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## REPETITION IN THE WORK OF JAN FABRE

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The tortoise (Handjesvanger voor de zilverkast / Handcatcher for the Silver Cupboard, 1978–79; Griekse tragedie / Greek Tragedy, 1981; Griekse overwinning / Greek Victory, 1981; Searching for Utopia, 2003) and the beetle (Fantasie–insecten–sculpturen / Fantasy–Insect–Sculptures, 1979; Strategievelden / Strategy Fields, 1998–2000) are among the oldest creatures to have inhabited our world; even today they largely inhabit an obscure world we know very little about but which nevertheless appears here and there at various times and places, in numerous pictures and stories. In *Dÿe den nest weet Dÿe weeten. Dÿen roft Dÿ heeten* (1995), we see 16th-century monks performing their task as beekeepers, and in *Old Spiritual Traveller* (2001), we see their contemporary brother-in-arms, the astronaut, who also wears protective clothing and journeys into the unknown. *De man die vuur geeft* (The Man Who Gives a Light, 2002), makes a shelter of his coat and invites us to take refuge and smoke a cigarette, and in *Me, Dreaming* (1978) a young man is hunched over the microscopic world under his nose. They are all 'dorsal figures'. Georges Banu, who wrote an historical account of 'dorsal man' in painting and theatre, convincingly reveals the powerful metaphorical potential of this figure:

« Dorsal man feeds on the problematic status of the metaphor that invites an act of elucidation without becoming dematerialised because of it: this ambivalence should be preserved. Thinking is supported by concreteness. »

Dorsal man is a character who turns away from the spectator and the outside world, and hides in the act to the detriment of the pose. Within the totality of the field of vision the back forms a blind spot. On the basis of this deficiency, the spectator can nevertheless make a projection based on the back, on the missing face. The dorsal figure creates a field of expectation, invites one to also look, to mentally construct the world on the other side in order to tell a story and embark on a journey. The back forms the physical, polemic reverse side of the face which is traditionally the seat of the mental and spiritual human identity, of the conscious mind that distinguishes us from animals. The dorsal figure leaves behind the false, romanticised individual with his petty, futile complaints, and becomes absorbed in a capacity we cannot precisely define or in a world that transcends him. He inhabits his own body, becomes a symbol of himself, a representative of himself. He has an amazing ability to metamorphose and a powerfully erotic charisma. He is a master of the art of seduction and deception. His dedication is total, unto death and beyond. He is a survivor.

What are the activities of the dorsal figure? Beetles, bees and ants are always so industrious, but it is a bit like the artist and the two philosophers in the muddy field: extremely active but what on earth are they doing? What is the purpose of their actions? If you try to go your own separate way it appears chaotic, an endless repetition of very simple, apparently aimless activities. However, the results often appear to be the work of a titan. With its prehistoric head, ponderous tread and the heavy armour-plating attached to its spine, the tortoise looks so ancient, clumsy and slow, that it appears to be thoroughly unsuited to this supersonic age. But appearances can be deceptive; one only has to ask the hare in Aesop's fable. In one of the paradoxes by Zeno of Elea, even Achilles, the swiftest warrior in Antiquity, could not keep up with the tortoise. During his stay on the Galapagos Islands, Charles Darwin wrote that when tortoises are set on moving to a particular point, they reach their destination far sooner than one might expect. Although one expects absolute concentration and purposeful manipulation from the golden researcher with his microscope, the title suggests that he is simply sitting there dreaming. The monk and the scientist share a detachment from the outside world and, in many instances, a great knowledge of nature, even though in each case it is very different. In bygone days, monks were actively responsible for

beekeeping. The activity of tending bees signified a special approach to the animal, a sort of combination of careful watching and loving care.

The almost endless, mindless repetition of elementary movements is also typical of the everyday, the domestic and the ordinary. From childhood Jan Fabre was fascinated by an interminable job that his mother performed every year. Vegetables and fruit were stored in an endless series of sterilised jars (with the brand-name 'Weck', referred to in the dialect of Antwerp as 'Wetspotten'), so that they would last the winter. For the young Fabre there was something calming and magical about this ritual, as the fruit, once it has been cut off from the world and neatly ordered, leads a sort of afterlife behind the thick glass, severed from life and yet not dead. In his Wetspotten series Fabre preserves personal moments in his early life – secretly smoked cigarettes and matches, a plate that suddenly broke, dead flies, bits of his sister's doll, body fluids, locks of hair, ballpoint pens, salt and butter, etc. He first takes them out and then, unnoticed, installs them as parasites on existing works of art such as *The Barnery* by Edward Kienholz in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam or *De grote amoniet* by Rik Poot in the Middelheim open-air museum in Antwerp (Wetsworld Project, 1977). He then arranges the jars according to self-formulated 'laws' in a *Wetskelder* (Law-Preserving-Jars Cellar, 1979) and a *Wetskamer* (Law-Preserving-Jars Room, 1979). Years later he performed acts between the long shelves full of organisms preserved in formalin in the cellars of the Natural History Museum (Consilience, 2000) and in the medical faculty of the University of Montpellier (*Angel of Death*, 2001), which serve as impressive memories of natural life.

In the course of a night spent in *De Neus* Fabre threw several insects into a shoebox. He followed the tracks made by the insects with a blue 'Bic' ballpoint pen until the whole box was covered with their tracks, so that the object, especially in its dark interior, appeared to dissolve into the crisscross of blue lines (*Schoendoos / Shoebox*, 1977). In the act-installation *Ilad of the Bic-Art*, the *Bic-Art Room* (1981) the artist himself sat in a box. For 72 hours Fabre was locked in a white space illuminated by fluorescent lamps and completely shut off from the outside world. Everything was recorded on camera. His only weapons were blue Bic ballpoint pens. The artist wrote and drew on every surface: walls, floors, bed, clothes and his body. He wrote sentences, spent hours shading, or wrote down endless series of numbers to add an element of rhythm to his accommodation. In this bare white cell, which was almost without any sort of stimulation, he explored fundamental conditions, the absolute zero of his existence as an artist. Drawing became a means of combating boredom as well as the primary activity of a physically strong body that draws on the surrounding world in order to survive.

During the second half of the 1980s, Fabre covered several gigantic synthetic silk canvases in the blue ink of ballpoint pens. The results were given titles such as *De weg van de aarde naar de sterren is niet effen...* (The road from the earth to the stars is not smooth..., 1988) and *Uur blauw* (Blue Hour, 1988), which was exhibited for the first time together with *Huis van Vlammen* (House of Flames, 1988), a shrine covered with lines in this blue ink. The *Blue Hour* is the moment of tense silence that exists between night and day, in which anything is possible. In an intense physical dialogue with the material, the artist becomes absorbed in his activity and in the space that has been created, but at the same time, through the endlessly repeated elementary drawing movements, a certain distance of abstraction develops in which image, shape, foreground and background disappear, in which the eye loses its grip on the space and a sensitivity to and watchfulness for unexpected manifestations develops. The climax of this series is the *castle Tivoli* (1990), which, following a large-scale collective ballpoint operation, is like a fairytale castle mirrored on the surface of the water in its pond.

In this series of works Jan Fabre manages to formulate, in the creative process itself, a clear and intelligent vision of the specific laws of two artistic disciplines. He was originally and still is a draughtsman. A drawing is the direct reflection of an artistic act and allows the artist to create in an instant a world which transparently and recognisably bears his signature. To create a sculpture, the sculptor has to deal with far more resistance from the material. The creation traditionally requires far more time, means and energy, generally beyond the powers of the individual. The final result is often able to withstand the passing of time and is frequently placed in the public space. Relationships with space and time are contained in ideas such as scale and monumentality. When it comes to forming meaning, the sculptor faces the challenge of addressing and representing the collective memory. Fabre drew with a blue Bic ballpoint pen, an industrial object that can be

bought in large quantities easily and cheaply. Moreover, he admires any individual who is able to manipulate the language system and economics of things in such a way that his own name becomes the term that is generally accepted and used for an object. In the world of the eponym people metamorphose into objects: 'Weck', 'Bic'. With this instrument, which is both personal and collectively shared, Fabre does not put his own personal feelings onto paper. By following the route taken by insects the artist allows himself to be transported to the completely alien space and time in the shoe box. The drawing movement then becomes more independent, is repeated hundreds or thousands of times by dozens of anonymous hands. The repetitive, elementary movements require both an unlimited, meditative patience and also bodies that are willing to give themselves up to what is obsessive and excessive. Monks, insects and dorsal man. The drawing becomes fully separated from the personal signature and metamorphoses into a sculpture. This is not the creation of an individual artist in the modern tradition, but functions as something completely independent and sovereign, in keeping with the laws of collective intelligence.

René Descartes referred to 'muscle memory', a term which he used to describe physical learning processes that occur wholly outside the influence of the conscious mind. In this way he believed he could prove how the memory of a flautist is mainly situated in his hands, or how animals are able to learn certain tasks or tricks. The so-called facilitation principle plays a central role in this unconscious learning process. Our brain is made up of millions of neurons. If a certain group of neurons is stimulated by a movement or a particular sensory experience, this creates certain links which form a specific pattern. A similar movement or experience ensures that some of the same neurons are stimulated and linked with one another, thus producing a partially overlapping pattern. Whenever this is repeated, the links become more deeply embedded, so that the movement, the recognition or the association occurs more smoothly, and ultimately becomes a prototype that is more or less stable. This purely physical process, which, among other things, also teaches us to recognise, catalogue and compare, develops from the conscious mind completely automatically and without coding. Consequently, a great deal of knowledge unconsciously allows itself to become intertwined by way of sensory experience, repetition and association. And no matter how much rational insight is acquired into the effect of optical illusions, one will nevertheless replace them later with the 'lie of the imagination' when an image appears in a cloud formation, a swarm of bees, a collection of blood stains or thousands of ballpoint pen lines. Fabre however does not see this susceptibility to optical illusions as an evil that should be fought tooth and nail by means of reason, but more as the true source of art and science. He writes the following words in his diary:

'People have seen images from the beginning. This is why they have created their own images. People saw images in a bone, a stone, a piece of wood, in fire. They saw them in the rough surface of the cliff face. Science and art are not marginal. They are a universal possession and are our most important weapons.'

The Belgian scientist Jean-Louis Deneubourg studied the collective organisation of certain insects, such as ant and bee communities, and used this to study complex systems without central control, such as a city, databases on the Internet, the patterns of marks on animal hides or the operation of the brain and memory. Ants and bees both perform movements that are highly elementary, repetitive and seemingly random. Without the involvement of any form of central 'consciousness', this leads to highly complex results. There is a sort of collective intelligence, which fundamentally transcends individual insect's capacity for understanding or imagination. The results of their behaviour literally belong to another world. In the Bic sculptures, Jan Fabre has used the same insect metaphor to explore and use the unconscious body's motor system and capacity for memory and imagination. Seven 'ballpoint pen' beehives presented neatly in a row are the most explicit expression of this (Wolt iemandt mir dasselb verkeren, das thut der Bienern wadel abkeren, 1990).

In the light of this approach, the sculptures Jan Fabre constructed using the carcasses of beetles during the first half of the 1990s form a logical further development in his work as a whole. In 1993 he made the first version of *Mur de la montée des anges*. This was followed by a whole series composed of green, blue, orange or brown beetles. This seductive, hyper-feminine form was inspired by three icons from Western culture: the Coca-Cola bottle, a dress by Dior and a statue of the Virgin Mary. Each is a prototype of the collective memory. The fact that icons become embedded in this collective memory by repetition has been seen by Jan Fabre in the history of the

production of religious images and in the work of Andy Warhol. There is no head or even a body. The dissected beetles have been sewn onto wire netting. An empty carcass themselves, the carcasses enclose an empty space. If you examine the sculpture from close up, you see a chaotic construction consisting only of hundreds of beetles swarming all over it. From a distance this festering material reveals a body that is radiant, strong and at the same time vulnerable, inhabiting a world the spectator can only perceive from a respectable distance: that of the sovereign beauty of the pure image. 'I believe in beauty because beauty is the colour of freedom,' says Fabre.

The three aforementioned beekeeper monks, who also float in the air like spectres or angels, are copies from an engraving by Bruegel. Here too the face is missing. Another figure with medieval roots as well as a hood enclosing a missing head is Zelfportret als joker in de Ommeganck (Street), 1997). It was in the Ommeganckstraat in Antwerp that the giant figures were stored for the annual carnival procession. These figures originally served to keep away hostile evil spirits. The joker himself appears to be unmasked as he stands supported by a cruciform construction which in turn rests on two trestles – an amputated scarecrow, as he waits until he can perform his comedy once again. This figure shares his carnivalesque, comic and at the same time threatening appearance with several Vlaamse krijgers (Flemish Warriors, nicknamed the Krijgers van de wanhoop / Warriors of Despair, 1995–1996). They consist of a framework of wooden slats onto which the breastplate of an old suit of armour and a head of beetles has been mounted. The most threatening example has a human face and the ears of a bat, while another combines the snout of a tortoise with the erect ears of a Vlaamse Reus (a giant overgrown variety of rabbit which by definition is destined to be carved up and served in beer sauce to food-lovers). Although this troupe of Flemish Warriors may at first sight appear to be slow and inert, do not underestimate them. It is said that bats and tortoises have a mysterious seismic organ which enables them to pick up vibrations. With their large ears the warriors listen to the dark world that surrounds them. They are the fruit of Fabre's armed imagination. Like many of Fabre's creatures, these sculptures do not hide their artificial, metaphorical origins. However, here the personal nature of the metaphorical construction is countered by the mass repetition of the beetles which usher these images into the 'other' world of the anonymous, unconscious and the timeless.

In addition to whole carcasses, Fabre sometimes also uses just the oval carapaces of the jewel beetle, as for example in Mestbol met ruggengraat (Dung Beetle's Pellet with Spine, 2001) and Bad (Bathtub, 2003). These works in particular have a distinct decorative and alluring character which looks like the result of traditional female domestic craft: the unthinking, patient repetition of an elementary and seemingly meaningless activity. Bad is hung vertically on the wall so that the form becomes an empty, abandoned niche. It is covered with fan-shaped patterns, formed by the carcasses, which draw the eye into a ceaseless movement over the undulating, gleaming surface. These beetle sculptures culminate in a bold architectural exploit that is analogous to Kasteel Tivoli: the ceiling of the Hall of Mirrors in the Royal Palace in Brussels is covered with 1.6 million beetle wing-cases (Heaven of Delight, 2002). In this way Fabre gives a new interpretation to the age-old genre of ceiling painting: a highly delicate play with the intense, natural and indestructible colour of the wing-cases and the endlessly fragmented and reflected light. Thirty assistants spent three months attaching them to the ceiling. Starting out from the shape of the wing-case, they managed to create a dozen patterns, in which the observer, depending on his vantage point, angle of approach and the incidence of the light, constantly sees new figures appear and disappear. The mass interaction between the thousands of wing-cases set the laws of collective intelligence in motion.

In the painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel the capacity of the Renaissance homo universalis to capture the totality of all worldly knowledge and skill within the range of one central perspective view is represented by a bearded old man who floats in the air and brings man to life with a gesture of his hand. In the course of the 16th century, in which the world was rapidly disintegrating, this figure desperately and vainly fought to preserve his credibility; it was a hopeless battle that would never cease. With the ceiling of the Hall of Mirrors Fabre has created a heaven for a radically fragmented, elusive and unimaginable world of the 21st century. Those who ascribe to the artist any identification with a centralised power have missed the point. This image is truly sovereign and fundamentally non-hierarchical, since it eludes every hand or eye. It is a mystical chart that represents what cannot be represented. It is a boundless breeding ground of

the imagination in which you, the spectator, helplessly drown, and are swallowed up by the monstrous yet hilarious spider who moves towards you from the ceiling. It is a map of Utopia.