

# Jan Fabre

## From the Cellar to the Attic

## From the Feet to the Brain



Kunsthau Bregenz

**September 27, 2008 to January 25, 2009**

**Exhibition concept and curator: Eckhard Schneider**

**Press conference:**

**Thursday, September 25, 2008, 12 noon**

**Opening: Friday, September 26, 2008, 8 p.m.**

In 1978, Jan Fabre (\*1958 in Antwerp/Belgium) erected a tent on his parents' property, which was to serve as his bedroom, laboratory, studio, retreat, and private universe for a long time to come. He called this work "De neus/neuslaboratorium" ("The Nose/Nose Lab"). It was Fabre's first sculptural work and can be considered the nucleus of his oeuvre. Three tent poles, a blanket thrown over them, a flat desk, a blue leather satchel, an assortment of bottles containing tinctures and insects, and a microscope make up the laboratory. Inside there is just enough room for one person, and despite its being so sparsely furnished, it is filled with meanings and visions. At first, everything seemed to revolve around the systematic method of investigation, killing, pinning, preserving, and categorizing insects. For, inspired by the passion with which his great-grandfather, the famous entomologist Jean-Henri Fabre, delved into and examined things, Jan Fabre seems to have also dedicated himself to the sober reality of scientific research.

The tent, initially just a scientific laboratory, now became a small studio. The territory through which Jan Fabre has moved from now on is the black area of the extinguished, an abstraction under which instinct is free to play out its obsessions. What has emerged is space for sharpened senses, which obey the voice of nature. The microscope – as a symbol of scientific precision, of a degree of concentration that aims at diving into the depths of painstaking observation – stands for the researcher-artist who hungrily seeks to explore interrelationships, and thus it also represents the visual act itself. And it has emerged early on in what would become typical of Fabre's work: the mirroring of the meaning of seeing as something that focuses inward and outward at the same time.

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The tent not only stands for a protective space but is also an archetype of risk, threat, and loss, conditions that would henceforth accompany Jan Fabre in his artist's existence. It also embodies the artist's loneliness. If looking outward fails to sharpen one's perception for the things of this world – the whole truth – there is always the parallel path into the self that one can resort to, into the fathomless inner pool of dreams and visions.

In 1976, two years before erecting his tent, Jan Fabre had gone to Bruges, where he discovered the Flemish masters for himself. Fabre did not regard the paintings he saw in Bruges as a work of mere art historical interest, upon which one has only to gaze long enough in order to be able to analyze and understand all its secrets. Rather, he experienced a reversal of the usual perceptual relationship between the work and the viewer: that not only does he gaze at the work, but the work also gazes at him.

Within a world of frequencies upon frequencies of mediation, the artwork in its singularity shifts for a brief but all the more enduring moment to the center of individual observation. It is the moment Joseph Brodsky was talking about in his acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1987 when he said: "A work of art leaps straight out at the viewer, addressing him tête à tête and engaging in direct contact with him without mediation." And he goes on to say: "If art teaches us – particularly the artist – anything at all, it is the privateness of the human condition. Being the most ancient as well as the most literal form of private enterprise, it fosters in a person, knowingly or unwittingly, a sense of his uniqueness, of individuality, of separateness – thus turning him from a social being into an 'I.'" In this respect it is understandable that gazing at the Flemish masters – with their real directness in displaying the body, suffering, and torture – Jan Fabre, in his sensitivity for these themes and forms, was so moved that he recognized himself in the paintings, and that from that point on, as he puts it, body art and performance became the main elements of his work.

His earlier happenings gave Fabre the opportunity to create a platform for simple truths. The first truth in this context was the body. This concept, traditionally most strongly connected with subjecting the physical self to danger and ultimately with death, is juxtaposed by Fabre, particularly in his theater pieces, against the idea of a body consisting of muscles, effort, and concentration and controlled by willpower. Like insects flying again and again toward a source of light until they grow weary and collapse, the dancers in his theater cover the hermetic box-like space of the stage with the regular staccato of their movements. Just as light triggers a self-destructive mechanism in the insects, so with Fabre does his fascination with death.

This established **certain basic principles in Jan Fabre's work** early on. He would apply selected artistic strategies which he devised in the early part of



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his career and continued to develop in different disciplines and various media. It is a universe of plentitude based on **five cornerstones**: the awareness of the power of the images of the real, discovered in the Flemish Primitives, further developed through the visual force of performances and theater, and finally emerging as visually overwhelming sculptural tableaus; the extreme emphasis of the body as the interface between life and death, agony and fulfillment; the fascination for insects as a symbol of metamorphosis, as the subject of intense research, and as important material for drawings, objects, and large-scale two- and three-dimensional productions; the continuous application of the auto-mechanical principle to all artistic activities, a principle that originates from the discovery of the body and the behavior of insects; the fascination for mirroring and doubling, which is the point of departure of many works.

For the **Kunsthhaus Bregenz**, Jan Fabre is staging his first large-scale museum exhibition in Austria. With new room-filling sculptural tableaus on five exhibition floors, Fabre creates a fascinating and mythical world of horror, beauty, and metamorphosis that is hardly conceivable in conventional artistic terms and constantly alternates between reality and dream. In its mode of presentation the exhibition follows the form of the human body, in which in metaphorical harmony with the different anatomical zones – starting with the feet on the ground floor and ending with the brain on the upper floor – the five exhibition floors form a *gesamtkunstwerk* of tremendous and mysterious complexity.

## 5 new installations for the Kunsthau Bregenz

### the feet:

#### **Schuilkelde-atelier voor de chileense kunstaar-krijgers en kuisvrouwen, 2008**

#### **Shelter-studio for the Chilean artist-warriors and cleaning ladies**

In the basement, Fabre created a shelter-atelier comprising three thinking models he made in the 90s. The shelter-atelier (which is a cement cube) is composed of an official space and the artist's secret studio. In the official space, Fabre presents a shelter for Chilean artists and cleaning ladies. He installs 7 blue biced beds and two "brain-legs" coming down from the ceiling. These "brain-legs" connect the basement of the KUB to the installation presented on the top floor. The secret space is a studio filled with ammunition and experimental organic material. In this place the artist hides and works on his creations. Fabre extends his sculpture to the toilets – which are also cemented – where animals grow out of the ceiling. The goose represents the stupidity of men; the peacock, the vanity of women; and the swan, the metamorphosis of the disabled.

### the sex:

#### **Fontein van de wereld (als jonge kunstenaar), 2008**

#### **Fountain of the world (as a young artist)**

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



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**the belly:**

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

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

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

**the heart:**

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

On the second floor of the KUB, Fabre creates a poetic installation, using 3,000 human bones and 10 skulls made out of Murano glass to create two altars facing each other. Some of the skulls and bones are painted blue, which makes reference to the shelter in the basement of the exhibition. On the one altar, Fabre presents a male heart, which is open. On the other, we find a closed, slightly smaller and more elegant female heart. These hearts are made out of a mosaic of human bones and, for the artist, represent a model for the future heart of mankind: a merciful heart that cannot bleed.

**the brain:**

**In de loopgraven van het brein als kunstenaar-lilliputter, 2008**  
**In the trenches of the brain as an artist-lilliputian**

On the third floor, the audience is guided to a surreal “terrace” affording a view of a timeless battlefield with 4 trenches leading to one big crater. In this crater we discover the skinless head of a giant. On this head stands the artist, presenting himself as a lilliputian, digging his way through the brain, discovering not only the structural physiognomy of the face but the terra incognita of the brain. Whereas sex represents the force of the artist’s creative potential, the brain is the place where it happens. This is why Fabre regards the brain as “the most sexy part of the body.” This theme is relatively new in his work; the artist first began exploring this subject two years ago. The installation presented here, however, derives from a small model Fabre made in 2003, which had been impossible to execute at the time.

# **KUB-Billboards**

## **Jan Fabre**

### **6 brains from Vorarlberg**

**September 27, 2008 – January 29, 2009**

**Seestraße Bregenz**

In cooperation with the Kunsthhaus Bregenz, Jan Fabre has selected six prominent Vorarlberg personalities who have agreed to pose for staged photographic portraits. Each of them either has to be bald to begin with or will have to shave his or her head for the picture.

During the photo session, a “brain” created by the artist from a head of cauliflower will be placed on each person’s head, the vegetable’s natural form calling to mind the human cerebrum. Thus, the KUB Billboard portraits tie in with Jan Fabre’s exhibition installations at the Kunsthhaus Bregenz, where the human body – including the brain – recurs as a constant theme.

## KUB-Publications

**Jan Fabre**

**From the Cellar to the Attic - From the Feet to the Brain  
Five new installations**

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

In knowledgeable essays the internationally renowned curators Lóránd Hegyi, Germano Celant, Philippe Van Cauteren, Katerina Koskina, and Yuko Hasegawa elucidate each of the expansive floor-filling ensembles, while Gert Mattenklott's contribution is a philosophical discourse on Fabre's gesamt-kunstwerk at the Kunsthhaus Bregenz. With its numerous foldouts and large-format installation photographs, this catalogue shows the complexity of one of the most unusual artists of our age.

**Jan Fabre**

**From the Cellar to the Attic - From the Feet to the Brain  
Five new installations**

German/English

Edited by Eckhard Schneider, Kunsthhaus Bregenz

Graphic design: Hans Werner Holzwarth, Berlin

With contributions by Philippe Van Cauteren, Yuko Hasegawa, Lóránd Hegyi, Gert Mattenklott, Katerina Koskina, and Bart Verschaffel

Approx. 160 pages, 22 x 30 cm, hardcover, cloth with dust jacket

Due to be published: November 2008

Price: € 58

In collaboration with Jan Fabre, a special, limited and signed book edition will also be published.



## **KUB-Editions**

### **Jan Fabre Four Planets**

Close cooperation with the artists while planning the exhibition results in special editions designed exclusively for the Kunsthaus Bregenz.

*People are better than angels because they have earned the goodness they possess with that complex but fragile organ between their ears.*

Jan Fabre, King of Plagiarism, 1998

### **Jan Fabre Four Planets**

Portfolio box with 4 digital pigment prints (Ditone) on transparent paper, 50 x 34 cm

Edition of 35 + 10 A.P.

Subscription price during the exhibition: 1500 €

Price after the exhibition: 1900 €, price excl. 10% VAT, plus postage and packaging

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Opening hours:  
**Tuesday – Sunday 10 a.m. – 6 p.m.**  
**Thursday 10 a.m. – 9 p.m.**

**24.12.08 10 a.m. – 2 p.m.**  
**25.12.08 closed**  
**26.12.08 10 a.m. – 6 p.m.**  
**31.12.08 10 a.m. – 2 p.m.**  
**01.01.09 2 p.m. – 9 p.m.**