

# The Healing Power of Art: Devotion, Catharsis and Renewal

Installation view of the exhibition  
*Jan Fabre. Pietas* at the 54th Venice  
Biennale, showcased at the Nuova  
Scuola Grande di Santa Maria  
della Misericordia, 2011.  
Collection The Phoebus Foundation,  
Antwerp



*Merciful Dream (Pietà V)*, 2011  
white Carrara marble, 190 × 195 × 110 cm /  
base: 270 × 40 × 180 cm

Jan Fabre is one of the most radical and unclassifiable figures on the international contemporary art scene. A visual and performance artist, theatre artist, author and teacher, Fabre has created an oeuvre that is complex yet distinct in each aspect of his creativity. Memory, time, the body, theatricality, poetry and discourse are the main ingredients that keep it indivisible and recognisable as a personal idiom. The unconventional materials in his artworks, the use of age-old symbols in conjunction with traditional techniques, and his collaboration with cutting-edge scholars and researchers all contribute to this. The length of his theatre performances often challenges human endurance. Their live sound and rhythm lead performers into an ecstasy of repetitive, mystical dance movements. His limited and often provocative discourse further resists categorisation. All these elements make him hard to place within a specific framework.



Jan Fabre is revolutionary, iconoclastic and subversive. His work is provocative and revealing of the contradictions of human nature. As expected, it is sometimes disturbing, provoking sharp criticism and reactions. Nevertheless, it has already secured his place among the most radical, versatile, honest and uncompromising artists of his time. It continues to trigger emotion and debate, attracting fervent followers and supporters. His works travel all over the globe and his performances are sold out at the festivals that host them. Earlier works keep returning due to popular demand. Familiarity with the contradictions in human nature, which move between poetry and destruction, reveals beauty in drama, in organic or artificial waste, in the uncanny, and in indifference to what is predictable and aesthetically accepted. Boldness to the point of impudence and sensibility to the point of pain have helped shape a trademark expressive and aesthetic “idiom”. In this, the sublime and the base, the sacred and the profane, the spiritual and the tangible coexist and converse as constituents of human expression.

**Art as a Path to Knowledge and Intellectual Advancement.  
The Artist's Role from the Renaissance to Contemporary Art**

In the Old Masters of the Low Countries, such as Jan van Eyck, Hieronymus Bosch and Rogier van der Weyden, among others, human pain and indulgence in instincts and passions are shown not as isolated events but as narratives. These unfold through extreme mutations and “surrealistic” situations, set in eerie, dreamlike and frightening settings. Here, lustful pleasures occur alongside horrible tortures, as the outcome of a life that has led humans to judgement, and thence to heaven or hell. All this was stipulated by religion in its attempt to set a normative framework that placed man before a terrible dilemma: eternal bliss or perpetual suffering.

Gradually, from the early Renaissance onwards in northern and central Europe, the Church became the driving force and promoter of education and art. It supported artists and the vulnerable within a framework regulated by dogma and religious authority. Under the Reformation led by Martin Luther, artistic freedom was curbed in Protestant regions, and ecclesiastical art was drastically reduced. The Italian Renaissance, however, continued its illustrious course independently of other regions. This was largely due to an anthropocentric approach, based on a keen interest in Greek philosophy, literature, science and art, including architecture and engineering. From the 13th century onwards, and especially after the fall of Constantinople, large numbers of intellectuals sought refuge in what is now Italy, predominantly in Venice. They introduced the culture of the Eastern Roman Empire, which, despite its military and administrative decline, had been flourishing culturally. These figures disseminated the Greek language and education. The spirit, the body as a field of scientific and aesthetic inquiry, customs and traditions all entered the Western world. They promoted Greek language and mythology, often combined with historical, contemporary or allegorical figures. The Renaissance came to be viewed as a return to the principles and idealised models of Ancient Greece and later Greco-Roman rules, particularly Athens and the major Greek cities of Asia Minor. A key role was played by powerful families such as the Medici, the Strozzi, and the Sforza, as well as royal houses and the Church. Their patronage supported this trend, which gained broad acceptance and led to the rise of the image of the “genius creator” and humanism. Several great artists, architects and philosophers emerged under these conditions.

Among them, Michelangelo was able to apply these ideas and introduce bold and ground-breaking propositions. He placed the human body – almost nude and sensual – even within the Vatican: in the Sistine Chapel, in his *Slaves*, and in the *Pietà*. In his hands, the body moved beyond the material. Matter became flesh, and flesh became aesthetic value, conveying the physical power of Christ and the slave's martyred sensuality. Michelangelo is one of Fabre's “teachers”, to whom he frequently pays tribute. The Italian master's contribution to his work was showcased in his *Pietas* exhibition of 2011 in Venice.<sup>1</sup>

**Presentation of the Works of Jan Fabre in Monumental Spaces**

The choice of a monumental setting as the spatial, institutional and symbolic context for an exhibition of contemporary art goes beyond mere “stage design” or a striking backdrop. It is a layered setting whose dense historical, social and experiential references alter the relationship between viewer and artwork. Moreover, in religious spaces charged with centuries of ritual, memory and collective projections of the transcendental, the environment acts as an active hermeneutic mechanism. The works are not simply “placed” there but inscribed within a pre-existing system of architectural axes, signs, symbols, mental associations and human presence across different eras. Space thus functions as a (con)textual system.

Performer Cédric Charron in *Peak Mytikas (On the Top of Mount Olympus)*, 2023



Performer Stella Höttler in *Peak Mytikas (On the Top of Mount Olympus)*, 2023

As Roland Barthes points out, cultural contexts are formed as “mythologies”: systems of signs ideologically charged with meaning and practice (Barthes, 1957). In this sense, space acts as an already formed semantic field. The viewer's gaze – especially in religious settings, even when unbelieving – expects the transcendental and the miraculous, and imagines the ritualistically repetitive. The placement of Fabre's works in such settings is intended to activate them. By “crashing” into historical space, the contemporary artwork may cause surprise or disrupt the status quo, but it also bridges the distance between memory and the present.

In this context, Jan Fabre's installations in major museums (Uffizi, Louvre, Hermitage), as well as in former palaces and theological schools (Nuova Grande Scuola di Santa Maria della Misericordia, now the Scuola Grande di San Rocco), monasteries and churches (Abbey of San Gregorio, chapel of Pio Monte della



Misericordia), are anything but accidental. These settings are ideal for an aesthetic, physical and existential encounter, activated by history, staging and memory. They cultivate the dialectical relationship between past and present, underscoring the timelessness of art.

Fabre sought to engage in dialogue with Michelangelo in 2011 in Venice, with the exhibition *Pietas* at the Nuova Scuola Grande di Santa Maria della Misericordia, as part of the 54th Biennale's parallel programme. A majestic installation guided viewers silently through marble works depicting human brains, until they reached a new *Pietà* – a faithful copy of the maestro's work in proportion, material and form. There, they discovered that in place of Christ lay the artist's besuited body, bearing many of the symbols of his oeuvre, in the arms of a mortal woman, as Mary's face had been replaced by a skull. His right hand still held a brain – the source of human evolution and of all that is good and evil. The intact brain outside the body is an allegory open to interpretation. It underscores its importance for humankind and presents it as a symbol of continuity and evolution, more powerful than any other organ, including the heart – a symbol of the Catholic Church. Michelangelo's *Pietà* transforms pain into aesthetic and theological harmony. In Fabre's version, the divine is transferred to the artist, who, though “dead”, continues to hold the brain – the organ most closely associated with the spirit, the invisible and the unverifiable; that which links us to the divine.

Unlike other works such as *I Am Blood (A Medieval Fairytale)*, 2001, *Angel of Death*, 2003, and *I Am a Mistake*, 2007, which subject the body to tribulations in a contemporary form of martyrdom akin to the morphology of Christian Passion, in this installation the artist appears in a state of glory – serene and eternally young. Where Michelangelo sought the divine in the human body, Fabre seems

Installation views of two of the four permanent works in the chapel of Pio Monte della Misericordia in Naples, 2019

instead to search for the human within the divine. It was this very pursuit – the encounter between flesh and spirit – that led him to the monumental *Mount Olympus. To Glorify the Cult of Tragedy, A 24-Hour Performance*, 2015, and, more recently, to *Peak Mytikas (On the Top of Mount Olympus)*, 2023.

#### Loans from the Past: The Survival of the Sacred in Contemporary Art

As we know, artists often take symbols and motifs from the past and set them into new political or social contexts. Jan Fabre has been “borrowing” symbols and themes from ancient Greek mythology, pagan customs, medieval legends, and heroic or urban figures, as well as from paintings by the masters of the early



*The Purity of Mercy*, 2019  
deep precious coral, pigment, polyamide, 137.2 × 102 × 43.4 cm



*The Freedom of Compassion*, 2019  
deep precious coral, pigment, polyamide, 113 × 101.7 × 39.5 cm

and classical Renaissance. Of course, this is more noticeable in the performances, which as complex and participatory experiences and soundscapes, draw the viewer into communion or even transcendence.

Fabre deliberately and consistently “borrows” from this reservoir of forms, symbols and aesthetic tensions – not as a mere replication of a finished age, but as a strategy of the present that activates the past. As Alexander Nagel argued in his book *Medieval Modern: Art Out of Time*, works of early modernism do not belong to a closed historical period; they possess a “timeless mobility” that allows them to be reactivated within new settings and uses. “[Art] allows humans to understand the specific ways in which material artifacts shape meanings and structure ways of being in an environment, as well as what happens when works of visual art and models of art-making cross temporal and geographical boundaries.” (Nagel, 2012).

Georges Didi-Huberman has described this process as the “survival of images”. Forms from the past return in spectral fashion – not as faithful copies, but as reactivated tensions, gestures and emotions (Didi-Huberman, 2002). In Fabre’s practice, this survival is primarily expressed through the morphology of passion: bodies that suffer, endure, are exposed and ultimately transformed. Trauma – both physical and existential – is inscribed in forms that recall the martyrdom of saints,

mythological transformations, heroic trials of antiquity, or the Passion of Christ, without becoming confined within theological dogma.

The reference to Caravaggio, another great “teacher” of Fabre, becomes crucial, particularly in relation to the enduring coexistence of Fabre’s red coral works with *Le Sette Opere di Misericordia*, 1607, in the chapel of Pio Monte della Misericordia in Naples. Caravaggio’s painting condenses the Baroque drama of light and shadow, flesh and redemption, through a staging of intense contrasts and physical proximity.

How, then, is this return of the sacred addressed by contemporary philosophical, psychoanalytical and aesthetic theories? And how does it endure in an increasingly unstable, violent and tragic world, where war, terrorism and displacement continue to disrupt global economic and geopolitical balances?



*The Resurrection of Life*, 2019  
deep precious coral, pigment, polyamide, 124.5 × 101.5 × 40.5 cm



*The Liberation of Passion*, 2019  
deep precious coral, pigment, polyamide, 125.3 × 101.8 × 43.5 cm

The quest for sanctity in contemporary art remains elusive, precisely because it is complex and resistant to straightforward interpretation. It is reformulated in ways that exceed traditional religious frameworks and rituals. In installations, interactive works and performances, the sacred emerges through the body, through ritual and through a sense of transcendence. Through art, nature itself acquires an ethical dimension and regains a form of lost sanctity, encouraging a collective responsibility towards environmental preservation.

In *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, Mircea Eliade explores the distinction between these two realms as fundamental to religious experience. He argues that all religions perceive the world as divided into the sacred and the profane – two essential categories of human experience. The sacred is necessary to endow life with meaning, order and transcendence, while the profane represents the mundane, indifferent and often painful dimension of existence. Rituals, sacred spaces and sacred time allow individuals to experience the absolute and to encounter the timeless spiritual dimension of existence (Eliade, 1987). The sacred manifests itself in particular places – churches, sanctuaries, monuments – or in nature, through rites, feasts and the re-enactment of mythical events. Religious experience, regardless of creed, stems from humanity’s desire to move beyond

ordinary space and time and to come into contact with the divine. It offers a realm of transcendence, the supernatural and the absolute, providing meaning, reassurance and hope. By contrast, the profane corresponds to the everyday: a world of habit and disorder, often devoid of spiritual significance and marked by indifference or hardship. Even in an age of secularisation, Eliade observes, people continue to seek the sacred as a means of understanding existence, memory and the soul, and as a promise of continuity. Art, myth and ritual provide access to such experiences, enabling catharsis, joy, communion and transcendence.

Moreover, both Roland Barthes in *Mythologies* (1957) and Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space* (1958) argue that religious space and symbols function as systems of signs that activate perception, interpretation and imagination in highly specific ways. Jean Baudrillard, in *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), suggests that symbols – especially within ritual contexts – replace reality with meaning, giving rise to a form of hyperreality of the sacred.

### The Exhibition at the Scuola Grande di San Rocco. An Experiential Confession and Redemption

Returning to Venice, this year's exhibition-installation *The Quiet Source*, to be held in parallel with the 61st Venice Biennale, takes place within a monumental space of great educational, religious, charitable and artistic significance. By situating his works within this layered historical and cultural context, Fabre engages with temporal stratification and establishes a dialogue across cultures, religions and eras. The experience of worship, the sense of awe, and the ritual practices embedded in such a space function almost like mythologies. They illuminate the works and generate a powerful tension between the sublime and the experienced, the spiritual and the physical, the collective and the personal, the timeless and the now.

With great humility and with no trace of conceit, the contemporary artist places his recent sculptures, all finished in 2026, within the Scuola Grande di San Rocco. He charts a path through three rooms, forming a triadic installation that constructs a narrative – not through literal representation, but through the unfolding of a personal story in an elliptical and symbolic manner. Three bodies, three presences, rich in symbolism and reference, establish points of tension within a network of relationships shaped by strong familial bonds. At times, facial features seem to pass from one figure to another. These figures allude – directly or indirectly – to his parents, his late brother, his life partner and himself.

On this occasion, Fabre presents a sculptural trilogy that functions as a psychoanalytical self-portrait. The selected title of the exhibition, *The Quiet Source*, refers to this personal, inner current of belief, which each human possesses and it has more to do with one's own reflection and sentiment, and less with an external normative authority. Fabre combines autobiographical elements with traditional symbols and motifs, employing a technique – molten wax – known since antiquity. At the same time, he incorporates contemporary materials and advanced technologies that influence the final appearance of the works. The highly realistic, polished silicon bronze surface resemble gold, evoking precious votive offerings while also reflecting, in miniature, the surrounding space. Once again, Fabre enters into dialogue with the micro and macro (small, close – big, far in Greek language) within a monumental environment and with another “giant” of art, since, in addition to the imposing architecture and décor, among the over sixty works painted by Tintoretto and his assistants, another masterpiece dominates the Sala dell'Albergo: Tintoretto's famous *Crucifixion*.

The triad of sculptures in Fabre's installation refers to light, both spiritual and natural, and “illuminates” the field of relations between the human body, the scale of the edifice and the theological function of the space. Although the works are on a human scale, they do not seek to dominate. On the contrary, they draw attention

Installation view of the permanent work  
*The Man Who Bears the Cross* in the  
Cathedral of Our Lady in Antwerp, 2015



*The Man Who Bears the Cross*, 2015  
silicon bronze, size: 178 × 148 × 41 cm  
(figure), 253 × 162 × 8 cm (cross)

through their discreet placement, establishing a dialectical relationship with the surrounding environment without disturbing its balance. The figures are neither heroic nor idealised. Only the figure of Edmond Fabre, the artist's father, in the Sala Terrena adopts a posture of strength, slightly raising his sword – the symbol that connects him to his son, who has chosen to call himself the “Knight of Despair”. The other two figures, one in the Sala dell'Albergo bearing the artist's own features, and the other combining those of the artist and his prematurely lost brother Emiel, are depicted in states of existential tension, vulnerability and concentration. This is, as far as I know, the most autobiographical work the artist has ever exhibited. He leaves it open to the viewer's gaze and interpretation, “offering” it as an ex-voto within a highly safe space that is spiritually, humanistically, and artistically charged.



The triad begins with the father and forms a fixed three-point configuration, like a small constellation. It is a symbolic arrangement in which notions of power, refuge, protection and memory coexist. Through this structure, the figures merge into a single narrative that remains open to interpretation, while their presence within the monument redefines the relationship between theatre and church. The bodies, the space and their positioning dissect the artist's past and present, as well as his memory, creating an allegory that reveals the relationships shaping his life. This is a confession – soulful and direct – not spoken in secrecy to a priest, but openly addressed to the viewer. Yet it still echoes a ritual familiar to both the Catholic and Orthodox traditions, articulated through the artist's own poetic language.

In monumental – and particularly religious – settings, the image does not function as a self-contained aesthetic object. Instead, it becomes part of a living ritual framework that includes memory, architecture, sound and silence, as well as the viewer's physical presence and disposition. At this point, Hans Belting's ideas on *An Anthropology of Images* offer a crucial theoretical lens. For Belting, images are not simply objects to be observed; they are embedded within bodies, practices and spaces, existing within historical and symbolic contexts. The image, in a sense, “inhabits” the viewer's body and is activated through ritual and spatial conditions (Belting, 2011).

Reflecting on “the difficulty of seeing”, James Elkins likewise observes that images dealing with pain, trauma and violence resist neutral aesthetic

contemplation. They demand moral and physical engagement from the viewer (Elkins, 2003). In Fabre's work, particularly when presented in spaces imbued with religious significance, viewers find themselves suspended between observation and empathy. The act of looking becomes a form of participation. This is even more evident in his theatre performances, as seen, for instance, in *I Am Blood (A Medieval Fairytale)* of 2001 and 2005 at the Palais des Papes in Avignon.<sup>2</sup>

In *The Man Who Bears the Cross*, 2015, permanently installed in Antwerp Cathedral alongside Rubens's monumental *Descent from the Cross*, Fabre creates a figure that merges his own features with those of his uncle Jaak, his father's brother. This hybrid figure carries the cross with surprising lightness, almost balancing it on his palm. The work acquires autobiographical resonance while integrating a central Christian symbol into a contemporary personal narrative. It reflects an



Performers Ivana Jozic and William Forsyth in *Angel of Death*, 2003



existential responsibility – both towards the sacred space and towards the great works it houses. At the same time, it enters into dialogue with Rubens's painting, itself shaped by the artist's encounters with Michelangelo and Caravaggio in Rome and Venice. The reference to the parallel paths and influences of the two Antwerp artists, separated by centuries, with the second recognising the first as a "teacher", is obvious. Equally obvious is the affinity of Fabre's 2015 work with his new sculpture of 2026 in the Scuola Grande di San Rocco, which shows his father holding a sword. The resemblance of the two men introduces the dimension of the family chain, continuity, and loss as a latter-day version of martyrdom. The father's body becomes a symbol of power, authority and protection, embodying both care and leadership.

The next sculpture, in the Sala Superiore, presents the artist's figure in a central role, yet without any sense of outward dynamism. Instead, it conveys a process of transformation. A deeply painful and traumatic experience is evoked through the image of the artist curled up with a marmot standing behind him – a symbol of protection, care and vigilance. The animal alludes to his wife, Joanna. At a difficult moment in his life, when he felt isolated, powerless and betrayed, support came from unexpected sources. Those around him may not have been able to resolve his difficulties, but they offered emotional strength, solidarity and protection. With their support, and through the presence of those who became part of his inner circle, he was able to regain confidence and enter a new, luminous phase of life – both metaphorically and literally, through the formation of his own triadic family. The trauma is not erased, but it is transformed. Within a sacred space – where many seek solace, reflection and prayer – this transformation suggests the possibility of healing.

In the last work in the Sala dell'Albergo, Fabre appears once more, now bearing traces of his brother Emiel's features – a visual affirmation that true love endures within memory. Kneeling on all fours, he holds a pair of scissors, cutting the grass of the family garden as his mother once taught him, removing what is no longer needed. The reference to the mother is subtle yet powerful. His posture suggests that one could sit upon his back. His body has unfolded and grown stronger, becoming almost architectural – a bridge or a bench, like those found in gardens and public spaces, inviting rest and contemplation. The mother, as memory, and the marmot, as present companion, emerge as two sources of comfort that enabled him to stand again and to connect past and present. In this final image, the artist, with his dual features, appears almost to kneel before Tintoretto's *Crucifixion*, his major work of 1565. The painting unfolds as a sacred narrative of suffering and faith, a theatrical composition where pain, faith, drama, compassion and cruelty coexist – just as the sacred and the profane invariably do.

The visual dialogue between Fabre's contemporary, autobiographical work and historical representations of the Crucifixion – from Byzantine mosaics, such as those in the 12th-century Monastery of Daphni in Athens or the Chora Monastery in Constantinople, to Antonello da Messina's serene *Crucifixion* of 1475 – reinforces the timeless and intercultural nature of this theme. Whether divine or human, the drama is inscribed upon the body with equal force. The severe frontal figures of Byzantine icons, with their theological immobility may differ from the hegemonic bodies of the Renaissance, the Baroque dramatic quality of the bodies of Caravaggio or Peter Paul Rubens, and even more from the painted, manufactured, sculpted or performed rawness and tension of many of Jan Fabre's works. However, they all express the same thing: a human reality that would be unbearable without faith, love and creation.

Fabre's practice weaves together elements from tradition, mythology, fairy tale, the Renaissance, the Baroque and contemporary art – not as a linear historical progression, but as a dynamic field of juxtapositions, borrowings and poetic transformations. Art and religion are themselves sites of transubstantiation. When they converge, they offer a space in which human trauma may be acknowledged, understood and, perhaps, transformed – opening the way to consolation, catharsis and healing.

#### Notes

1. The exhibition *Pietas* took place from 1 June to 16 October 2011, during the 54th edition of the Venice Biennale, in the Nuova Scuola Grande di Santa Maria della Misericordia, and was curated by Giacinto Di Pietrantonio and Katerina Koskina and promoted by GAMeC – Gallery of Modern and Contemporary Art, Bergamo, by the State Museum of Contemporary Art, Thessaloniki, and by the Kunsthistorisches Museum of Vienna.
2. *I Am Blood (A Medieval Fairytale)*, an emblematic performance, originally commissioned by the 55th Festival d'Avignon, took place in the Cour d'Honneur of the Palais des Papes in 2001. It was exceptionally re-performed, in the same festival, in 2005.

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