

**IGNAS STAŠKEVIČIUS**

# **FIFTEEN CONVERSATIONS**

Essential exchanges

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## Contents

The interlocutor's foreword / 9

**Jan Fabre:** This is something I have had to learn as an artist, to say:  
that's it... / 11

**Jeroen Chabot:** I thought that we should focus on the fundamentals of how  
people are going to earn their money / 27

**Samanta Schweblin:** As a writer, you write not about what is, but about what  
could be / 41

**Victor de Munck:** Culture doesn't exist in any real sense, but we act as though  
it does / 53

**Ernesto Spinelli:** You are turning psychotherapy into something that is meant  
to improve people's lives. I don't make that my aim / 73

**Vladimir Tarasov:** I am talking about that connection, that there is something  
that protects you... / 89

**Vivian Sjóðklett:** I don't explain to women how to relax in bed / 117

**Roza Džamaldi:** Now I realise with even greater clarity that the spirit  
determines everything / 139

**John Cumming:** There should be heated discussions about how classical  
music performances can be made more attractive / 159

**Marina Abramović:** It is possible to tap into the boundless universal energy  
constantly ripping through your body / 183

**Omar Pérez:** This is how I get closer to the source—free and pure... / 199

**Mario von Kelterborn:** It is not necessary to understand every piece, it is  
enough to enjoy it / 215

**Fred Jeremy Seligson:** I look through the eyes of an ancient person and  
notice things that others miss / 229

**Vladimir Chekasin:** Nominalization doesn't help you learn anything / 243

**Slava Ganelin:** Music is not abstract at all / 261

## **The interlocutor's foreword**

In my life conversations have gradually become an enjoyable treat. This book is an attempt to share this pleasure with an English reading audience.

With this work, I did not strive to parse contemporary affairs, glorify anyone, or emphasize any sort of homogeneity. All my conversation partners have created something original in life, and continue to do so, expanding the boundaries of both their crafts and the human mind.

All of the interviews included here were taken live in the years between 2019 and 2022. Some of them have previously been published in various places in their Lithuanian translation. The texts here were transcribed from the original audio recordings. Four conversations were translated from the Russian originals. In places, our words were edited for clarity and brevity.

Wishing everyone the daily experience of meaningful conversation, I hope that these exchanges encourage a desire to explore something new.

*Ignas Staškevičius*



## Jan Fabre

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This is something I have had to learn as an artist, to say: that's it...

Jan Fabre (born in 1958)—an artist, playwright, stage director and choreographer. We have met and talked at his studio in Antwerp in March, 2021.

**Let us start with the body, your body. Your body is a source of inspiration, but also an instrument, sometimes, in your art. And you've exploited your body artistically in many different ways: you paint with your blood, your tears, saliva and sperm. And of course art represents your discoveries in an artistic way... but maybe there are some things you have discovered about the body which are not represented in art. The body at its limit, for example. How does flesh end, where does it become otherness...**

I have to go back to Rubens. As a young man, I frequently visited the Rubens house. I saw a lot of self-portraits of Rubens. I was, I think, fifteen years old. I couldn't figure out why this man made so many self-portraits. I remember that my father tried to explain to me, a young man, that those were all different Rubenses. That Rubens was a schizophrenic personality, and that all of these were different evocations. My first atelier was in the attic of my parents' home. I think by seeing all those portraits I became, as a young man, uniquely interested in my own body. It was, first of all, quite cheap, because I could not afford a model. Of course you start with the face, you put on different masks and display different personalities. I started making little self-portraits—to exercise, to research. Then, of course, I started undressing myself. I was skinnier then. (*Laughs*) There began the *parcours*, the research of my own body, the young body. In '77 I made my first blood drawing.

I remember—my father sent me to Bruges to see the Flemish primitives, to the Groening museum—and I remember going into a shop there to buy some knives to cut my forehead with. I was sitting in a very small hotel in Bruges, very

cheap, and I was cutting my forehead to draw with my own blood. Thanks to my papa, who knew a lot about the traditional paintings, the traditional painters, I knew that these great masters, the Flemish masters, were alchemists—they used animal blood, human blood, inside a mix of lime oil, balms... This alchemistic property, it is a sort of research—I was researching the material inside my own body. Later, I started making paintings with my own sperm. I remember, when I was eighteen, nineteen my studio had mirrors; I would look at myself while I masturbated and catch the sperm on the paper. I remember using my penis as a pencil, to draw with... All these experiments, as a young artist, were the starting point for my style of investigating the inside and the outside of the body. Later I became much more specific, researching the skin, the skeleton.

When you study the great masters, you start to understand that... well, for example Van Eyck... Van Eyck was one of the inventors of oil painting, but he was also ingenious in manipulating the body...

### **In painting.**

In paintings. If you look at his paintings, anatomically it's all wrong. But they also started constructing the body to be within the frame, essentially. The body became the central measurement of everything. You know, as a young man studying these things, I discovered quickly that my body was a kind of a trap.

### **A trap.**

A kind of battlefield...

### **But if it is a kind of battlefield, who is doing the fighting?**

There is a daily battle. Say, white and red blood cells. Of course a battlefield for your 'self,' because I started using my body in the late 70s already as a canvas, beating myself up, always testing the limits of my physical state and my mental state...

### **That's what I meant.**

What could I handle, what could I do... how I would react. I was proud, as a young artist, of the bruises on my body, I would wear them almost as jewels. I didn't see it as sadomasochistic... for me it was a kind of research: what

happens? What reaction would I have, what would happen to my skin... It was never about using pain as a way to see beauty, no, it was about the reaction.

14

**Do you have any tattoos?**

Nothing. Even though Antwerp, it's a port, there are lots of tattoo shops... I used a ballpoint pen to draw on myself. Then I would photograph myself, make small movies, and then I would wash myself, rub it off, and the next day do something different. And I used bruises, I made drawings on my body out of bruises. Patterns of flowers, a crown... And I would use sandpaper to remove my skin. There is a film, where I remove the skin on my legs with sandpaper. I saw the body as an object, just as you would use sandpaper to scrape a table. And of course, when you're young, you heal very quickly...

**Another topic you explore is metamorphosis. And that is about the bodies of insects...**

Well, I have to be honest here, that is also from my father. He was himself a very good classical drawer. He was a specialist in botany, he worked for the city his whole life, making drawings of plants. We were a poor working family, but what we did every year was collect money to buy a year-long subscription for the zoo. Every Saturday, Sunday, we would go to the zoo. We would make drawings, sketch the movement of animals. I remember an exercise my papa taught me was to draw the animals, and then to watch the people in the zoo and make comparisons, who resembles which animal. He introduced me, essentially, to the metamorphosis of humans into animals, animals into humans. He was a brilliant man, he educated me about [Johann Caspar] Lavater, his teachings on physiognomy.

In my private archive I still have photographs, Super 8 mm film... There was a beautiful gorilla named Gust in the Antwerp zoo, there is footage of me in my studio performing as Gust—shouting, screaming, experimenting with the state of animal trance. I was always fascinated, thanks to my papa, in the behavior, the intelligence and wisdom of animals. This inspired me to do such performances, mostly private, which I would film with the 8 mm camera. You see me performing in these films, as a young guy, naked, jumping around, trying to incarnate the leopard or the tiger.



**So that is also a sort of alchemy.**

Yes, exactly. In the garden I had a little laboratory. I got a microscope from my papa, from St. Nicholas, when I was thirteen or fourteen years old. Each year I would get something scientific, because he saw that I loved it. And so I set up a laboratory. I was once sitting in the garden, making drawings, aquarelles, being a young Dr. Frankenstein, when my uncle came by. He told me that we have had in our family a fabulous entomologist, Jean-Henri Fabre. You see, a lot of my universe comes, ultimately, from my home.

**What did your father think about your art?**

My father was an incredibly great craftsman, but he was not an artist. He was very critical. One time, after seeing an exhibition of mine, he said "Come home, Jan, we can sit in the garden, make some drawings, I will teach you how to draw." (*Laughs*) In a sense he was right, because he was an incredible craftsman, an incredible observer. But he was not an artist. He could not cross the boundary.

Both of my parents were critical for a long time. Even when I turned forty, even after seeing my paintings in the most famous museums, or my plays in famous theaters, my dad would say: "Well, Jan, you are forty, when are you going to find a normal job? If you want, I can get you a steady job in the city."

**What kind of job would that be?**

To work in the gardens there, or something like that... He had some connections. (*Laughs*) He still hoped that I would become a man who would marry, have children, and have a steady job. But they eventually started to understand my seriousness, my dedication to my work. But, you know, my mother and my father, they were my inspirations, they still inspire me when I think back. Thinking of them, going back in my memory, gives me insight into myself. They are dead now, but it is as though I am in a dialogue now. And I think: ah, I have to see things in a different way...

**A. B. Yehoshua told me of his relationship with his father. Yehoshua's father thought that, so long as he is alive, his son will not write his greatest work. And that was true. What is your experience?**

It is quite a complex love story... I left home very early, when I was nineteen years old. When I became older, I forgave them, but they were very severe with me, very strict. It was a kind of reflex from poverty... My father's brother was with the resistance during the War, my father had to stop his studies at the Royal Academy, he became a craftsman, drawing botanical plants. When I reached a certain age, they forced me to stop my schooling, to go and work, to bring back money. But I needed schooling; I attended two art schools simultaneously, I would tell one school I was sick and attend the other... I would come back home at 10 o'clock in the evening, when my parents turned the electricity off, so I would do my school assignments by candlelight.

I left home, and I didn't come home for almost ten or fifteen years. It is a complex relationship. But, when I became older, I understood the richness they gave, the imagination, the openness they had toward me as a young man. And at the same time the incredible strain they gave me, and the stubbornness I developed by not giving in to them. My sisters, for example, started working... they were intelligent young women, but they went to work to bring home money.

Later my mother told me that my father would come out of his bedroom and watch me working by the candle. They told me later they thought, wow, our son doesn't give up, he has character... You know, in my generation, of the 75 accepted to the Royal Academy, only four finished, the rest left to work in factories. That's how it is: many wanted to change the world with their art, but they lacked the stamina and the character to endure poverty. But I knew poverty. I had nothing for a long time. I would make money by playing guitar and the harmonica in the street. I learned a lot from the streets.

At the same time, my mother came from a very rich, French-speaking bourgeois family. My father came from a poor, communistic Flemish family. It was a difficult Belgian marriage.

My mother taught me the language of love. In the evenings she would play the songs of Georges Brassens, she translated the songs, she would read me Rimbaud and Baudelaire and immediately translate the words. She was a beautiful, sexy woman also. She spoke beautiful French. To this day, I draw from this. It is a complex relationship, you understand.