

JAN FABRE

STIGMATA – Actions & Performances 1976–2017

The Belgian artist Jan Fabre (1958) is one of the most innovative and important figures on the international contemporary art scene. As a visual artist, theatre-artist and author he has created a highly personal world.

STIGMATA – Actions & Performances 1976–2017, curated by the influential Italian art historian and curator Germano Celant, ranges from Fabre's early performances, such as *Money Performance* (1979), *Ilad of the Bic Art Room* (1981) and *Sanguis / Mantis* (2001) to *I am a Mistake* (2017) and many others, some of which were created with fellow artists (Marina Abramović or Ilya Kabakov), philosophers (Dietmar Kamper, Peter Sloterdijk) and major scientists (Edward O. Wilson or Giacomo Rizzolatti).

In a unique setting, the exhibition consists of an incredibly rich body of work that presents a picture of the last 40 years of Fabre's performance oeuvre.

The architecture behind the exhibition can be seen as a radical expansion of Fabre's early installation *Objects to break in and to fight* (1978), in which he shows the tools used in this performance on his work-table (a sheet of glass on two wooden trestles).

In a labyrinth of tables, the exhibition comprises thinking models, drawings, costumes, photographs, films, video recordings and archival material as well as extracts from Fabre's *Night Diaries*.

The film *Doctor Fabre Will Cure You* (2013) by the artist and avant-garde filmmaker Pierre Coulibeuf is being screened in the Refectory.

BIC ART

During several of his performances in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Jan Fabre introduces the Bic ballpoint pen as an alternative for the art of the Great Masters. At first, choosing the blue Bic ballpoint was a matter of practicality: "It was cheap and handy, I could buy them everywhere and steal them everywhere." Moreover, Fabre is very much aware that no other artist uses Bic ballpoint pens. The chemical nature of the blue ink, containing a sort of silver gelatine, produces the effect that drawings are not static, that they become fluid. Further, the colour refers to the concept propounded by French entomologist and namesake Jean-Henri Fabre: *'The Hour Blue'*, that magical moment between the end of night and beginning of day, the splitting of time, when night animals go to sleep and day animals awake, when all changes and all is possible.

For the action *Bic Art Propaganda*, Jan Fabre sends handmade postcards around the world, by way of publicizing his *Bic Art-movement*. The music that you hear during *The Bic Art Music Performances* is the scratch of the Bic ballpoint pen on paper. The drawing becomes a musical score. With the action *Bic Art Print*, the artist investigates (influenced by Yves Klein) prints made using his own body.

Belgium is the only country where the national tricolour is traditionally imprinted on cleaning cloths. Using one such floor cloth, (*Cleaning the Museum*), Jan Fabre cleans the museal Jordaenshuis in Antwerp. On one of his floor cloths says: *'Only acts of poetical terrorism'*. During the performance *Ilad of the Bic Art*, Fabre as Ilad (Dalí reversed) directly confronts art history. He rips out reproductions, pins them to the wall, and then gives them the treatment with his blue Bic pen. For *Ilad of the Bic Art*, *the Bic Art Room*, Jan Fabre locks himself up for three days and nights in a completely white room, wearing white clothes, eating white food. At the end of it all, the whole room (and he himself!) are fully clad with Bic blue texts and signs.

GANGSTERS & METAMORPHOSIS

As a young street fighter, Jan Fabre starts to recognize the beauty of the language of the street. The sense of loyalty that reigns there is very important to him. The poetry and the style of street fighting, the law of the street based on physical and mental strength, along with its code of honour, comprise an important stimulus for his performances. To gather material, the young artist broke into villas in the richer suburbs of Antwerp. He and his friends constituted the 'Cartouche gang'. Objects they stole were sold for art materials or subsequently used in installations. Bounty from these raids were presented by Fabre in *Burglaries & Street Fights*. In the 8 mm film *Het gevecht* (*The fight*) he depicts the law of the street in a short fragment.

In the Louvre Museum, Fabre offers a 5 hour-long performance, *Art kept me out of jail*, inspired by the French gangster and enemy of the state no 1 Jacques Mesrine, a figure who had long fascinated the artist. Between ancient sculptures and sarcophagi, Fabre appears in always different (dis)guises, to finally succumb to a long salvo of gunfire at the feet of Nike of Samothrace. In Fabre's eyes, Mesrine is an escape artist and a master of metamorphosis. The figure of Mesrine is a metaphor for the artist as a louse in the fur coat of society. At the same time, the performance is a commentary on the status and role of the museum: art must not only be preserved; it must also find its way into the wider world to acquire true meaning.

Metamorphosis and transfiguration have been important motifs in Jan Fabre's performances from the very start. At the end of the 1970s, the artist has his then girlfriend – a makeup artist – regularly transform him into a wide variety of characters: Fred Astaire, Jim Morrison, Jacques Mesrine, an Arabian prince, etc. The precision of Fred Astaire inspires him to look at choreography like drawing with the body. The performance *Tonight I want to be Fred Astaire. Tonight I want to be a killer* is a metamorphosis from animal to human and from human to animal. By way of reaction to his own lean aspect as a young lad, in *Ich bin ein Skelettmann* Fabre lets himself be fitted out for a suit of flesh. Subsequently, for the film by the French artist Pierre Coulibeuf, this 'Skeleton Man' again appears, this time in dialogue with the 'meaty' works of Peter Paul Rubens.

MONEY & THE ART WORLD

During several of his early performances, Jan Fabre attempts to make his mark on art history, critically reflecting on the work of art as a commercial commodity. He also casts a critical glance on the art world's prevailing laws, and maps out the ambiguous position occupied by money within our contemporary society. In his very first performance – in reaction to art-school traditions – Fabre turns classical paintings upside down and clads them with the text: *'You have to take everything seriously but not tragically.'*

When Jan Fabre, during the course of *Money Performance*, rips up, eats and finally burns the bills he received as admission fee, with *The Rea(dy)-make of the Money Performance*, where the artist makes an exhibition with the money collected, and walks around in a suit made of money while stuffing the rest in his pockets, the public's reaction is less than enthusiastic.

At the opening of the exhibition *The Essential Multiple*, Jan Fabre and Erik Vermeulen ask members of the public for an entry fee. A signed receipt is given, stapled and then handed back

as a multiple made by the artists. During the opening of an exhibition in Turnhout, Fabre goes around with a bag on his head that reads *'Buy at Jan Fabre's'*.

The same themes are again taken up during Jan Fabre's stay in the United States. With *After Art*, he investigates what it means to be a young artist on a public platform. For *The Killing of J.F.K.*, he shoots at a dollar coin bearing Kennedy's image. *The Creative Hitler Act* sees Fabre exploring the role of artist as dictator, and who as an absolute ruler determines which language is to be used. The relationship between artist and art critic is further examined in *Art as a Gamble, Gamble as an Art*. When Fabre calls into question the critic's position within the world of art by symbolically torturing the philosopher Lars Aagaard Mogensen with art-related attributes, a member of the public calls the cops. On New York's Park Avenue, Fabre together with artist colleague Anson Seenoo try to sell passers-by drawings on dollar bills and bags of salt as art works. When the organizers refuse Fabre's proposal to have art critics shoot at him in a manner reminiscent of Russian roulette, Fabre reacts by creating the piece *It is Kill or Cure*.

SCIENCE & EXPERIMENT

Jan Fabre's fascination for science goes back to childhood days. The young Fabre liked nothing better than studying the world of insects and other animals, dissecting their small bodies and transforming them into new beings. His discovery of the famous French entomologist and namesake Jean-Henri Fabre, opened up a new world to him and would come to leave its mark on his entire artistic universe. During the performance *Me, Dreaming*, the artist exploring his own body. He sands the flesh of his legs like he sands the table's wood. Object becomes body, body becomes object.

The new millennium sees Jan Fabre being invited to be the first artist-in-residence at The Natural History Museum in London, where he worked on the film *A Consilience* and for which he had the museum's scientists clothed as an animal from their respective branches of research.

In the film *Is the brain the most sexy part of the body?*, the face-to-face interaction takes place between the scientist (Edward O. Wilson) and the artist (Jan Fabre). They use the cross fertilization between their domains to better understand the brain and its beauty.

For *Do we feel with our brain and think with our heart?*, the artist enters into dialogue with Italian neurologist Giacomo Rizzolatti, discoverer of mirror neurons which may be responsible for our empathic sense.

BLOOD & BODY

As an important source of inspiration and motivating force to create his performances, Jan Fabre cites his visit as a young student to an exhibition on stigmata and self-chastisement at the Groeningemuseum in Bruges. The overpowering corporality and the significance of the blood sacrifice later inspires the artist to perforate his own body. During *My body, my blood, my landscape*, Fabre cuts his body with a razor and uses his own blood to draw on paper. In later performances as well, Fabre draws inspiration from the Middle Ages and Flemish Masters like Jan van Eyck, Jeroen Bosch and Pieter Bruegel the Elder. Skeletons and skulls, stuffed animals and harnesses are recurring elements.

During the over 5 hour-long performance *Sanguis / Mantis*, Fabre puts forward his views regarding art, religion, trance and transformation, and writes a manifesto in his own blood: *'There's no getting used to art'*. In a ritualistic manner, he moves among 13 tables, driven by different pieces of equipment. The loss of blood plus the effects of rust toxicity from the harness compel the artist into a near mystical state of exhaustion, thus expanding his consciousness and stirring artistic creation. Destruction and creation are two edges of the same sword. The form of the helmet is based on the praying mantis, which acts as an oracle of future events while sucking blood.

Out of respect for art and a love for beauty, Jan Fabre and Marina Abramović explore the notion of virgin warriors who throughout history have fought for beauty. Enclosed within a giant-sized cage in Palais de Tokyo, Fabre wears the harness of the rhinoceros beetle; Abramović wears that of the wasp. The performance lasts some 4 hours, and consists of 26 parts or actions. These vary from references to iconic images (Saint George, the Pietà and others) and the expression of states of mind, to writing and drawing with each other's blood. These operations are a battle taken on by both artists in order to reach a new state of being: "We try to get back to a state of childhood, of transparency, of virginity in our transactions."

HOMAGES

References to, collaborations with and tributes to artists, philosophers and scientists who have inspired or influenced him – these run as a connecting thread throughout the performances of Jan Fabre. In Amsterdam, Fabre becomes acquainted with the work of Bas Jan Ader. As an homage to this artist (presumed lost at sea), he managed to persuade a friend to share a stay of two days and three nights on a boat. At the University of Milwaukee, Fabre offers a Marcel Duchamp-related performance. Using salt, he attempts to materialize Duchamp's spirit. The performance's title is a play-on-words on the name of the French artist: Mar-cel Du-champ, *Sea-Salt of the Fields*.

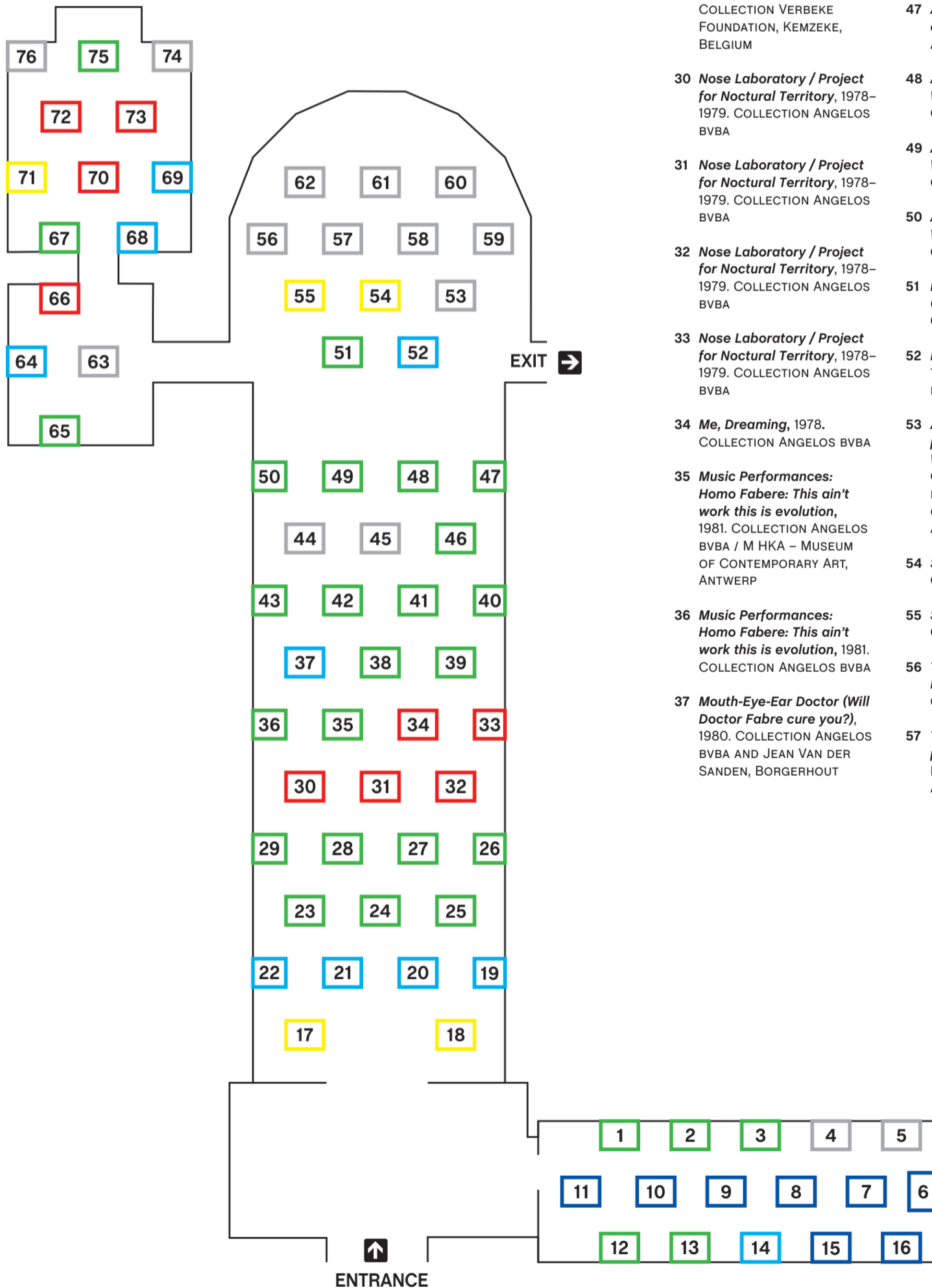
An organically grown friendship between Jan Fabre and Ilya Kabakov becomes sealed with a joint performance in Antwerp. To a score written by Fabre, Kabakov improvises by way of homage to Fluxus artist Walter Marchetti. In the film *A Meeting / Vstrecha*, the two artists share – like fly and scarab – the secret of art. They discuss, each in his own language, on the rooftop and in the basement of a skyscraper in New York, various aspects of being an artist in their respective countries.

Jan Fabre creates *The Problem (Homage to Dietmar Kamper)* together with German philosophers Dietmar Kamper and Peter Sloterdijk. In a romantic landscape, the three gentlemen put forward their problem, rolling a ball of earth like dung beetles to extend their knowledge and create their own world.

During the *Red Lines Performance* Fabre, together with the Dutch poet Albert Hagenars, visits some of his favourite haunts in Antwerp. The action consisted of connecting all these places with a red thread.

The film *The Scheldt (Hey, what a pleasant madness!)* is a homage to the river that runs through the artist's home town. The river as the bathtub of the city, allowing the artist to relax his body and give free flow to his creativity. During the performance Fabre offers the river two gifts: the counsel that everything and everyone needs a sort of fine madness, and a Bic-blue owl. The owl is a self-portrait of the artist, who indeed spends much of his time working and living in the obscenity and obscurity of the night.

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| 1 <i>Long Street of Images - Jan Fabre Street</i> , 1977. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA AND PIERRE COULIBEU | 7 <i>Action: Bic Art Prints</i> . 1980. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA | 14 <i>Tonight I want to be Fred Astaire. Tonight I want to be a killer</i> , 1979. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA | 20 <i>Burglaries & Street Fights</i> , 1978. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA | 38 <i>The Killing of J.F.K.</i> , 1980. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA | 58 <i>A Meeting / Vstrecha</i> , 1997. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA |
| 2 <i>Vincent van Gogh - Jan Fabre House</i> , 1978. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA AND PIERRE COULIBEU | 8 <i>Ilad of the Bic Art, the Bic Art Room</i> , 1981. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA | 15 <i>Ilad of the Bic Art, the Bic Art Room</i> , 1981. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA AND COLLECTION M HKA / MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, ANTWERP | 21 <i>Burglaries & Street Fights</i> , 1978. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA | 39 <i>It is Kill or Cure</i> , 1982. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA | 59 <i>A Meeting / Vstrecha</i> , 1997. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA |
| 3 <i>You have to take everything seriously but not tragically</i> , 1976. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA | 9 <i>Ilad of the Bic Art, the Bic Art Room</i> , 1981. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA | 16 <i>Ilad of the Bic Art</i> , 1981. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA AND COLLECTION M HKA / MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, ANTWERP | 22 <i>Burglaries & Street Fights</i> , 1978. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA | 40 <i>The Creative Hitler Act</i> , 1980. COLLECTION CAROLINE AND MAURICE VERBAET, ANTWERP | 60 <i>A Meeting / Vstrecha</i> , 1997. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA |
| 4 <i>Buried (Homage to Pieter Engels)</i> , 1979. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA | 10 <i>Ilad of the Bic Art, the Bic Art Room</i> , 1981. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA | 17 <i>My body, my blood, my landscape</i> , 1978. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA | 23 <i>Rea(dy)-make of the Money Performance</i> , 1980. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA | 41 <i>We went uptown and let us tell you, it was fantastic</i> , 1982. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA | 61 <i>The Scheldt (Hey, what a pleasant madness!)</i> , 1988. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA AND JEAN VAN DER SANDEN, BORGERHOUT |
| 5 <i>Buried (Homage to Pieter Engels)</i> , 1979. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA AND COLLECTION M HKA / MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, ANTWERP | 11 <i>Ilad of the Bic Art, the Bic Art Room</i> , 1981. TIBA ART COLLECTION, OTEGEM, BELGIUM | 18 <i>My body, my blood, my landscape</i> , 1978. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA | 24 <i>Rea(dy)-make of the Money Performance</i> , 1980. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA | 42 <i>T. Art</i> , 1981. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA | 62 <i>The problem (Homage to Dietmar Kamper)</i> , 2001. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA |
| 6 <i>Action: Bic Art Propaganda</i> , 1979. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA | 12 <i>Zeno X (performance with my tortoises Janneke & Mieke)</i> , 1978. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA AND COURTESY OF DEWEER GALLERY, OTEGEM, BELGIUM | 19 <i>Burglaries & Street Fights</i> , 1978. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA | 25 <i>Money Performance</i> , 1979. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA | 43 <i>After Art</i> , 1980. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA | 63 <i>To Bring an End to the Royal Judgement and the Judgement of God (Homage to Antonin Artaud)</i> , 2009. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA |
| <i>The Bic Art Music Performances</i> . 1979. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA | 13 <i>Zeno X (performance with my tortoises Janneke & Mieke)</i> , 1978. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA AND COURTESY OF DEWEER GALLERY, OTEGEM, BELGIUM | | 26 <i>Money (Art) in Culture</i> , 1980. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA | 44 <i>Sea-Salt of the Fields</i> , 1980. COURTESY OF DEWEER GALLERY, OTEGEM, BELGIUM | 64 <i>Television action: The Way to Art and the Way to Beauty</i> , 1997. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA |
| | | | 27 <i>Money Performance</i> , 1979. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA | 45 <i>Sea-Salt of the Fields</i> , 1980. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA | 65 <i>Parrots and guinea pigs</i> , 2003. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA |
| | | | 28 <i>Rea(dy)-make of the Money Performance</i> , 1980. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA | 46 <i>Bill us later</i> , 1979. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA / M HKA – MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, ANTWERP | 66 <i>A Consilience</i> , 2000. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA |
| | | | 29 <i>Money Performance</i> , 1979. COLLECTION VERBEKE FOUNDATION, KEMZEKE, BELGIUM | 47 <i>Art as a Gamble, Gamble as an Art</i> , 1981. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA | 67 <i>I am the shame pole</i> , 2010. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA |
| | | | 30 <i>Nose Laboratory / Project for Nocturnal Territory</i> , 1978–1979. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA | 48 <i>American Works and Window Performance</i> , 1980. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA | 68 <i>Art kept me out of jail (Homage to Jacques Mesrine)</i> , 2008. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA |
| | | | 31 <i>Nose Laboratory / Project for Nocturnal Territory</i> , 1978–1979. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA | 49 <i>American Works and Window Performance</i> , 1980. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA | 69 <i>Art kept me out of jail (Homage to Jacques Mesrine)</i> , 2008. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA |
| | | | 32 <i>Nose Laboratory / Project for Nocturnal Territory</i> , 1978–1979. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA | 50 <i>American Works and Window Performance</i> , 1980. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA | 70 <i>Is the brain the most sexy part of the body?</i> , 2007. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA |
| | | | 33 <i>Nose Laboratory / Project for Nocturnal Territory</i> , 1978–1979. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA | 51 <i>Performance X... Art as a Cultivated Boredom</i> , 1981. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA | 71 <i>Virgin / Warrior</i> , 2004. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA |
| | | | 34 <i>Me, Dreaming</i> , 1978. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA | 52 <i>Ich bin ein Skelettmann</i> , 1988. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA | 72 <i>Is the brain the most sexy part of the body?</i> , 2007. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA |
| | | | 35 <i>Music Performances: Homo Fabere: This ain't work this is evolution</i> , 1981. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA / M HKA – MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, ANTWERP | 53 <i>A masterpiece on vertical piano (Homage to Walter Marchetti)</i> , 1996. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA / M HKA – MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, ANTWERP | 73 <i>Is the brain the most sexy part of the body?</i> , 2007. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA |
| | | | 36 <i>Music Performances: Homo Fabere: This ain't work this is evolution</i> , 1981. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA | 54 <i>Sanguis / Mantis</i> , 2001. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA | 74 <i>An attempt not to beat the record time achieved in Mexico City in 1972 (or how to remain a dwarf in the land of giants)</i> , 2016. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA |
| | | | 37 <i>Mouth-Eye-Ear Doctor (Will Doctor Fabre cure you?)</i> , 1980. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA AND JEAN VAN DER SANDEN, BORGERHOUT | 55 <i>Sanguis / Mantis</i> , 2001. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA | 75 <i>I am a mistake</i> , 2017. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA |
| | | | | 56 <i>The problem (Homage to Dietmar Kamper)</i> , 2001. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA | 76 <i>Love is the Power Supreme</i> , 2016. COLLECTION ANGELOS BVBA |
| | | | | 57 <i>The Scheldt (Hey, what a pleasant madness!)</i> , 1988. RONNY VAN DE VELDE, ANTWERP | |



- BIC ART
- GANGSTERS & METAMORPHOSIS
- MONEY & THE ART WORLD
- SCIENCE & EXPERIMENT
- BLOOD & BODY
- HOMAGES



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