

beautiful and sexy lady. She would often translate French poets for me such as Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and *chansonniers* like Boris Vian, Lucien Delille, Georges Brassens and Leo Ferré.

GC So you had two influences, one literary and one visual. Double reality. Your rambles were primarily between art and literature, it seems. You approached the edges of both to find your own language of expression. In fact you were exercising both the eye and the ear to find the key to your communicative life.

JF Yes, literature and image came together. You could say almost like a typical Belgian marriage. In our culture of painting you always see a kind of alliance between text and image.

GC How did they get together?

JF The anarchy of love brought them together. They were always a quite sexy and anarchistic couple. I lost them about seven years ago. They never had money because they lived with the idea that money has to roll over the floor. Essentially they didn't have the notion of saving money, so there was never money enough. They never had a car, my father rode a bike. At the same time, when my mother went out she was always dressed very elegantly, wearing high heels, a two-piece suit, leather gloves and a beautiful purse. When I asked my father why he didn't dress up, instead of wearing jeans, he replied: 'A man is judged by the woman by his side.' (*Chuckles.*)

GC One important metamorphosis of art happened with the advent of feminism. The relation between masculine and feminine was overtaken by the desire to talk of oneself, to take responsibility for one's own intimate and personal condition as an instrument of political change. Certainly the advent of Body art is connected to this insurgence of a person, the woman, who tends to speak of her own life. She places her body, her memory, on public display.

This desire to express oneself will inevitably lead art out of impersonal and unexpressed objectivity to favour a public kind of auto-narration. This is what performers do when they do not act, they 'display themselves', show themselves as they are. This method is also useful to define the distinctiveness of difference, so that they can auto-legitimise themselves. In fact your initial path on the whole was a coming into light, practising a relation with your appearance, your energy, your city. Such births always have a familiar premise.

JF I was raised by a couple who were extremely emancipated without even talking about emancipation. My mother made it very clear to me that the most beautiful warrior in the world is a woman and a mother. This thought and image you see throughout all my work.

GC How many children were there? You were the youngest?

JF There were five of us, and I was in the middle. I have a sister, Jeannine, five years older, who is a social worker, and an older brother, Emile, who died very young. Emile became my second name and I paid homage to him with the actions (1997–2000, No. 77) and the bronze sculpture *The Man Measuring the Clouds* (1998). The

face of the sculpture is his face, but made older. The performances and the sculpture were also based on the famous phrase of the ornithologist Robert Stroud. When they closed down Alcatraz and he was set free a journalist asked him: 'Mr. Stroud, what are you going to do with the rest of your life?' He looked up to the sky and said 'I'm going to measure the clouds.' I also have two younger sisters, Vivianne is a housewife and Annick is a secretary. At home it was the same story every month. When the cheque of the child allowances arrived one of us got new pants or underwear and then we had to wait for several months to get something new. But mostly my parents were an amazing couple, full of imagination. I remember as a young kid, I would sit listening to them over dinner with my mouth open. One night my father saved my mother from the Indians, the next night he was Marcus Antonius and she was Cleopatra. (*Chuckles.*) As a young boy I believed all their stories. Looking back, maybe these stories were also the roots of my attraction to performance and theatre.

GC The stories of the family give the young boy a taste of a possible, ideal world. Slowly this becomes possible and unquestionably the drive is a desire to narrate yourself, so that others may know your story. Your specific horizon is open for a performative movement that weaves together visual and literary elements. Your uniqueness makes you favour physicality, presented through a text or a thought. All your performances reflect your poetic notes, collected in your diaries. They are, therefore, textual before material. In this interweaving of image and word the written or drawn component is at the foundation of your work. History is first narrated in your insomniac annotations and then constructed and presented in public. The familiar territory is one of security and of dreams, but it is also the place where the nucleus of identity is formed.

JF What I can say is that through my parents I learned to celebrate life. Not to take things for granted. I remember when I was 20, and I left for New York the first time, my mother told me: 'Never forget where you come from, never forget this and always be stylish.' I remember as a young boy at home when I did something wrong my parents could never really punish me. When they sent me to the basement, after five minutes I was already busy, I found some material, wood, hammers, nails and made small sculptures, or most of the time I made some fortresses and castles. And then I remember when I was 12 years old I got a present. And maybe you know this from your youth. There was this chemical box 'number 1' with a microscope and some test tubes inside. And then I had my first laboratory in the basement, because I was fascinated by chemical reactions.

Still today the idea of alchemy is important in my work. With these laboratory experiments the test tubes exploded a couple of times and for several months I was walking around with red or black spots in my face.

GC Those experiments tell something about the strong desire to know and to leave traces.

JF It reminds me of my first performance in 1976 during an opening of a group exhibition where I was involved with some of my paintings and objects. At the opening I did some actions with newspapers and turned one of my academic paintings upside

down and painted in different colours the text 'You have to take everything seriously but not tragically.' (No. 1)

GC You were kind of destroying, not destroying but interacting. So in a certain way this action was related to your experience as a student, to history of art, and to counteracting. Applying oneself to the construction of something means overturning the existing so that there are no more definite points of departure. Personally, after the experience in engineering I became conscious of the risk of relying on theoretical and impersonal doctrines. Instead I needed the emotional and passionate support of an activity that operated on the basis of experience. I rejected guaranteed and traditional knowledge to opt instead for emotive and situational power that I wished to find along the way, or in my studies of the creativity of others. The spirit was definitely 'anarchic'; I tried to reject the metaphysical dimension of my studies to enter the heart of the matter or event. For this reason I initially moved between different areas, from cinema to art, from billiards to design, from architecture to theatre. At the Faculty of Arts at university I stayed away from the violent action that characterized the Luddite and the Lotta continua movements of the Genoese academic world. I turned to the force of artistic creativity, which I considered to be just as disruptive and libertarian. Your path, on the other hand, was characterized from the very beginning by a critical cancellation and dissolution of traditional representation.

JF Yes, you could say turning traditional images around, writing texts on them, was a kind of poetical terroristic action against the classical and rigid system of the Royal Academy of Fine Arts. During my student days I hated this, but later, when I was teaching myself, I realized that I had a very good grounding and technique in classical drawing and classical painting.

GC Can you tell me something about the performance with the red rope?

JF The *Red Lines Performance* (1976, No. 2) I created together with a friend, the Dutch poet Albert Hagedaars. He is still a very good poet. We went into the city with the red rope and made a line between different places that were important to me as a young artist. At the same time it was also about measuring the distance between those places such as the Zoo, the Van Gogh House, the Schoonselhof cemetery, the Rubens House. The length of this red rope was wound around my body afterwards.

GC The city became your stage.

JF The city was always on my side, the city was my playground, the city was my first stage. The street was my canvas, my first mistress. As a young artist I knew every corner of Antwerp. By knowing the city this well and everything that was around I could survive. This is how I knew immediately about the death of a man in the neighbourhood who was a specialist in making and copying plaster academic models. When they emptied his house and threw all his plaster sculptures into containers in front of his door I quickly passed by to take everything so I could sell them to my fellow students and had money to buy art material. Another example, I knew the Jewish neighbourhood very well, and their traditional shoemakers. I could buy beautiful leather, handmade, pointed shoes there for only 100 Belgian francs. The same shoes were sold in the high fashion boutiques for 2000 Belgian

francs. So I sold the shoes to fellow students and friends for 500 francs. Like always, I did business with life.

GC Buying and selling.

JF Are you referring to my action *The Sandwich Man* (No. 22) from 1979? During the opening of a solo exhibition of drawings I was walking around the whole evening with a plastic bag over my head on which you could read 'Koop bij Jan Fabre' (Buy at Jan Fabre's).

(Jan Fabre lights a cigarette.)

GC Was there a prostitution habit in Antwerp?

JF Of course Antwerp is a port with a lot of prostitutes and artists. *(Chuckles.)*

GC When I was a young boy in Genoa I often went to the docks to visit the local cabarets. My father had his office in the area, so the criminal underworld did not impress me much and I was attracted by the obscure and forbidden world of prostitution.

JF I knew also in my city these beautiful and generous women.

GC Not because of sex! As a matter of fact I was still too immature to understand the idea of the sex market, I was more interested in the world of trickery, of cheating and robbing tourists that let themselves be fooled. The area was also the American used-goods market, where I could enter a distant world of jeans and drunken sailors enjoying their shore leave.

JF I passed them by for years when I was walking from home to the art schools. I was always fascinated by the red-light district, the sham and the theatrical setting of it, this sort of obscure and obscene zone. This territory of pimps, transvestites and gangsters. Beautiful sexual and erotic characters who for sure influenced me in my performance work.

GC The port is a universe that unites us. It opens onto the sea and onto the expanse of water that by night appears as an obscure and mysterious world. That shapeless material that is the adventure into the unknown. From my house I could see ships arrive and depart, so that I actively observed the idea of voyage, which would then become my way of life, travelling between Europe and America. The power of the element of the sea, of work connected to shipping, harbours and dockworkers, has always represented a utopia that is continuously renewable. It is a positive and active privilege that has given me the power to 'emigrate' and to examine in depth this passion for travel, both mental and physical.

JF I knew the port of my city very well. Because the Municipal Institute of Decorative Arts and Crafts was located in the port, near 'the shack'. The Institute had a number of classrooms located in these huge hangars. They used those hangars to build the windows for students to learn how to make a window display. The shack was the place where every morning the dockworkers had to go to get a number, to get a job. As a student job in the summer I also worked in the port on the banana boats.

GC I am sure. That was when they still worked with the hook?

JF I also worked with the hook in those days. The dockworkers were really tough guys. I was dead after three or four days working on the banana boats. Wow! But I knew these guys from the neighbourhood. And of course they knew I went to art schools. So they called me 'Rubens' to tease me and then they shouted 'Rubens died again!' (*Chuckles.*)

GC What was the feeling of the port, were there a lot of ships?

JF When you were in the docks of Antwerp you could smell the North Sea. This beautiful receptacle of the tears of God always fascinated me. I did one of my first performances in 1976 on the sea. I was on a sailing boat with a friend and his father for forty-six hours without sleeping in homage to the Dutch artist Bas Jan Ader. Probably you know Bas Jan Ader disappeared in an attempt to cross the big blue water.

GC In 1975 I saw him in L.A. and he said: 'I'm taking this small boat and we will meet in Genoa', because Genoa has a port and he was planning a show with the Saman-gallery, directed by Ida Gianelli. In any case, how did you decide to become an artist, as I decided to become an art historian?

JF It might sound very strange, but very young I knew I would become an artist. There was a kind of an incredible necessity and drive to become an artist.

GC Did you know what it means to become an artist? How did you decide? What attracted you?

JF Two things were important for me. First of all my godmother and godfather had a really tough pub for the dockworkers. Their son was a postman and he came around in the neighbourhood. Ringing the doors he brought the cheques, he was given some drinks and some money everywhere he went. For me, as a youngster, I thought, 'Wow, he's free, that's what I want.'

GC Your freedom was important.

JF The second thing that was important for me was the idea of the chemical experiment. As I have already told you, I had this small laboratory in the basement of my parents' house. At that age my idea was to become a postman or a kind of scientist-researcher. Still today in my work I systematically choose for the experiment and I want to bring my messages around the world. So the combination of the postman and the *gaia scienza* guided me to become an artist.

I remember when I was young I wanted to look like an artist; I wanted to be special. I walked on the street to the school already with a bowler hat and with pointed shoes. Of course the bowler hat was a reference to René Magritte. I wanted people to see that I was an artist. You can see this in some photographs of some actions from the late 1970s. It was about the idea of presenting oneself as an artist. Through my own presence, by wearing costumes I had made myself, and through the presentation of the actions. Of course this changed when I became older. Now I don't want to look like an artist anymore.

You can see this bowler hat and pointed shoes also in the golden thumbtack costume I was wearing in the performance and sculpture *Me, Dreaming* (1978, No. 11). For me

the costume as a new skin was always important. This is a performance where you see me working with a microscope in homage to Jean-Henri Fabre. His writings and drawings inspired me a lot as an amateur entomologist. In this performance I used sandpaper to take the skin away from the legs of the table and to take skin away from my own legs. In this performance my body became an object and the object, the table, became the body.

In the late 1970s we had only one shopping street in Antwerp, Offerandestraat (Offering Street) and in the middle of the street there were some small display windows in which I did some actions. For example in a box I presented the action with my bowler hat and pointed shoes that I stained with my own shit and spread on the Belgian flag.

GC In 1977 you created a work called *Window Performance* (No. 6), which lasted seven hours and was set in a shop window. What actions did you perform in this greatly reduced space?

JF Well, just lying naked with the snails crawling over my body. And the snails were in the colours of the Belgian flag with the golden crowns on top. In these years I had the feeling I was living in a slow country where in my eyes little was happening and time was crawling like a snail. And of course the performance was also about the different perception and experience of time. The seven hours represented the cycle of repetition and through repetition purification.

GC Did you know Marcel Broodthaers?

JF At that moment not yet. Later, in the early 1980s, I met his widow, Maria Gilissen, through Jan De Zak and Panamarenko. That was when I really started discovering the work of Marcel Broodthaers.

GC Why so much attention to the flag, particularly in Belgium? In Italy the use of the flag would be seen as extremely nationalist. So the reasons for its frequent presence in the work of Broodthaers or your own must have a different connotation. What would that be?

JF It's a different situation. Don't forget that already with my first solo performances and solo exhibitions in my neighbourhood I was already in trouble with the far-right-wing organisations in Antwerp, amongst them the Flemish Militant Order (VMO), a predecessor of the 'Vlaams Blok' which was to be a big political party in the Flemish part of Belgium in the 1990s. So I was born and living in that area. And of course those parties became popular because a lot of Moroccans and Turks came to settle in our neighbourhood. (*JF lights a cigarette.*)

I remember the Flemish Militant Order had a pub opposite a small gallery, The curiosity house in the Diepestraat, where I did an exhibition. I went inside that pub after eleven in the evening. People were wearing grey leather coats with Swastika insignia, singing German songs, and they had a magazine named *Alarm*. In that magazine they tried to prove that all the genocides of the Jews were fake. And this was in my fucking neighbourhood. And of course it didn't take them a long time to smash the window of the gallery and to destroy several of my works.

GC The reason you used Belgian flags was then politically radical?

JF Using the Belgian flag had something ambiguous. On one side it was a form of protest against the Flemish nationalists who wanted to create an independent Flemish nation, and on the other hand I lived in a kind of love-hate relationship towards my country, because in my opinion Belgium was in deep cultural hibernation. After staying one year in New York at the beginning of the 1980s I developed a deep respect for my own country and being there made me realize that Belgian and Flemish art are historically of a very high quality. Being in America made me understand my own cultural roots much better. I'm a dwarf born in a country of giants, such as Hieronymus Bosch, Van Eyck, Van Dyck, Rubens, Bruegel, and so forth. They are amazing masters. Still today I steal a lot from these giants. For example, when I prepare a new solo performance I always leaf through books with reproductions of these masters to get inspiration. When I look again to the small painting *The Ship of Fools* (c. 1510–1515) by Hieronymus Bosch I'm always blown away by the power of subversiveness and imagination. Some of these paintings are often much more avant-garde than a lot of contemporary art that I see today.

You know we are the only country in the world to clean the floor with a cloth with the colours of the Belgian flag on it? So we clean the floor with our own flag. In 1979 I did an action, *Cleaning the Museum* (No. 23), in the Jacob Jordaens House. I used one of the Belgian floor cloths with the biro text 'only acts of poetical terrorism' to clean the floor as a preparation of my exhibition.

GC Did you know Joseph Beuys at the time?

JF Yes. It's a beautiful story how I got to know him. It was through a teacher at the Municipal Institute of Decorative Arts and Crafts, Mr Scheiltjes: he was interested in the physical actions I was doing in the window display boxes and one day he came to me saying: 'Jan, here is a train ticket and some money. This weekend you go to the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven to visit a solo exhibition by Joseph Beuys.' For me it was like 'Wow', a new world opened for me. To be honest, most of it I didn't understand, but I was fascinated, and I was particularly intrigued by his American interrogation chair.

I always saw Beuys as a kind of shaman. I discovered with him immediately a kind of taste for material, which reminded me of what my father taught me as a young artist: 'Jan, when you taste something, taste it slowly.' My father taught me to taste the materials that I used to create something. Joseph Beuys had this incredible feeling for the alchemical quality of materials. I went back to see the exhibition a couple of times thanks to the sponsorship of my teacher Mr Scheiltjes.

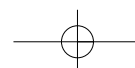
GC What does this word *gevonden* mean?

JF *Gevonden* means 'Found'. The poster was based on the old American 'Wanted' posters that showed the outlaws or gangsters that were being looked for. Most of my posters and invitation cards from the 1970s to announce my exhibitions and performances I made by hand with scissors, glue and a copy machine. Usually I would finish every poster manually with text put on it with red lacquer. On this poster *Gevonden* you see me dressed as a gangster wearing different accessories to disguise myself as a pirate, a clown, a dictator, and so on. Already in those days I was inspired by the French gangster Mesrine. I made this poster for my exhibition where I showed four glass ta-

bles—the base of our exhibition in the MAXXI museum of Rome—on which I display all the objects I had used to break into houses and villas, and also objects that I used for street actions and street fights.

This exhibition was visited by Wies Smals from Stichting de Appel in Amsterdam, at that time the best centre for Performance art in Europe, and she was the first who invited me officially to do a performance. I was very proud in those days because she offered me 200 guilders (*chuckles*) and a hotel room and I felt so serious and professional. (*Chuckles.*)

And there I presented the performance *Ilad of the Bic Art* (1980, No. 38).



II_Germano Celant and Jan Fabre
Vis, Croatia, 7 August 2013

G. Celant Towards the end of the 1970s there was a manifest reaction against conceptualism in art: almost a return to the order of traditional painting, both in Europe and in America, from Schnabel to Baselitz and from Clemente to Salle. The intention is to reclaim the territory of creativity according to a conservative view of making art, to abandon the mental and philosophical conjectures and to return to the classical art of painting and sculpting. In this context of recuperation of the past and the thematics of individuality, counterpointed to the political and theoretical arguments of the preceding groups, the personal and mythical self-exaltation of the artist is affirmed. In your own development as well, bodily self-narration, by means of your erotic attributes, becomes the subject of a performance: *Ilad of the Bic Art*. Here the use of your body is combined with the chromatic drawing of signs and lines with a Bic ballpoint pen; a further intertwining in real time, therefore, with the spirit of the age.

J. Fabre The performance I did in Stichting De Appel was called *Ilad of the Bic Art* (1980, No. 38). For several performances in which I used the Bic, I created the character called 'Ilad'. It is the reverse of 'Dali'. And also Bic Art was a pseudo-name for a utopian new art movement. A lot of my performances are almost a kind of actions to create an instant exhibition or an instant installation. In this performance I was naked and my penis became the Bic ballpoint pen and the Bic ballpoint pen became my penis. I was cutting out pages from different books with reproductions of my favourite and historical paintings and during the performance I would create a series of drawings entitled *Historical Wounds*.

GC How did you arrive at the Bic?

JF Simple, because it was cheap and practical, and I could take it and steal it everywhere. I remember in school we were obliged to use ink, ink out of the pot or the next step was the fountain pen. I think my generation was the first generation who could use a ballpoint pen in school, and in the late 1970s, early 1980s I didn't know any other artist who was using this material. First of course I liked the colour, the blue is a spiritual colour, the vibrant and hypnotising colour of blue eyes, it's the colour of the sky without clouds and the colour of Mary's cloak, and so forth. Secondly, I also liked the chemical quality of the blue Bic ink from the ballpoint pen. You see this and expe-

rience this in my series of drawings of *The Hour Blue*, Bic blue drawings with a hint of green, blue, violet, red and silver. The composition of the substance of this ink contains a kind of silver gelatine like in photography. That's the reason a lot of these drawings are not fixed, but fluid. These drawings are always changing; they are almost like magnetic energy fields.

GC It seems that your interest in Dalí is related to the diverse potentials of an artist's life. His movement was always one of continuous regeneration, almost as if art were an abyss he needed to jump into to find a new life, represented by all the different kinds of media, from painting to photography and from performance to cinema. Your way of realising yourself, of existing, is also similar. You dive into yourself again and again, to find a new identity. You choose for the vital flux that creates new situations all the time. Maybe this is the reason why you oscillate between drawing, performance, theatre, sculpture, photography, a coming and going of languages, an attitude that brings Surrealism to mind.

JF I was fascinated by the work and life of Salvador Dalí, and Luis Buñuel was also very important for me. Buñuel, this stubborn one-man-movement whose influence you clearly see in my 8mm films, such as *The Bag* (1980, No. 29), *Suicide?* (1980, No. 31), *Hyperventilation* (1982, No. 55), and so on. Dalí is sexy and Duchamp transformed eroticism into an intellectual game in his work. I remember in that period it was natural to be interested in the work of Marcel Duchamp, who of course also influenced me, but it was not done to be interested in Dalí, because he was not regarded as a serious artist, he was seen as a commercial artist.

GC His detractors called him 'Avida Dollars' and he was an admirer of Franco. Here too we see ascent and descent, from high art to low commerce and politics.

JF His ambiguous position and his ambiguous personality were a part of the concept of *Ilad of the Bic Art*. I liked the idea of how he connected high art and low art. Don't forget I studied window display and at the same time classical drawing and painting. Salvador Dalí was a high craftsman in painting and he was one of the first artists who sold his body and his name for publicity, he worked in Hollywood with Alfred Hitchcock... he made a lot of crossovers in different disciplines.

GC If we put Dalí in the context of those years of generational rebellion around 1968, his figure is extremely negative. What excited more at the time was the radicalness of Marcel Duchamp, who had a therapeutic effect on the mercantile and sentimental spirit of art until the 1970s. Only recently has Dalí's multilingualism been reappraised by new generations, who removed all social and political engagement. It's an attempt to 'revirginise' him by emphasizing the anarchic side of his work. By dissecting his path we understand the linguistic schizophrenias that marked him. The same forces allow artists today to be not just a painter or a sculptor, but operators in different media; photography, cinema, theatre, performance... In that sense Dalí is a precursor of one who finds power in the continuum of identity, not in the repetition of a single mode of expression.

JF What you say makes sense. In the late 1970s I was busy with what I called *Bic Art Propaganda* (1979, No. 19). As a mail art project I was sending hand-made post cards

around the world to make propaganda for my Bic Art movement and I was making art on my own name cards to make publicity for myself. (*Chuckles.*)

GC A kind of portable art works.

JF It's quite funny for me to see the envelopes back with the stamp *Ik stempel (H)Art*, it's an assembling from two languages and different meanings. *Ik stempel* signifies 'I stamp', *(H)Art* talks about the great intensity and creating art from the heart. But also it was a word game on my situation as a young artist: I was unemployed for years and every day I had to get a stamp from the unemployment office to check that I wasn't working on the black market. But of course they were wrong, because I'm the inventor of the long weekend, the weekend of seven days and seven nights. Still today I work on the black market, because the black market is romantic time. Living in the romantic time is real avant-garde.

GC Your inclination to 'corrode' any fixed notions regarding the creation of art, performance or theatre, is clear. It derives from a continuous effort to be disassociated from what is consolidated, permanent. All your productions are directed at the corrosion of any sort of model; also your interest in all types of material or media falls within this negation of the permanent and the fixed. Your drive towards mobility overwhelms all other elements, so that they cannot condensate in a single expression or method (whether photography, drawing, sculpture, film, etc.).

JF From the beginning I used different medias, I never felt obliged to follow the rules of the art world. I was always a kind of escape artist and I always chose the best medium for the idea I wanted to experiment with. In that period for example I was trying to find a mediatory position between visual arts and music. For that reason I created *The Bic Art Music Performances* (1979, No. 20). When you listen to this music you can hear and feel the physicality of different types of drawings. The drawing as musical score. When I was making the drawings I taped on my hand this small microphone, the tape recorder was standing on the ground and when I was drawing I recorded the sound.

GC Did you know at that time Bruce Nauman?

JF No, at that moment in time I didn't know his work.

GC What was the kind of artistic information that was brought to your attention? The 1960s and 1970s were dominated by a 'renaissance' that was material, energetic, philosophical and behavioural, for which the aesthetic sources were open at 360 degrees to expressive inclusion. Did you know the linguistic regeneration that occurred with Conceptual art and Land art?

JF I remember when I was a young artist, there was this incredible power of intellect. (*JF lights a cigarette.*) You had to be a conceptual artist, you had to be an anthropologist. If you were not being conceptual you were not taken seriously. And I was busy with trying to find a connection between the brain, the heart and the balls. My actions, performances, drawings and sculptures were based on energy and living through it by self-experience. These works from the 1970s and the 1980s were a prolongation of my doubting, my searching, my extreme nervousness, my violence and vitality.

GC Being a part of it...

JF That was important for me: to do it for real.

That's one of the reasons I did the *Ilad of the Bic Art, the Bic Art Room* (1981, No. 47) in the Salon Odessa in Leiden. It was an art gallery that was specialised in live performance and live installation. Through Stichting De Appel and Wies Smals I had met the video artist Michel Cardena—and of course I had to perform twice naked in his videos—who introduced me and arranged for me that I could do this performance. I designed a room where everything was white, even the food, and stayed in that room for three days and three nights. I gave myself the mission to become a drawing machine in this white prison. I was filmed with two concealed cameras, this project was a kind of big brother *avant-la-lettre*.

GC Why is the time so important for you? Why this long performance?

JF Time was and always is an essential factor in my work. Time as an architectural building stone. Time as a web of repetition and by the repetition the change of content. For sure, in the Bic Art Room time changed from the profane to the sacred. And time as a labyrinth of loneliness.

GC What about Yves Klein? You knew his work? You had seen it?

JF Yes, of course. I discovered Yves Klein very early because in Antwerp you have the Hessenhuis, where the group of artists around the Belgian Zero artist Jef Verheyen founded the artist group G58. With Uecker, Yves Klein came different times to Antwerp to show his work. And of course in the *Action: Bic Art Prints* (1980, No. 37) in the gallery De Stempelplaats in Amsterdam you can see his influence. I used different parts of my body to make Bic Art Prints.

In the artist group G58 there was another Belgian artist, Cel Overberghe, who I knew quite well through my collaboration with the gallery Workshop 77 in the Omeganckstraat, he was a co-founder of the gallery and also presented his paintings over there. In this gallery I did different actions and performances. For example *Fear and Happiness* (1981, No. 52) where I was in high intensity and energy jumping around and shouting what made me happy and with which fears I was living. It was clear that my own fear was my biggest drive of creation. For me an important project that I did in this gallery was *Mouth-Eye-Ear Doctor* (1980, No. 36). In Flemish the title *Mond-Oog-Oor-Arts* has a double meaning: the word for doctor is *arts* (so an 'eye doctor' is an *oog arts*), and the project is about art. In all the drawings, self-portraits, I looked like a monkey. Because the complete project was based on the idea of the three wise monkeys—'see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil', which I changed into 'hearing, seeing and speaking'.

GC What's the subject of the performance?

JF During the opening I was dressed as a doctor and acted as a doctor. I examined the bodies of the visitors, drove them around in wheelchairs, wrote prescriptions saying which medicines they had to take to open themselves more to art. A few weeks later, at the end of the exhibition, I gave a midnight speech from the balcony *Art will keep you awake*. During this speech I was throwing fake mouths, eyes and ears to the listeners below.

A year earlier, in 1979, I had made the exhibition *Wetskamer* in Workshop 77. This was a white room installation with white furniture containing a couple of hundred *wetspotten* which were filled with small objects like Bic ballpoint pens, and organic material, such as flies, scarabs, onions, and so on. During the opening I was walking around with the empty *wetspotten* to collect all kinds of private small objects from the spectators and afterwards I buried those jars in front of the door of the gallery as a kind of time capsule for the future. The ritual of the performance *Buried (Homage to Pieter Engels)* (1979, No. 25) was digging a hole, placing all the jars inside, closing it again with the street stones, and using one stone as a memento. It was a homage to Pieter Engels, a Dutch artist I liked very much in those days and who made different grave monuments as a time capsule to open in the future.

GC *Wetspot?*

JF It's an Antwerp dialect word for *weckpot* and a *weckpot* is a preserving jar. *Wetspot* can also be read as 'the jar of law'. Maybe I was already a little bit inspired by Marcel Broodthaers? I found all this material in the basement of my parents' house. Because I remember images of my mother preserving fruits and vegetables in those glass jars. I think in the year 1977 she stopped doing this because, for the first time, we had a freezer at home.

Another action was *The Wets World project* (1979–1981, No. 28): I went to different museums and placed always one *wetspot* inside a famous artwork. As a young partisan of art I did a kind of 'poetical terrorist actions' to infiltrate the museum, to infiltrate the camp of the enemy. I was questioning, criticising how museums were conserving their collection. For example the one I placed in *The Beanery*, an important work by Edward Kienholz in Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum, went unnoticed for several years. Almost as if I were contaminating the art world with my own traces.

GC This kind of 'forced' inclusion reminds me of the artist André Cadere, who 'participated' despite not having been invited to any of the important collective exhibitions or museums. He would turn up with a stick composed of fragments of wood of different size and colour, ordered and organised according to his internal code, which he would 'put on display' anywhere he went. Bringing it with him he passed through each exhibition, and then declared that he had taken part. It was a creative imposition, which often led to him being removed from the museum. A refusal, in effect, of the curator's 'selection' and of the imposing and affirmative power claimed by the institution... the intrusion allowed him to overcome all barriers, to join the artists he admired, even if he had not been officially invited to exhibit his work: an anti-authoritarian attitude. Next to individuals like him there was the Fluxus group, whose revisiting of the museum began in those years, with shows in several German museums.

Had you heard of these radical anti-academic gestures? I try to contextualize because you know that's important, you're not in a vacuum. There were a lot of exhibitions made by Harald Szeemann about the happenings and Fluxus in Germany. Did you get this kind of information at the time?

JF I hadn't heard of these at the time. Because I was more oriented to Belgium and The Netherlands. Because I didn't have the money to travel and my command of French

and German was, and still is today, lousy. So in the late 1970s and early 1980s I discovered a lot through Flor Bex's International Cultural Centre in Antwerp. Looking back he curated an exciting and fantastic programme in the ICC. I went there regularly to see exhibitions and performances. Those days I even wrote letters to Flor Bex asking for an opportunity to present my own work. He didn't reply, but he always followed my work and later, when he became director of M HKA, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Antwerp, he bought a lot of my drawings and installations. In 1997 he curated my solo exhibition *Passage*. I remember seeing a beautiful and intense musical performance by Laurie Anderson in the ICC, she was alone on stage with her violin and two big loudspeakers. I also saw some performances by James Lee Byars. This was still before the period when he was always dressed in gold. What I saw was an action with a huge red, kind of plush, costume that several people could fit inside.

Another place in Belgium which was important for me during those years was an alternative art space in Liège called Cirque Divers. They were connected with RTBF (Belgium's French-language public broadcaster) and produced, for example, the famous TV-tape of Marina and Ulay in which they were shouting into each other's mouths. And Michel Antaki, who ran Cirque Divers, invited me in 1983 to present my eight-hour theatre piece there. Of course later I discovered the important exhibitions of Harald Szeemann. The first time I met him was in the beginning of the year 2000, when he invited me to participate in one of his exhibitions. The most important collaboration with him was his last exhibition just before he died, *Visionary Belgium* (2005).

GC Chris Dercon was already around?

JF I met him the first time at the opening of the Bic Art Room in Leiden. He was studying at the University of Leiden and he was making his first performance-tape festival. He invited me to present one film in the festival. And in those days he was still also a performance and visual artist. He asked me to teach him about Performance art. And I didn't like the idea because I didn't think he was a good artist. He also prepared a solo performance about me. The title of this performance was *Del Fabre* (1981). It was a kind of critical homage to my egocentric and schizophrenic state as an artist. During my residence in New York, Chris came to stay with me for three weeks in Mott Street, to work on his so-called 'video art'. He was interviewing the gallery owners Mary Boone and Leo Castelli. For me this was not art, he was more busy with public relations and networking. It was normal, because Chris was always so ambitious.

GC I met Chris as a TV director in Ghent when Jan Hoet did *Chambres d'amis*, where he did the 24-hour live broadcast TV programme in which I was involved.

JF I remember watching that on television. I refused to go to the opening because I was angry. I was one of the first artists invited to participate in the *Chambres d'amis* (1986) exhibition, but because of a big fight between Jan Hoet and myself about another project, Jan Hoet kicked me out of *Chambres d'amis*. For almost two years we didn't speak to each other and then Jan came to visit me with a big bouquet, to invite me to participate in the drawing exhibition *Signaturen* (1988) at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Ghent. With Jan it often happened that if artists did not agree with him it ended up in an extreme physical and mental fight. Over the course of thirty years Jan

Hoet became a friend who I deeply respect and trust.

The first time Jan Hoet saw one of my performances was in the year 1980 when I did the *Money (Art) in Culture* (No. 35) performance in the framework of his famous exhibition *Art after '68*. I was not invited by him, I was invited by American philosophers in aesthetics who had an international meeting at the University of Ghent. I invited all the philosophers in the performance *Money (Art) in Culture* to assist me in making a big collage with money. In a bucket I burned money, and the catalogues and posters from the *Art after '68* exhibition. With these ashes I wrote the word 'culture' on the money collage. At the end of the performance I sold the work in a kind of auction house style to the highest bidder. The American philosopher Curtis L. Carter bought the work and it was he who brought me to America for the first time.

GC Invited as visiting artist?

JF Yes. I did my first paid solo performance in America at Marquette University in Milwaukee, where Curtis L. Carter was Chairman of the Fine Arts Department. He invited me to do three performances at different locations in the context of university conferences on philosophy. After my first two performances in Milwaukee I went back to New York where I cleaned myself up through the exciting nightlife of the Big Apple, where I found a gun to do my *Killing of J.F.K.* action (1980, No. 41).

The first performance in Milwaukee was *Sea-Salt of the Fields* (1980, No. 39), a homage to the French salt seller, Marcel Duchamp. Essentially the performance was a ritual questioning the duality between the representation of salt as a materialistic symbol and the representation of salt as a spiritual symbol.

The second performance I did was *After Art* (1980, No. 40). The title played on the word 'Aftershave.' The content of the performance was about what it means to be a young artist on the public platform and how to purify yourself from this. I did several acts with shaving foam to transform myself in different artistic identities. I shaved myself a lot in this performance until I was bleeding. And later in the performance, with the pieces of broken glass of the aftershave bottle I cut myself different times in my finger tips and made the public, the philosophers, drink fresh artist blood.

The third performance I did—back in Milwaukee, after New York—was *The Creative Hitler Act* (1980, No. 42), it was my answer to Marcel Duchamp's *Creative Act*. It was about my idea that in this Western society the last dictator is the artist, because he doesn't make compromises, he makes choices. The topic of the performance was the power of language and image, the travesty of language and image and the abuse of language and image. During the performance I used green chalkboard paint to cut and paste drawings from pages out of books of fairy tales. In this performance I created an instant exhibition with this series of drawings.

GC The reference to a dictatorial condition is intended to upset its meaning, that of declaring one's autonomy from any system of control. After Milwaukee, what did you do?

(JF lights a cigarette.)

JF I came back from America and I felt an urge and necessity to translate my American experiences into an exhibition and performance. The victim I found was a young

gallery owner who ran the Galerie Blanco in Antwerp and there I made the *American Works and Window Performance* (1980, No. 43). During the opening of this exhibition I offered warm Campbell soup instead of wine.

GC Warhol?

JF I had brought a lot of cans of Campbell soup back from America in my suitcase. In front of the gallery I created a little bit of the atmosphere of the famous Studio 54. I placed ropes at the entrance and positioned four bouncers, nightlife friends, each with a baseball bat. On the four baseball bats I had engraved 'In God we Trust' and these guys were selecting the people who could come inside to visit the exhibition. When you were selected you received a jawbreaker, my 'magic ball' with a worm inside. So the atmosphere of the opening was slightly hallucinatory. (*Chuckles.*) In the meantime I was sitting in the window and eating a lot of peanuts, acting like a monkey as a reference to the American president Jimmy Carter. And I was also behaving like a prostitute, writing dirty phrases on the window with lipstick, such as 'Energetic Mimbos' (New York slang for hot babes), and poetic phrases such as 'The greatest nation is imagination'. During the evening I made hundreds of lipstick drawings on paper. This performance was an answer to the American superficial state of mind, everything in America is about the surface.

GC The lack of 'thickness' is typical of American culture. For us Europeans a wall might have stood for thousands of years. It is not plaster, not fake. Let us return to your search for the roots of your identity.

JF Beautiful metaphor. Yes, I discovered in America what it meant to be a Belgian artist. The next day in the gallery I did my *Filet Americain – D'Anvers Performance* (1980, No. 44). Filet Americain is a type of minced beef that Flemish people like to eat. With this meat I created small temples from different religions on pages of *The Wall Street Journal*. It was an ambiguous message that the spiritual temples of art and religion are rooted in extreme capitalism or maybe floating above extreme capitalism. I must say that the attitude of Andy Warhol was a major inspiration for me. One time I was invited into his Factory and it was a thrill to meet him. When I came back to Antwerp, a couple of weeks later, I founded my own artist office in the city. In those days this was not done in Belgium. As an artist you were still expected to live in an attic and to be poor. I was so proud that I met Andy Warhol and showed off about it. My father said to me: 'I will teach you something about Andy Warhol.' He took me again to the Rubenshuis: 'That's the real Andy Warhol: Rubens! But 350 years before.' He explained to me again that Rubens had already had a studio with a lot of assistants. My father showed me which assistant painted the birds, which assistant painted some landscapes, which assistant painted the jewellery, and so on. Then he took me to his archives and showed me sketches of all the wagons he designed for different processions. With his assistants he painted almost in a Goya-esque way all these wagons. My father made me read the letters and writings of Rubens. Afterwards my father asked me several times: 'Now who is the real Andy Warhol?' (*Chuckles.*)

GC Drugs? Did you do more experiments with drugs?

JF Yes, there was a period in my work that I was testing chemical and natural drugs to ex-

perience their effects on my physical and mental state. For example the series of photographs *Tea-hangover* (1980, No. 45) bears witness to this. Even the installation that I created in the basement for an exhibition in the small Flemish place Watou: when you were watching this installation and you stayed for a while you got stoned. In all these small teabags you saw my self-portrait, as if my extracts were making the public stoned.

The Action: 30x Lust for Life (1981, No. 49) I did with Gerda Van Hoof was a battle between drugs and concentration. Whilst repeating the Iggy Pop song thirty times from very soft to extremely loud we forced ourselves to stand still. To be honest I don't remember it exactly, maybe the physical position looks like it was inspired by Marina and Ulay?

GC You also had different pop bands?

JF That's true. In the late 1970s Antwerp and London were very connected through the drugs and punk scene and in that period I had my first band. After a couple of months I stopped my own punk band. I had a lot of friends in that scene but at the same time I was an outsider. I loved the punk scene, I liked the radical choices they made. It influenced me a lot. I always liked to go to their clubs, but what I didn't like was their style of dressing. For me those outfits looked ugly and not sexy. I didn't like the Mohawk haircuts, the leather jackets with pins or the 'No future' tattoos on their forehead. I liked to go to those clubs dressed up very smartly in a suit, a black tie and with my pointed shoes as a kind of act of resistance. Because I believed in the future, I believed in the vulnerability of beauty, I believed in art, because my work talks about hope. My work always refuses cynicism.

GC Although it is antagonistic, your method has always aimed towards a search for what is beautiful. Punk, or cruelty, violence and blackness eventually lead to a bright and luminous dimension: the place where creation exists. At the time, then, you also tried the world of music.

JF I bought one of the first cheap synthesizers and wrote some lyrics. I made a new band called 'M. Bryo' which also didn't want to deal with the 'new wave music'. My band 'M. Bryo' was quite avant-garde, it had the flavour of a cool synthesizer sound that later marked the coldwave music movement.

GC Did you play in public?

JF Yes, I performed with my band at a number of my own exhibition openings. A lot of the lyrics I wrote referenced art and the art world.

GC Did you do your own music or sound?

JF I created a kind of music performance concept. Of course I was influenced by the 'chameleon-artist' David Bowie, but even more by the Beatles album *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967). Still today I have all the Fab Four's old LPs. I think for myself the best concept and concert I created was *Homo Fabere: This ain't work this is evolution* in 1981 (No. 53).

GC In the same year, 1981, you were also again in New York teaching at the School of Visual Arts. So you were coming in and out of Europe?

JF The philosopher Timothy Binkley—a Wittgenstein specialist, who had seen my performances in Milwaukee—invited me to work in the School of Visual Arts in New York. A couple of hours a week I taught a course about the relationship between Performance art and the visual arts. What was very strange was that my students were much older than myself. But I gave them a lot of European imagination.

The first performance I did there was *Art as a Gamble, Gamble as an Art* (1981, No. 48). The basic idea was to discover consiliences between the rules of art and the rules of gambling. For this performance I invited art critics who had to write a small essay about my work. I was trying to reverse the idea that it is not the artists who have to follow the critics, but that the critics have to follow the artists. I played a game of chance with each critic: the spinning knife, Russian roulette, poker dice, and so forth. Each time a critic lost to me, he or she had to follow my conducting. And during the performance I was trying to conduct them how to read their text, but they didn't listen. (*Chuckles.*) But this was okay, because it was about the tension of losing and failing, and flirting with Lady Luck.

GC You have tables again in this performance *Art as a Gamble, Gamble as an Art*; because we also have tables in the MAXXI museum. In fact, the whole of the *Stigmata* exhibition revolves around this instrument, which creates a transparent and flat lake in Zaha Hadid's space on which materials float like rediscovered fragments of your performances, from the costumes to the recordings, from the photographs to the drawings. What does the table represent for you, is it a tool or symbolic material?

JF For me the table is a kind of stage, a territory, a border, and in the case of the performance *Art as a Gamble* the table became almost a spiritual place where the critics had to 'put their cards on the table'. They had to reveal their purposes and possibilities. I'm not kidding. The table with the glass plate and the two wooden trestles that I made myself when I was 18 I still work at today in my private house.

GC Ikea time?

JF No, Ikea didn't exist in Belgium at that time. I designed this table for almost no money for practical reasons. Because you could clean it easily, you could not cut into the surface of the top, and I could place a lamp underneath the table so that I could copy photographs or drawings. For me this table is an important working instrument and you see this in all my larger drawings of the series *The Hour Blue* that are the size of that table.

GC So it's also a kind of modular element.

JF I often used this table as a bed. Because as a young guy I already had nerve and neurological problems, my body was often over-heated and it was always nice to sleep on the cold glass. So the working table became a bed of purification. I'm explaining this today in beautiful words, but essentially it came out of an instinct of survival.

The four tables, with the glass plate and the two wooden trestles, of the 1978 performance *Burglaries & Street Fights* (No. 7) became the modular element for our exhibition in the MAXXI museum.

GC Did you make the drawings on the playing cards during the performance *Art as a Gamble, Gamble as an Art*? They are fantastic.

JF I started drawing on those cards during the performance, but finished them later. Every three days I sent one of the playing cards to my beauty specialist Gerda, who at the time was still my girlfriend. She always kept them, that is the reason we still have them today.

GC Did you have a studio in New York or did the School of Visual Arts organise it for you?

JF Sometimes you need luck in your life. But yes, I believe that luck is the only justice. I became very good friends with Patrick T. Sellitto who earned his living as an art photographer at the School of Visual Arts. He photographed my performance *Art as a Gamble, Gamble as an Art*. I decided to go and live for a longer period in New York and Pat and I decided to share an apartment at 250 Mott Street, in Little Italy. We rented a three-room apartment for 200 dollars, which even in those days was very cheap. We made two beds on top of each other and there we lived together for more than a year. To make some extra money to survive I was also busboy, assistant of a waiter, at the Tenth Avenue Bar & Restaurant.

GC Patrick T. Sellitto, is he the artist with whom you did the *Bill us later* project (1981–1982, No. 54)?

JF Yes. This project started as a joke, we had so much fun with that project. We wanted to buy or to order art magazines, but we didn't have the money. We figured out that the application forms in those days had a small box 'Bill me' which you could tick. Of course we went to many book and newspaper stores and ripped out these forms from all art and culture magazines and we asked our friends and young artists in the neighbourhood to do the same. We did this for two years and received hundreds of magazines. We had the utopian idea that these magazines would go bankrupt. (*Chuckles.*) In front of the door at 250 Mott Street we also made a huge 'phallus-sculpture' from this pile of magazines, and passersby could take the magazines with them for free.

Another friend of Patrick and me was the artist Anson Seeno. Together we invented different actions and projects to survive. Another funny action, *We went uptown and let us tell you, it was fantastic* (No. 56), I did together with Anson Seeno and we repeated it for several weeks in 1982. We installed ourselves outside a bank in Park Avenue, put a kitchen towel in front of us on which we presented our one-dollar bills with small drawings. For 100 dollars apiece we tried to sell our treated one-dollar bills as artworks to the rich people. 'Beauty walks, money talks', sometimes we had great parties afterwards. (*JF lights a cigarette.*)

For me this period was very important in my life, because I had come from a country of snails, where not so much was happening. Suddenly I'm in New York in the School of Visual Arts and meeting artists like Jonathan Borofsky, David Salle and Joseph Kosuth who were also teaching there. These older artists took me under their wings a little bit. For example, at night they took me to the Café University, near Washington Square Park. Back then it was the meeting place for poets, artists and musicians. I must say it was amazing for me that these famous artists took me along and introduced me to everybody. In Belgium it was the opposite, older artists would never introduce you to other important artists or gallery owners, you had to find

everything out yourself. I loved this open mentality and the generosity of my American colleagues.

So I was lucky. Martha Wilson from the Franklin Furnace, an alternative art space, came to see my performance *Art as a Gamble, Gamble as an Art* and she invited me to do a performance in her space too.

GC I know Martha very well. She was fantastic and fundamental for the history of alternative spaces and for her support of 'artist's book'. What did you do at Franklin Furnace?

JF My proposal to Martha Wilson was the performance *It is Kill or Cure* (1982, No. 57). I wanted to invite twelve art critics and give them a revolver, a six-shooter, with one real bullet inside. The art critics had to turn the chamber and shoot at me. If they were lucky they could kill me. But Martha wouldn't allow this. So I created a performance about the refusal. But still I smuggled inside one six-shooter loaded with one real bullet and five blanks and I gave Patrick T. Sellitto the mission of occasionally, during the performance, pointing the revolver at me and pulling the trigger. When Martha discovered there was a real bullet inside, she was furious.

GC You were also arrested for a performance in Saint-Louis?

JF I was arrested at the end of my *T.Art* performance (1981, No. 50) at Washington University in Saint-Louis. I had been invited by the Danish philosopher Lars Aagaard-Mogensen who was a professor over there and whom I had met for the first time in Ghent after my *Money (Art) in Culture* performance. The basic idea of the performance was to create a physical attack on the reactionary thinking of philosophers about art. I took Lars Aagaard hostage and softly tortured him with different art materials.

GC Who called the police?

JF I think I was a little bit too aggressive to the philosopher and for that reason there was a kind of panic in the public. I think one of them called the police. But I must say the big black police officer who arrested me was really cool, he got the picture of what I was doing and drove me around for several hours in his police car showing me all the nice spots of the city. (*Chuckles.*)

GC Who was Luc Vermeulen? Was he an artist?

JF He was an artist from my generation. He was a fellow student at the Municipal Institute. I've lost track of him, I think he stopped. We did *The Essential Multiple* action (1978, No. 17) together. Basically people had to pay money to enter our exhibition and we created a multiple at the moment itself. We stitched their receipt to a piece of paper, signed it, gave it a black passe-partout and sealed it in plastic. When people entered the exhibition there was nothing to see. (*Chuckles.*) They got an artwork from us.

GC In exchange for money?

JF Yes, this was the action.

GC What is the relationship with the devil, why do you put two horns on your portraits? The artist as a devil, as a fallen angel? There is a photograph of Robert Mapplethorpe as a fallen angel.

JF As a young artist these horns were representing a part of my personal character and my natural subversive behaviour. Yes, it's a fantastic photograph, beautiful work from Robert.

GC When did you meet Robert?

JF It was in Amsterdam in 1982, he and his Dutch gallery owner Rob Jurka came to see my eight-hour theatre piece *This is theatre like it was to be expected and foreseen* in Ritsaert Ten Cate's Mickery Theatre. Robert liked the performance so much that afterwards he asked to meet me. It clicked immediately and later he offered to come to Antwerp to photograph my new theatre piece *The Power of Theatrical Madness* (1984). As you remember very well, we made a book out of it and you wrote the introduction. Robert was fantastic and very generous. Afterwards he gave me forty-three original prints to support me. I still have them in my private collection.

GC Why did you shave your head in the performance *I never betray beauty* (1984, No. 62)? This is for me an image of the 'political' traitor. Normally in Italy mostly women were shaved if they had a relationship with a Nazi army.

JF In Belgium too, women who slept with the enemy were shaved, but so were men who collaborated with the enemy. I did this performance in an old vulture cage at Antwerp Zoo.

The reason I did this in the Zoo is that after the war they locked up the collaborators there. For me it had a lot to do with the political background of my family. My father came from this Communist background of resistance fighters and my mother from a very distinguished French-speaking Catholic bourgeois family. I remember the continuous discussions about politics and history in my youth. There was a strongly anti-fascist attitude towards the Flemish Nationalists and the German Nationalists. It was for me almost as though my parents were the righteous ones, the good ones. They chose for the so-called correct side. They hated everything that came out of Germany. Because I remember my father made these jokes, 'A good German is a German ten metres under the ground', or 'A German is welcome but he has to come alone, not with 20,000 Germans.'

GC Terrible.

JF I remember it was bon ton in my two art schools to be anti-fascist and to be pro-communist. A lot of my friends, young artists, all walked around with a membership card for the Belgian Communist Party.

If you were a member of the Communist Party, you were an interesting artist. Of course I never accepted this. I was in those days already a one-man movement. That was why I made the performance *I never betray beauty*.

(*JF lights a cigarette.*)

GC To reverse it?

JF To say: 'When you are unable to conceive of yourself as a fascist, you are a fascist.' I always detested people thinking themselves to be the righteous ones and that they can judge other people.

GC There was a historical moment also, in 1966, when for the first time a Marxist historian wrote about Mussolini contextualising his figure and giving it a different perspective. Up till then this had been unthinkable: nobody could say it could happen. Futurism was re-evaluated as well, and people said: 'Wait a moment, from 1909 to 1918 it was an experimental group.' With distance, you start to re-interpret history.

JF I never joined any political organisation. I think as an artist you always have to be sovereign. In my mind I chose very quickly to be an artist-dictator. So I said to myself 'Okay, when I can admit to myself that I have a gram of fascism in my brain. I can also admit that sometimes I can betray beauty, because I am human.' In my youth I often went to the museum of Utrecht to see this fantastic self-portrait with a black headband of the Dutch painter Pyke Koch. In those days this was the only painting by this brilliant artist that you could see. Because the Dutch are so politically correct that they hid all his paintings in the basement of the museum.

GC In those years you also started to get involved with Belgian artists?

JF In the late 1970s, I shared a small apartment with a very good friend of mine, the artist Tjen Meylemans. In 1984 I made a quite ironical performance for the Belgian television where I invited the most famous Belgian artists of the time. They had to read for me the fairy tale *The Emperor's New Clothes* (No. 63). I started the performance saying 'Once upon a time' and then Guillaume Bijl, Leo Copers, and so on took over and finished the story. It was a little bit comical because they were trying to be actors. (*Chuckles.*)

With Guillaume Bijl I had a quite good relationship, we spent some crazy time together when I was living in New York. And I knew Luc Tuymans in those years already from the nightlife. He was a bouncer in nightclubs and when these clubs closed we often ended up together in sleazy bars in the red-light district. Also Ronny Van de Velde who at the time was still an artist I saw sometimes. He also studied at the Municipal Institute of Decorative Arts and Crafts and later he became a fantastic art dealer and gallery owner. Still today I work together with him.

GC What was your first collaboration with the gallery of Ronny Van de Velde?

JF In 1988 I made an installation with seven Bic blue bathtubs and seven blue glass owls, called *Hey, what a pleasant madness!*, and Ronny also produced the film *The Scheldt (Hey, what a pleasant madness!)* (No. 67).

GC What is the significance of the owl for you?

JF Here look, this golden chain with the small golden owl I'm wearing, it's a present I received from my mother when I was 18. My mother was very Catholic but we could never go to church because of my father, so for that reason she didn't give me a small golden cross, but a small golden owl. Since then, I wear it around my neck. In this case the owl is a symbol of not over-estimating yourself. The owl, this night animal, this messenger of death, often appears in my work as a self-portrait. Because most of the time I'm working and living in the obscenity and obscurity of the night. The film is a homage to the river Scheldt, the bathtub of my city. In a ritual act, standing in a small rowboat I give my powerful river two beautiful presents that float to the open sea. I give an advice, in the form of Bic blue glass text, that everything and everybody needs a kind of pleasant madness and a blue Bic owl.

GC You did a lot of this kind of work.

JF The bathtub is also a bed and a working table for me. Bath, bed and table, all places for purification and contemplation. Privately I often spend time in bathtubs. When I cannot sleep, I'm an insomniac maniac, who needs his bath. And also because of my neurological problem my muscles often cramp, and spending time in the warm water helps me to relax. That's one of the reasons I always demand a good bathtub in my hotel rooms when I'm travelling around.

GC Also in 1988 you did the performance *Ich bin ein Skelettmann* (No. 68).

JF During the opening of the exhibition *Die Leere mit Bedacht Gefüllt* in Bremen I walked around with a costume I had made out of animal meat as an idea to protect myself. I was constantly shouting 'Ich bin nicht bang, Ich bin ein Skelettmann.' It was a kind of shamanistic ritual to celebrate the animalistic side of myself. It was also based on my nickname in primary school, the teachers called me 'Jan, the skeleton man', based on the Antwerp legend 'Jan zonder vrees, Jan zonder vlees', which means 'John the fearless, John the meatless'. (*Chuckles.*)

III_Germano Celant and Jan Fabre
Vis, Croatia, 8 August 2013

G. Celant Towards the end of the 1980s the idea of artistic coherence was no longer dictated by a single language, such as painting, sculpture, film, drawing, performance, or whatever it might be, but by a definition of art as 'process'. Traditional divisions have disappeared and research begins to move from one field to another. What counts, now, is the possibility for personal expression, not ideas of coherence and continuity.

The investigation can take the form of any medium, as long as perception and analysis are concerned with the present.

Was it agreeable for you to move between singular performance and theatre writing and directing with the same freedom you had when you went from drawing to sculpture with industrial, chemical Bic ballpoint pens and the natural prismatic colours of the jewel beetles?

J. Fabre I took the liberty to jump from one medium to another. I always chose the best medium for what I had in mind. I never followed the rules or the dictatorship of art curators and theatre producers. I was always a good escape artist. I always followed my own set of rules, I am a kind of 'one-man movement', never adapting to the power of protocol.

In the late 1980s and the 1990s I remember when I did my performances and my exhibitions essentially the theatre world didn't accept me. Because I was a visual artist who approached theatre and dance praxis, theatre and dance history, in a different way. I did not adapt myself to the traditional dramaturgy of theatre. I bent and changed the rules of dramaturgy. I was one of the first who brought the idea of real time and real action inside the theatre codex. The theatre establishment did not really accept this in those days: they said loudly, 'this visual artist has to keep his hands off actors and dancers.'

And then later when I became—between brackets—a little bit successful with my theatre work the visual arts establishment reacted with 'Ha, he is a theatre artist not a visual artist.'

Or I got stupid remarks from some art critics and art curators saying things like 'his visual art is too theatrical' or 'his visual art is so theatrical'. I always disliked these superficial remarks, because 'theatrical' means the point or angle you look at something from and of course my exhibitions and my own solo performances were always influenced by my knowledge of dramaturgy.

GC You stopped for a while doing performances. How was the feeling of not being on stage anymore? You feel it was part of your development?

JF There were some periods when I refused invitations to Performance art festivals because most of these festivals I did not like and it became too fashionable. A lot of the performances I saw at festivals of this kind gave me the impression that most of them were done by very bad visual artists or theatre performers who used performance as a kind of garbage bin to hide their own lack of talent. I never liked these kinds of hybrid, multi-media performances that I never could read in a clear way. For that reason I did a lot of un-announced actions and I returned to performances for film in those periods to get away from the festival system.

Looking back on that period of my life I did a lot of un-announced actions in my own city almost as a kind of protest against the bad urban planning in my city.

For example in those years I would regularly stand in the middle of the main street in the centre of Antwerp at night, shouting at local politicians until the police picked me up. I also did crazy actions at night as a kind of private protest about the crazy love affair I had with the brilliant actress Els Deceukelier.

Sometimes I would stand still in the middle of the main street until a car would hit me.

GC It seems that a generation of refusal asserted itself from the 1970s onwards.

Many of these artists come not from middle class families but rather from the working class, the proletariat. All these splits are connected to an anger that comes from below, not from the pleasure of disruption and provocation, as was the case until 1950. If we analyse the paths of the main figures of the historical avant-garde up to the advent of Informel and Action painting, we see that these are artists that either come from a middle class background that sustains them, or they are supported by rich patrons.

Only after the war do artists support themselves and art becomes labour, often secondary with respect to that of a construction worker, a transporter, a teacher, and so on. Making art becomes a public outcry to assert one's own diversity. The range of existence goes from Damien Hirst, who represents the angry generation and English punk, to American graffiti artists from African-American ghettos. It is a moment of radicalisation of the lower social strata, that offer their ruins, their excrement, their 'filth' as an extreme message. The same thing happens in fashion and photography, from Alexander McQueen to Robert Mapplethorpe and in all other creative areas.

You put your own blood, sperm, urine on paper... that's what I think was an important shift in art history. There is always this connection between drawing and performance. They represent traces, they represent spitting up, throwing out things, from out of your body, you know it's totally different, it's not something that will be realised in the future but that arises on stage.

JF Throwing out things from out of your body. I like this metaphor. Still today I believe that you cannot create or make art: I would almost say that art comes out of the pores of my skin.

GC Fluid things.

JF We have a beautiful word in Flemish, *afscheiden*, which means 'to secrete'. You do

not make it, it comes out of you. A lot of my solo performances essentially flowed out of my body like a stream. Over the years I developed different on-going performance-drawing projects with my own bodily fluids. My body fluids as a source of creation.

Every year since the 1970s I have made a couple of drawings with my own blood. I like the idea that drawings like this have a natural discoloration, coagulation, salinisation and calcification. It's an essential part of the process of origin and the process of ageing of these blood drawings.

The possibility of transfusion goes from blood drawing to text written with my own blood. For example the concept 'You will never get used to art' that I wrote during the performance *Sanguis / Mantis* (2001, No. 80). It's about the eternal being present in the ephemeral.

Since the 1980s I have also made some sperm drawings every year. A kind of testimony of lonely nights in hotel rooms during my many travels. The drawings express for me a kind of directness of vitality and physicality. For me these drawings are also a representation of the biological competition. These drawings radiate a masculine power, in which the masculine power can also be misused and abused. Sperm as a healthy and dangerous weapon and as a parrot motif. Also here I like the discoloration, the colour of the sperm that becomes more yellow and intense over the years.

I started the urine drawings in the 1990s. Don't forget I come from a country where 'Manneke Pis' (Little Man Pee) is the national symbol. A symbol of resistance and subversion. Our body is 65% water. Over the years I also researched the philosophical, social and political meaning of water in our body. I also researched the crying body. The different amount of sweat and the different smells of sweat when I had sex, when I did sport, when I was sick, and so on. The culmination of this research was my text *The history of tears* (2005). A lot of the urine drawings are connected with local Flemish legends and myths. For example the 'Maanblussers van Mechelen'—young men who urinated against the church in Mechelen to fight the fire, because through an optical illusion of the glow of the moon it was as if the church was in flames.

Since 2000 I've also been using my own tears to make drawings. I developed a typology of tear-drawings: the first ones are the irritation tears, for example tears I got through the peeling of onions, the second are the emotional tears, for example tears due to physical or mental pain; and the third I call spiritual tears, tears I got from listening to a beautiful piece of music or looking at a beautiful painting. I discovered that inside the spiritual tears you find the most traces of salt. All these performance-drawings are an attempt to offer my body to the outside world; performance as a noble sacrifice.

GC Placing yourself at the centre of physical vibrations, turned up to maximum intensity, allows you to take the use of your own body and offering it as sacrificial event to its very limits.

(JF lights a cigarette.)

This is a process of offering and of purification. Almost a kind of dying to liberate and be born again.

- JF** Creating at the same time your own jail and by being in this jail creating your own freedom.
- GC** Subjecting yourself to the scene, you become a storyteller that recounts himself, not by means of words, but through blood, excrement, urine... It is a paroxysmal narrative where the poetic springs from human materiality, not from its recounting by words or abstract signs. In comparison the voice is a phantom, whereas the flesh is a concentrated energy, a bundle of nerves radiating concrete and material traces. Here the relation between theatre and life is again manifested, in the way Artaud meant it. Considering that at the time those dominating the arts gravitated towards blankness and impersonality, immateriality and conceptuality, your contribution moves in an almost 'neosurreal' direction, one of the blind and unconscious nature of action and gesture, brought with maximum repetition, completely 'materialistic'.
- JF** The repetition of obsession is important. Obsession is the light in my dark, cloudy, rainy Belgian landscape.
- GC** You also did a performance for television about kendo?
- JF** Since the late 1980s I've been practising kendo. I started doing this Zen discipline to get my energy and aggression under control. It was good for me to learn to be humble and to listen to a master. Kendo is splitting of space with exactness and speed. Kendo is an exercise to sharpen reflexes, concentration, stamina and learning to estimate distances between bodies. I made a small television action entitled *The Way to Art and the Way to Beauty* (1997, No. 75). It was a kind of publicity for the cultural national radio station.
- I have a degree in kendo and during the working process of every new theatre creation I also teach my 'warriors of beauty', my actors and dancers, kendo twice a week, together with a friend artist, Eric Van De Mert, who has a higher degree than me.
- GC** The idea of the costume is very important in your performances. And if the actor's body is the machine that radiates an uncontrollable force, then what does the costume represent, the appearance or mask of what?
- JF** It depends, of course, on which performance the costume was made for. Sometimes it's a receiver of energy. In the beginning period, the late 1970s, the base was always a pair of jeans and a denim jacket, pointed shoes and a bowler hat. Almost like an 'artist uniform'. Later the costume became an element of transformation.
- For example the Fred Astaire costume (*Tonight I want to be Fred Astaire. Tonight I want to be a killer*, 1979, No. 26), or the Jacques Mesrine disguises (*Art kept me out of jail*, 2008, No. 87). Sometimes it became a new skin to defend myself, like the exoskeleton of the scarab or the armour of a knight. Or the skin as antennae, like an animal's. Sometimes the costume is a symbol of power or a blazon of discipline, the costume as an erotic body.
- Of course the costume always brought out the extremes of my vitality and physicality. The costumes were always a carrier of nerve and energy knots. For that reason a lot of my performance costumes contain the idea of the power and resistance game. Sometimes I turn the costume and my body inside out; to see what it con-

tains, how it reacts. To give order to my reflective thoughts. As a young artist I said often 'I'm a Dr. Mengele in my own concentration art camp.'

- GC** Go to extreme boundaries. You get to war, you get at war with yourself or is it a war with the outside world?
- JF** I think in the beginning it was much more a war with the outside world and with age it became much more a war within myself. We live in a world in which we are taught that problems have to be solved. I think a lot of my solo performances—and my personal character—are based on the Greek matrix: to honour the conflict inside of yourself and to celebrate this conflict to the outside world.
- GC** What happened with this performance, *A gambling battle between a curator and an artist* (1991, No. 71)?
- JF** Well, as you know, I always liked to flirt with Lady Luck. I taught Jan Hoet to gamble in official casinos. Jan Hoet could not officially gamble in Belgium because he was a state employee.
- The first time I taught him to play Blackjack was around 1995 in the casino of Salzburg, on the expenses of Gerard Mortier who at the time was the director of the Salzburg Festspiele. (*Chuckles.*) Gerard Mortier invited Jan Hoet and me to come and see different opera productions and to create an exhibition of my work. But we were so bored with these opera productions we always left during the interlude to gamble. Typical of the character of Jan Hoet; the second time we played he was already directing all the gamblers sitting at the Blackjack table.
- GC** (*Laughs.*)
- JF** But Jan Hoet and I had already done earlier gambling actions in Tokyo. The most intense and longest session was during *Irony by Vision* (1991), an exhibition Jan Hoet curated about the work of Magritte, Broodthaers, Panamarenko and me at the Watari-um Gallery. For three hours we played the Japanese gambling game Patchinko. We repeated this action also in 1995 during the exhibition *Ripple across the water*. Typically of our character we couldn't stop playing. After hours both of us felt stoned and it felt almost as if our organs were tumbling around like the iron balls of the Patchinko game.
- Often I took some of my artist-colleagues—Rob Scholte, Marina Abramović, Thierry de Cordier, etc.—out to the casinos to teach them to gamble. It was always very ironic to me that those artists who liked to take risks, were always so scared of losing in the casino.
- GC** Can you tell me about the performance when you were dressed as a beekeeper?
- JF** I was always interested in the work of the Flemish master Brueghel, the elder one. There is a small drawing by him of three monks who are beekeepers. This work inspired me a lot for sculptures. For me this image of the monk-beekeeper is like a spiritual body. A kind of traveller-astronaut.
- My performance *The Beekeeper* (1991, No. 70) that I did behind the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Antwerp was a homage to this spiritual body and also a homage to Brueghel. I was dressed in a white beekeeper suit and made drawings of battlefields

with honey. In the golden jelly I was predicting the Flemish future wars as a reference to the visionary beekeepers of the Middle Ages who advised and predicted how the kings should prepare their battles. This performance was also a metaphor for the artist as a guardian of the precious and vulnerable society. It felt like I became a beehive myself.

GC Tell me something about this blindfolded action you did on The Heath.

JF Sometimes I had an idea in the morning and the same day I did the action itself. I regularly carried out a kind of poetical terrorist actions. For sure this performance was an instinctive protest because the politicians wanted to cut The Heath into lots to sell it to real estate agents. And also this heath had, since my youth, been one of my favourite places to hang out with my girlfriends. So I wanted to protect a kind of youth-territory. Looking back my performances always go forwards and backwards between the intensity and the danger of the street and the anarchy and mystery of nature.

Since the late 1970s I have used the idea of smell in a lot of my drawings, sculptures and performances. My nose as an artistic instrument. I blindfolded myself and in my imagination I was trying to find the philosopher's stone through smell. I still remember the sound of my girlfriend Gerda's laughter. She was enjoying herself so much because I was completely losing my way and after two hours, when I stopped the action, I looked like a Flemish pygmy. (*Chuckles.*) During the performance I was repeating constantly a Flemish folk song *Op de purperen hei* (On the purple heath).

I was singing 'De zomerse hei. Dat is hier op aarde de hemel voor mij. Hoe schoon nog de wereld. De zomerse hei. Dat is hier op aarde de hemel voor mij.' (The summer heath. Here on earth this is heaven for me. How beautiful the world may be. The summer heath. Here on earth this is heaven for me.)

GC Since you are a classic insomniac, you also did a lot of actions with sleeping pills?

JF By often staying awake for several days and nights I contracted—without knowing it—a latent form of hyperventilation. For that reason I often had 'faux-cardiacs'. So when I was travelling around for my work I visited many hospitals. In that period to get away from my panic attacks I started to take sleeping pills. And I ended up in different comical and dangerous situations. Later I started taking those pills on purpose, to experience very consciously what they did with my physical and mental state.

(*JF lights a cigarette.*)

With the sleeping pills I did different actions over different years. Sometimes I became aggressive and started fights, sometimes I acted funny, sometimes I fell asleep in restaurants whilst eating. Sometimes I felt like a divine creature, a kind of Hypnos, who was longing for the state of Morpheus. In some actions I was walking around under influence of sleeping pills with one of my owls, Ilad or Dali. The owl as a symbol of not over-estimating myself and as kind of protector of the night and to guide me to death's little brother: sleep. Luckily most of the time I was accompanied by a friend or a girlfriend, who brought me safely back to my private apartment or to my hotel.

GC In 1996 you did a couple of smoking actions?

JF Yes, because this wave of health dictatorship came up.

GC So nobody could smoke anymore?

JF One of my first smoking actions I did with the Japanese painter Masato Kobayashi in the favourite restaurant of the gallery owner Shugo Satani in Tokyo, after the opening of my solo exhibition *Skeleton + Skin* (1996). I repeated these smoking actions on several occasions over several years. Essentially they were based on a text that I had written in 1988, *I am a mistake*, dedicated to Luis Buñuel, also an addict to the pleasure of smoking.

These smoking actions were a kind of protest against the ban on smoking. And also a celebration of my friend, the cigarette, in bad times and in good times. Kobayashi and I were talking about the poetical pleasure of smoking. In these actions I used phrases of my text *I am a mistake*. I love to evaluate the cigarette between my fingers. To feel the filter between my lips. To taste the tobacco on my tongue. To experience the nicotine in my lungs. To follow the movements of the swirling smoke. The real metaphor of these smoking actions is being faithful to the pleasure that is trying to kill me.

In 2007, based on that text *I am a mistake* and on my experience of my different smoking actions, the Belgian artist Chantal Ackerman and I created a film work about this. In Chantal Ackerman's typical style she filmed the splendour of smoking.

GC How do you approach the collaboration...

JF Essentially for me it is something that happens organically. For example I already knew Chantal Ackerman ten years before we collaborated, we saw each other regularly in our galleries in Madrid. It is always a question of finding the right time, place, topic and situation to work together. The actions and performances in the 1970s and 1980s were usually done with very close artist friends. For example, with the Russian artist Ilya Kabakov it was very comical. For years we met each other at Frankfurt airport.

GC The world is very small.

JF Frankfurt airport is like a turntable in Europe.

For sure for three or four years we crossed each other in the corridors of the airport, sometimes at the gates, sometimes at the coffee bars. In the beginning we said hello from a distance because we recognised each other and over the years slowly the conversations became longer. I remember he told me that one of my visual arts catalogues was copied and spread around in the underground of the Moscow art scene.

The first exhibition I saw of Ilya was at the beginning of the 1990s in the Hannover Kunstverein, curated by Eckhard Schneider. From the beginning I liked his subversive and poetical drawings and installations very much. At one of these airport meetings he told me he would come to Belgium to create an exhibition at the Deweer Gallery. Slowly we became friends and he came to visit me in Antwerp: and then we did our first performance together: *A masterpiece on vertical piano (Homage to Walter Marchetti)* (1996, No. 74).

GC How was the performance conceived, you improvised or you wrote a small script together?

JF It was both. I had some musical phrases from the Italian Fluxus artist Walter Marchetti and the rest of the piano composition we improvised.

GC Did you know Walter Marchetti personally?

JF I met Walter Marchetti in 1985 in Milan, because Mino Bertoldi, from the art organisation Out X off, arranged a piano concert by Walter Marchetti as a gift to me after the presentation of *The Power of Theatrical Madness* in the Teatro Nazionale of Milan. My performance with Ilya Kabakov *A masterpiece on vertical piano* was a sort of present to Walter Marchetti and to Mino Bertoldi, who always supported and defended my work in Italy.

GC A year later you did the performance for film *A Meeting / Vstrecha* (1997, No. 76) with Ilya?

JF Ilya and I decided very early to shoot the film in New York, in his apartment block. Beforehand I made a lot of drawings, I made a kind of thinking models of his basement and the roof of his building. Also in my Antwerp studio I made two 'sculpture-costumes', one for me, a scarab costume, and one for Ilya, a fly costume. The materials I used to make the costumes were organic material from humans and animals, for example human bones, pig bladder, etc.

GC It reminds me of your angel sculpture *The Wall of Ascending Angels* (1993) made from the green jewel scarab that I presented in the *Looking at Fashion* curated by Ingrid Sischy and myself in Florence in 1996. Did you ever make a costume only consisting of scarabs for yourself?

JF One time I made a 'sculpture-costume' with brown carnivorous scarabs for an action in 1994. In this performance I was wearing that costume and crawled outside it, leaving behind an empty shell: a spiritual body. We haven't been able to find any photographs of this performance. I lost a lot through my personal chaos. That's one of the reasons why I was keen to create this exhibition on my actions and performances with you, before more would get lost. Thanks to the professionalisation of my studio the last few years, my assistants Katrien Bruyneel, Joke De Vos and Nino Goyvaerts have been able to track down a lot of old photographs and drawings related to my actions and performances.

GC How did you prepare *A Meeting / Vstrecha* with Ilya Kabakov?

JF I took a year to prepare the script of the performance. We wrote some dialogues together, because we decided that he would speak in Russian and I would speak in Flemish during the performance. In the film you don't see that we are pretending that we understand each other. Of course Ilya doesn't understand Flemish and I don't understand Russian.

The next step was also fantastic, and comical. Because the film was produced with Japanese money we had to give the world premiere in the National Opera House in Tokyo.

After the screening we had a talk in front of a Japanese audience: also there we did

our dialogue in Russian and in Flemish, with a simultaneous Japanese translator. You can imagine it was an absurd celebration of the Babylonian confusion of tongues. (*Chuckles.*)

GC So it was an accumulation and a stratification of languages...

JF Exactly. It was an accumulation of languages and symbols. For the performance film we made different groups of actions and conversations. One of the actions and conversations dealt with the problem of the external world, the global society of high-speed communications and information, the totality of control over everything, the influences of different civilisations on each other.

Another group of actions and conversations was about the organisation of the art world. Another group was about the relationship between politics and art, economics and art. Of course all from the point of view of the fly and the scarab. Then we had groups of actions and conversations connected to subjective, individual problems. Another group was about why artists connect with each other and even identify themselves with an insect.

GC The scarab and the fly: they communicate differently?

JF They have completely different systems to communicate. The fly is always above ground and the scarab is underground and above. Ilya uses the flies often as a representation of a utopian powerful civilisation. For me the scarab is essentially one of the oldest computers in the world. Scarabs contain the memory of our civilisation, they are almost like the radars of the humankind. They are insects with an external skeleton. That's the reason they survived for millions of years and didn't change. Do you know that the scarabs are the first chemical warriors in the world? In a lot of my sculptures, drawings and installations they are the symbol, like in classical *Vanitas* paintings, of the bridge between life and death. But death as a positive energy field, not as a negative energy field. Death keeps us awake.

Also Ilya knew about my works from the late 1970s, my installations and performances with flies. For example in 1979 I made an installation in a small Antwerp gallery; I completely filled the space with greasy and sticky brown flycatchers, living flies were flying around and the public had to enter the space to see at the end a self-portrait with a flycatcher stuck to my face. Of course, by walking through the space also the visitors stuck to the flycatchers. Essentially is not every solo performance a self-portrait? You exhibit yourself, you expose yourself. You destroy your own personality and you create a new personality. Maybe my performances are from an artificial naturalness, they are a quest to reveal the deepest being of my own schizophrenic self.

(*JF lights a cigarette.*)

The collaboration with Ilya Kabakov was exciting and for me personally a revelation. First of all I think he is a great artist. He is a very friendly and generous man. I admire his professionalism. We created two exhibitions together, one at the Belgian Deweer Gallery. For me it was fantastic to experience that this great artist with such a status still did everything himself. He was sitting at a table in the gallery making small drawings, cutting out things, gluing paper models... and putting his newly created works on the wall with such enjoyment and concentration. So humble towards beau-

ty, without any pretension. I know artists of his calibre, who come into a gallery or a museum space and won't touch anything any more, because they have twenty assistants who do everything for them.

GC This is a further example of the rise of a generation of artists that come from backgrounds marked by poverty and destitution, like Russia in the 1970s. Now the same thing is happening with globalisation.

From around 2000 onwards, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, global consumption of art has resulted in the emergence of other cultural strata, those of regions marked by misery and hunger; for example in India the affirmation of a 'Bihari' like Subodh Gupta or in the China of Wei Wei and Cai Guo-Qiang. Something has mutated in the social system of art. This victory of the female sensibility and of the 'poorest' corresponds to the use of sensual and simple materials found in life. No longer palace art, but art from life.

JF At that moment in my life the artist Ilya Kabakov became an example for me. I thought by myself, 'I want to become old like this as an artist.' Still enjoying making things yourself, not acting like a star and not becoming cynical.

GC I worked with Ilya for the Venice Biennale in 1997. The same Biennale in which I presented your work.

JF For a number of personal reasons I could not accept Catherine David's invitation to participate in Documenta X with my *Globe* (1997) made from beetles and my *Self-portrait as joker in the Ommeganckstraat* (1997), so I remember I called you and you agreed to present those two works at the Venice Biennale.

GC Are the drawings related to the performance, are they made before or after?

JF It depends. Some I made before, some I made during, and some I made after. In any case for me the drawing and my writings are always the starting point. They are a kind of diary: sometimes I use them as they were originally made, but often I elaborate and finish them after the project. I enjoy enriching the drawing and the text through the experience of the performance.

GC How long does it mostly take you to make a drawing? Is it quick or does it take several hours?

JF This type of elaborated drawing, I think two or three a night.

GC During the night?

JF For me the night is my private zone free of taboos. For me, being alone is like being a jazz musician playing his instrument in solitude. When I'm alone at night I have to write and I have to make drawings. It's like breathing, it's my oxygen. On this small piece of paper I can create a universe. In one second I can make a flying carpet from a square. These days I still do everything by hand, I don't use a computer. For me writing is also drawing, because when I'm scrapping text—I scrap and rewrite a lot—the scraps often become drawings.

And everything happens with the three 'i's: instinct, intuition and intelligence. For example, when I wrote the script for the performance film with Ilya, I wrote by ear. I

did a lot of interviews with Ilya and I knew the sound of his voice, the way he constructs sentences, also his breath between the words and sentences.

GC Did you also sketch while you were doing the interviews with Ilya?

JF Yes. I made drawing notes of his personal movements and gestures. The drawing and the writing are always progressing and developing.

GC The activation of your processes is continuous, it vibrates from the drawings and sculptures, from the solo performances and the theatre pieces. It never seems to abate, almost a delirium that disseminates all your energies in different fields. A blazing furnace that emits incandescent splinters in an impulsive and rational manner: a flow of life that turns into an expressive and artistic stream.

