



PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

BEING IN TOUCH:
A METAMORPHOSIS OF JAN FABRE'S
THE CASTLES IN THE HOUR BLUE
INTO BODIES OF LONGING

SYLVIA SOLAKIDI CENTER FOR PERFORMANCE PHILOSOPHY, SURREY, UK

for Λ

Time is the substance I am made of.
Time is a river which sweeps me along, but I am the river;
it is a tiger which destroys me, but I am the tiger;
it is a fire which consumes me, but I am the fire.

Jorge Luis Borges, "A New Refutation of Time"

A green light has sprouted in a small circle at the lower right quadrant of her photograph. She is "active now."

The pattern of dark photographs and those with bright green circles changes continuously on the rectangular window of the messenger application that is open while I write on my laptop. Each light bears potential for a contact.

When did all these lights emerge?

As I am sitting at my writing table and I move my eyes from the rectangular laptop screen to my rectangular window, I see the rectangular sky segment cloudy and the lights on in several rectangular windows of the rooms at the opposite side of the inner yard; each light indicates human activity. The pattern of dark and bright rectangular elements changes continuously, following the weather and the hours of the day. The time that passes becomes a kaleidoscopic installation of flashing lights that I cannot affect; I cannot affect time, as I cannot contact people and participate in their activities. An *Empire of Light* in the inner yard.

In the old times, we touched each other and it was only Mr Monk who needed antiseptic wipes after human contact. In the old times, we were active with others outside our homes and it was only Mr Monk who believed that “it’s a jungle out there.” This is the title of Randy Newman’s song for the titles of the TV series about the brilliant detective who suffered from phobias that worsened after the loss of his beloved wife. Since March 2020, it’s a jungle out there for everyone; the COVID-19 pandemic jungle. In order to protect each other we must practise social distancing. Our homes are shields from the virus and isolation is the price we pay for safety; we trade human contact for safety. Touch is related etymologically to both contact and contagion (Partridge 1991, 692); touch, though, has become dangerous, as if it was related only to contagion and not to contact.

Despite a distance of no more than a few metres, people and their activity around the inner yard are beyond my reach. My need not to lose touch becomes more pressing with time; I am near but not close enough. I am like Tantalus, who saw trees and rivers withdraw, as he stretched his arms to grab fruits and drink water; he could see what he could not have. As I am sitting at my writing table and I am looking out of the window, the unbridgeable distance of safety brings despair; I acquire the desperate body of Tantalus. I can only be in touch with people online. Distance depriving me from human contact in the physical space and transforming contact in the digital space becomes a limitation in my life.

The old times of touch as contact rather than contagion were only over a year ago.¹ Experts talk about the post-pandemic era, a new era of human relationships. Old times bring nostalgia and post-pandemic brings uncertainty. The distance in space that isolates one from others is transformed into a distance from time, as I am isolated from both past and future; I close down into a parenthesis of time. The notion of post-pandemic implies a future as succession and completion, a future of evolution, which closes the door behind it and sets an unbridgeable distance from the past, the old times when touch as contact was possible. If I lose touch with contact and I offer touch to contagion, this parenthesis will never open again and contact will be confined to an unreachable past. Certainly, quarantine and physical distance are needed during the pandemic. But why should physical distance become social and temporal as well?

As I am sitting at my writing table, I try to make sense of my unprecedented isolation. I read Marc Augé’s 2014 book *The Future* and I realize that the future of post-pandemic is not the only option. The future, he claims, is “a time of conjunction,” which “always has a social dimension” and “depends on others,” so that we may not lose touch (Chapter 1). The parenthesis of time will make the past of touch as contact “disappear and collapse” and will bring more “solitude in the blank

image of a terrifying future" (Chapter 2). Augé's notion of the future as "inauguration," a "beginning" and a "birth" (Chapter 3), suggests that the transformation of touch from contagion into contact can only happen during the pandemic, otherwise loss will be irrevocable.

As I am sitting at my writing table and I am looking at the succession of day and night in the changing pattern of lights in the rectangular elements on my screen and outside my window, I review an image of day and night, light and darkness, from the old times. On a gallery wall, two rectangular drawings are hung side by side; the day and the night, the sun and the moon, a cross for the sun and a sword for the moon, among blue lines that cover the surface of the drawings. Let's follow the blue lines; where did they stem from?



Figure 1a: Jan Fabre Cross with suns (1987). Bic ballpoint pen on paper 238 x 165 cm. Photo: Pat Verbruggen. Copyright: Angelos bv



Figure 1b: Jan Fabre Sword in the night (1987). Bic ballpoint pen on paper 238 x 165 cm. Photo: Pat Verbruggen. Copyright: Angelos bv

In the beginning was an insect. In the late 1970s, in Antwerp, Belgium. On a white paper sheet on the top of the work table of a young artist. What time is it? It is the Hour Blue, the time of stillness and silence, when nocturnal animals have gone to bed and diurnal animals are not yet awake (Bernadac 2008, 104). The Hour Blue is a hybrid of night and day. It is not "night" since nocturnal animals are not active; it is not "day" either, since diurnal animals are not active. It is like an *Empire of Light*, René Magritte's series of paintings with a paradoxical combination of a day sky with a night earth. It is the time of sleep and transformation from night to day; it is "the hour of imagination" (van den Dries 2001, 61).

The artist is the great nephew of the entomologist Jean-Henri Fabre who defined the Hour Blue. And the insect was with the artist, with Jan Fabre, who is awake and works at his table. He was intrigued by the insect's movement on paper and he traced it with a blue BIC ballpoint pen (Fabre and Bekkers 2006, 23–24); he wrote movement down. More BIC blue lines followed; the white paper became blue with white gaps since the pen can never cover the surface smoothly. "There is a land where drawing is writing and vice versa [...] This land lives in me and I have discovered it through Vincent van Gogh," Fabre writes in his diary (Fabre 2011, 15). The BIC blue lines are vibrating like those in van Gogh's paintings. As the Hour Blue, the hybrid of night and day, is drawn in BIC blue pen, which is a writing instrument, each work becomes a hybrid of drawing and Fabre's handwriting. Out of the repetitive BIC blue lines emerge letters, words and forms, either in blue or in white—cuts on paper or spaces untouched by BIC, like the sun, the moon, the stars, the sword and the cross in the works *Cross with Suns* and *Sword in the Night* [Figures 1a and 1b]. Drawing and night are not closed down into themselves, but open up towards writing and day, their supposed opposites.

The process of transformation from egg to adult during the life cycle of an insect is called metamorphosis. And since an insect triggers the drawing of the first line of Fabre's Hour Blue, it transforms it into an hour of metamorphosis. For Fabre, who stages repetition in his visual and performing art, the biological process of metamorphosis has become "an attitude in life" (van den Dries 2001, 60). Repetition that allows the body of the artist "to master the action" (59) is his condition for endless experimentation (Fabre 2011, 134) and is derived from what he considers to be the main principle of theatre that repeats itself differently in each rehearsal and performance of a piece (Fabre 2011, 132). In Flemish, his language, the word "*repetitie*" stands for both repetition and rehearsal (van Dale 2008). Metamorphosis for Fabre becomes the opening up towards new experiences; it is a birth. Each repetition is different than the previous one, like the forms of the body of an insect during its life cycle. Each repetition is metamorphosis in-the-making, a process towards a future (Fabre 2011, 139), which can be inauguration and new beginning, according to Augé.

As I am sitting at my writing table, I try to make sense of my unprecedented isolation from people and time by approaching the future through Fabre's staging of the biological notion of metamorphosis. He is not alone in this process. In his 2021 book *Metamorphoses*, philosopher Emanuele Coccia also reflects on metamorphosis as a concept not confined to insects and their biology but as a principle of "shared life" (174). He approaches metamorphosis as an alternative to "evolution and progress" (9), since the different forms of an organism do not replace one another but are "simultaneously present and successive" (9), comprising "a continuity of life" (3). He claims that metamorphosis is rather a life of forms than a form of life" (54). "A single self expresses itself" across forms (57) and none of them corresponds to a final stage of an evolutionary process; metamorphosis is always in-the-making. "Every living being is a chimera" of more forms, states Coccia (55). Accordingly, Fabre privileges metamorphosis because he "refuses to accept the body as a closed identity" (van den Dries 2001, 66). Bodies on his stage are "hybrid," hence "liquid" and "rebellious," and cannot be easily kept under control, as they change form continuously. The Hour Blue that is initiated by insects as a hybrid of night and day, as well as writing and drawing, is for

Fabre the hour of metamorphosis, because the body can open up from its presumed “unique” identity (61).

How about the body of Tantalus and its closed identity of desperate isolation? Could it open up through a metamorphosis? As I am sitting at my writing table, I re-view my experience of Fabre’s Hour Blue drawings.

It is December 2018 in Milan and I visit Fabre’s exhibition *The Castles in the Hour Blue* (22.09–22.12.2018) curated by Melania Rossi in Building Gallery and Basilica of Sant’ Eustorgio. The choice of the church does not come as a surprise. Fabre has been influenced by the spirituality of the works of Great Masters in Antwerp, his home city. He has even created works that are permanently housed in Churches, such as his sculpture *The man who bears the Cross* in the Cathedral of Our Lady in Antwerp and his installations with hearts made of red coral in the Chapel of Pio Monte della Misericordia in Naples. As I look at the works and I am taking down notes in BIC ballpoint pen, I keep my hands busy, with a pen and a notepad, while my hands are eager to touch the works. These drawings with the blue lines that scratch the paper deep and create a relief surface are like “parchment or prepared skin,” as Fabre states (2014, 158). Their protective glass makes the distance from the skin of my hands to their “skin” feel bigger; I am near but not close enough. I am desperate to touch the works, I long for this touch. The inviting, tactile characteristics of these drawings, though, can be perceived with my eyes; my eyes touch them. It is not the torture of Tantalus. It is a game of the senses. The distance between our skins is part of this game, it makes the experience of drawings more intense, as I am on the verge of touching the works and my imagination is triggered by involving two senses, vision and tactility, instead of tactility alone. The viewing experience of the drawings of the hybrid Hour Blue becomes a hybrid of two senses, a sense in-the-making, a metamorphosis of my senses and my viewing experience that allows me to be in touch with the drawing without touching it.

In a series of 1989–1990 drawings, castles made of plant leaves are placed on the BIC blue lines (Figure 2). No, these are not leaves, they have antennae... and six legs. They are insects! The castles are made of bodies of *Phyllium giganteum*, an insect species that has a hybrid phenotype and resembles a plant leaf. These insects undergo metamorphosis to leaves and castles by crossing over the limits of species and living organisms; they are hybrid creatures of the Hour Blue. They tend towards the BIC blue lines, they long for them, but are never fused with them. They are added on the relief as distinct bodies that interact with the “prepared skin,” they organize and orient the vibrating BIC blue lines around them, and they shape *their* Hour Blue through their BIC blue shadow. The intensity of the interaction between castles and BIC blue lines adds to the intensity of my viewing experience of the drawing’s tactile features.

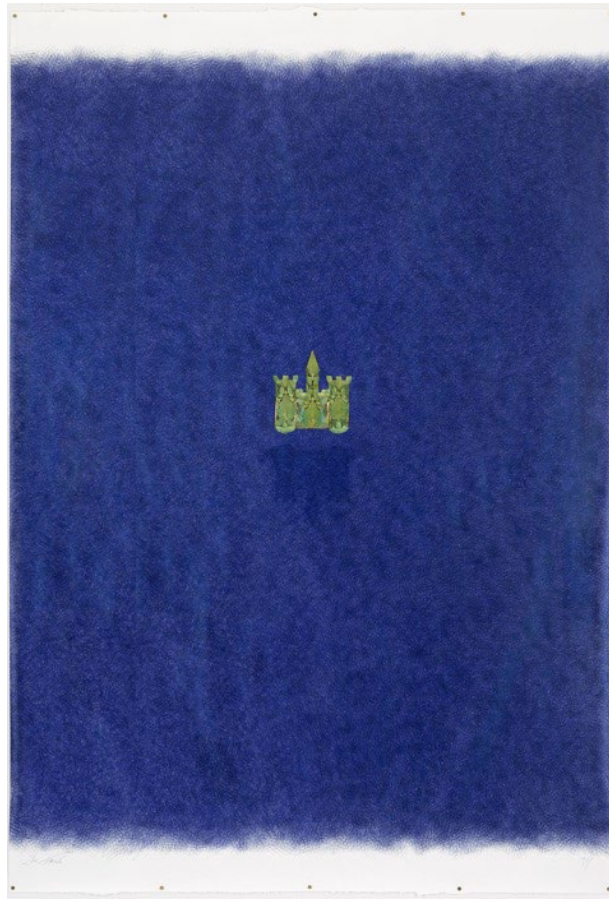


Figure 2: Jan Fabre Dream castle in the hour blue (1989). Bic ballpoint pen on paper with pieces of Phyllium giganteum 168,2 x 164,5 x 6 cm (incl. frame). Photo: Pat Verbruggen. Copyright: Angelos bv

These castles are not made of stone but of bodies of insects; life is their building stone. More precisely, “shared life” (Coccia 2021, 174), since insects offer them their process of metamorphosis. For Fabre, insects are “comparable to medieval knights,” since their exoskeletons are like armour. He believes that an armour protects the vulnerability of existence and he embraces metamorphosis as a way to expose and protect this vulnerability (Bernadac 2008, 105). “The medieval universe” is a place “where the opposites coexist,” he states. His example is the brave Lancelot, who has an imperfection since he commits adultery. Like a medieval knight, the insect is “hard and vulnerable” (32). The castles in the Hour Blue are such hybrids; they are vulnerable shields. The Hour Blue, the hybrid that is fluid and cannot be controlled, can protect as well.

In Basilica of Sant’ Eustorgio, Fabre’s 1987 piece on artificial silk *A Castle in the Sky for René* (Figure 3) was hung like a soft wall, along the left aisle of the main body of the church, where the Mass takes place. There are no insects in this piece. Out of the BIC blue lines emerge various forms. As I was about to light a candle at the chapel opposite this work, I saw a heart; it was the main form at the upper right part of the piece. No, it is not a heart; it is a rock, the building stone of the castle. The piece is dedicated to René Magritte, the Belgian painter who used to paint rocks, as well as skies, like the day sky over the night earth in his series *Empire of Lights*, and Fabre considers him to

be one of his Masters. The information next to the piece pointed to my mistake; still, I looked at the piece and its heart was beating. A metamorphosis of the rock into a heart took place in my viewing experience. The castle founded by this rock is a vulnerable shield, a castle in the Hour Blue, because its beating heart is an invitation for a contact with those who are outside. This castle offers security not because its rocks are as strong, but because it longs for contact. A castle can be seen from everywhere, but life inside is inaccessible; it is closing down and it is always ready for defence. This castle, though, shows its beating heart and opens up, it refuses isolation and suggests that protection is connected to interaction. In the Hour Blue of metamorphosis, safety undergoes a metamorphosis and the knight of the castle made of stone/heart is desperate for others; he longs for contact.



Figure 3: Jan Fabre A castle in the sky for René (1987). Bic ballpoint pen on artificial silk 689 x 1684 cm. Photo: Installation during the exhibition 'Jan Fabre. The Castles in the Hour Blue', Milan, 2018. Location: Basilica of Sant'Eustorgio, Portinari Chapel. Photo: Atilio Maranzano. Copyright: Angelos bv

And there was evening, and night is not the end of the day for Fabre, but the beginning. The Hour Blue is his time of creativity, when he makes his drawings and writes in his diary; he uses BIC pen for both, as “despite the computerized world, he writes everything by hand” (Lórán 2012, 140). “Whom can I count on?” he asks in his *Night Diary* (Fabre 2011, 129). His diary is intimate, a way to close down into his thoughts, but he longs for interaction with others, he is desperate to open up during the day; he has also published his intimate diaries.

He works in his home that is lit not only by electricity, but by his creativity as well; it becomes a *House of Flames*, of BIC blue vibrant flames, like the houses of his 1989–1991 installation—three rectangular boxes painted in BIC blue and a bigger one, a “Tower,” at the end. The first box has its door closed, the other two have their doors open at different degrees, while the Tower’s door is wide open (Figure 4). This installation is a hybrid of different stages of closing down and opening

up; it demonstrates metamorphosis in-the-making. I did not see this installation in Milan. *The Castles in the Hour Blue* is a touring exhibition but undergoes metamorphosis, as the curator adapts it to each exhibition site. I saw this piece in Arras, France, in Musée des beaux Arts, the old Benedictine Abbey of Saint Vaast, where it was scheduled to run from 02.03.2020 to 04.05.2020, but closed early because of the COVID-19 restrictions; I visited it on its second day, to re-view the works that I had already enjoyed in Milan.



Figure 4: Jan Fabre Houses of flames (shrines) (1988). Bic ballpoint blue on wood (three parts) 17 x 20 x 29 cm; 25 x 28,5 x 39 cm; 32 x 37 x 51,5 cm. Photo: Pat Verbruggen. Copyright: Angelos bv. Jan Fabre Houses of flames (tower) (1991). Bic ballpoint blue on wood 76 x 24 x 32 cm. Photo: Pat Verbruggen. Copyright: Angelos bv

And there was morning and Fabre met people he could count on. And with them he made the work *Tivoli* (1990), and covered the walls of this castle with Hour Blue BIC drawings that he prepared with friends and colleagues. The paper sheet of his Hour Blue drawings has opened up and has become immense; he is sharing the life of his Hour Blue with others. And others re-create the Hour Blue with him. And others look at the works; like me, who looked at photographs and film of the Tivoli castle in his exhibition in Milan and Arras. His creativity of the night undergoes metamorphosis and becomes a hybrid with the creativity of others during the day.

And there was morning and Fabre met people he could count on. And with them he makes theatre. During the night he prepares himself for the rehearsals of the day by writing and making drawings (Fabre 2011, 140); he prepares himself for the metamorphosis of his creative rituals of the night into the rituals in his rehearsal space, Troubleyn Laboratorium, in Antwerp. "Ritual is essentially a birth," as Augé insists, and theatrical rituals are only possible with others. The collaboration in Fabre's theatre Laboratorium is also based on metamorphosis, as Fabre believes that there is "one

long chain that keeps us all together" (van den Dries 2001, 61). The biological fact that "our life [...] was transmitted to us by others" and that it is "a continuation and a metamorphosis of a life that came before it" (Coccia 2021, 3–4), is transformed into theatre. The paper sheet of his Hour Blue drawings has opened up and has covered the stage of his first opera, *The Minds of Helena Troubleyn* and his theatre piece *Prometheus Landscape I*, after Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound* in the 1980s. The knight has admitted his vulnerability by showing the beating heart of his castle, his own beating heart, and he longs for sharing his activities with others. He opens the door gradually, with caution, Safety is not achieved in total isolation, but in cautious interaction with others. Fabre closes down for preparation in order to open up for collaboration, towards a future as birth and "conjunction," as Augé states, which materializes in his theatre pieces. A castle in the Hour Blue can be a shield for the preservation of contact; the invitation to shield together and protect each other.



In the beginning was an insect and the insect is Fabre. He is the dung beetle, "the happy Sisyphus" of repetition. He identifies himself with the beetle that rolls a huge ball to the peak of a hill and lets it roll back in order to collect materials and do the itinerary again, differently (Fabre 2002). And as an insect he can undergo metamorphosis into a castle; he *becomes* a castle in the Hour Blue.

And there was evening. In his House of Flames, Fabre cannot sleep. He is an insomniac, "he lives the night in a continuous manner" (Fabre and Bekkers 2006, 21). As a result, he is awake when both nocturnal and diurnal animals sleep and he experiences the Hour Blue. He does not only observe the Hour Blue, but he shapes it, he makes it his own, as the BIC blue lines are directed towards the lower right corner of the paper and give rise to his signature; his name becomes another bunch of vibrant BIC blue lines. As he undergoes the metamorphosis of Hour Blue every night, he *becomes* the Hour Blue.

According to Coccia, "being alive does not just mean perceiving the world [...] but also constructing it, shaping it in a different way" (155). Fabre reflects on his insomnia and explains it creatively: "Why don't I sleep? Because only during the night I have the time to be who I am" (2011, 20). He approaches sleep deprivation as a creative limitation and as he is both a Castle *and* the Hour Blue, he copes creatively with time, in a way that differs from those who can sleep. The Hour Blue, his time of "imagination," becomes his time of creativity because he dares to cope creatively with its temporality.

Since his childhood, he has been building castles and listening to chivalry stories from his father (Fabre 2011, 99). Fabre has been dreaming to restore chivalry as a fight for a good cause (2014, 37). The knight of despair is the main character in his 2005 theatre piece *History of Tears*. The knight achieves a metamorphosis of his desperate situation, from loss of hope to longing for something, as despair makes him believe "in an absurd hope" (Fabre 2005, 31). This knight has a special relationship with temporality, as he says "I sense the future" (11). The good cause that he fights for is the search for a future through relating to people, those who are on the same stage, where he performs his monologues at a distance. As time goes by, he switches from "I" to "we," when he

speaks. He longs for people, as he longs for the future that he can already sense. His sword in this fight is “the force of vulnerability” (11). The knight is immortal, a hybrid of living and dead bodies, since when one dies, another takes its place (12). His body undergoes metamorphosis of life and death and constantly changes form. It does not have “a closed identity” (van den Dries 2001, 66), but it is “longing for completeness” (61). For Fabre, this completeness is “the sublime moment when scene and audience merge into a seamless whole” (61), the moment when the insomniac artist who works alone in his room when everyone sleeps, undergoes a metamorphosis through the interaction with collaborators and audience.

The future that the knight senses cannot be a time that closes down, a future of succession, but a future of a new birth. For Coccia, metamorphosis is “a future, an omnipresent possibility. [...] And everything leads back to it—especially death” (83), which is “a metamorphic threshold” (90). For Fabre, “death is the father of metamorphosis” (2007, 135). The knight of despair is a hybrid creature of life and death on Fabre’s stage, where death longs for life and vice versa; in his case, “two incompatible bodies belong to the same individual” (Coccia 2021, 174). Death, the vulnerability of existence, is not the end but the longing for a future of a new birth.

Fabre who experiences the night “in a continuous manner,” like the immortal knight experiences life and death “in a continuous manner,” explores his insomniac body as a body that undergoes metamorphosis, as a Castle in the Hour Blue. The vulnerability of his insomniac body becomes his strength, like the exposed vulnerability of the beating heart of the Castle of the Hour Blue. Alone in the night, he creates rituals to cope with his insomnia. These rituals undergo metamorphosis in his theatre space, Troubleyn Laboratorium, his other “castle,” with his performers in the morning. This Laboratorium is a shield for an artistic community, “a sheltered building” (Bousset et al. 2016, 79). The hybrid body of metamorphosis re-creates the Hour Blue by coping creatively with its temporality through despair that longs for a future of “an absurd hope;” a future through longing.

I went to Arras in March 2020 to watch Fabre’s solo theatre piece *Resurrexit Cassandra* (2019), and his exhibition *The Castles in the Hour Blue* was opening on that day. His Cassandra is a hybrid creature of life and death, the prophetess who comes back to life in order to warn humans about climate change; she is a hybrid creature of the Hour Blue, although no BIC blue lines cover the stage like in Fabre’s theatre works of the 1980s. On my last time in the theatre and in a museum before the pandemic, I heard a plea for metamorphosis as a future through longing. As I am sitting at my writing table, I re-view the exhibition that I visited twice, through this plea. Since metamorphosis is a process of repeating differently through hybrids, I take up Fabre’s gesture and I explore it through the dynamics of closing down and opening up. It is not a narrative of evolution, my writing does not progress, but unfolds in rounds of closing down and opening up that repeat this movement differently in the art of Fabre and my experience of isolation; it creates hybrids of these two states instead of opposing them to each other. The beating heart and the open door of Fabre’s castles are an invitation to share his creativity, an attempt to cope creatively with time that will lead to a future through longing. It is a narrative of a future as birth, a narrative of genesis of a temporality that takes up the genesis of Fabre’s universe of the Hour Blue. It is told with the help of the Book of Genesis and the beginning of the Gospel of St John, an attempt of a secular

metamorphosis of a sacred narrative, like the one performed by Fabre in his works that are in Churches.

I re-view Fabre's exhibition in order to hybridize my experience from the two visits with the experience of the pandemic. Art can become a paradigm for shaping a future, since, as Augé claims, "art offers to one and all the opportunity to live through a commencement." This experience does not end when I leave the exhibition space, I can adapt it in order to live. Whom can I count on? If touch is not closed down in a parenthesis of time during the pandemic but becomes a hybrid of contagion and contact by taking its vulnerability into account, this sense can undergo metamorphosis and lead to a future through the hybrid temporality of longing, since when I long for something, I experience in my present a future birth.

As I am sitting at my writing table, I watch a recording of Penny Arcade's performance *Longing lasts Longer* (Zehentner 2021), a performance that I experienced in London in 2016. "Longing is a persistent sense of loss that attaches to ourselves," states Arcade. Longing is not nostalgia, since "nostalgia is done from a safe distance," according to Arcade, but touch is not trapped in the old times that can only be missed, but is opening up towards the future of a new birth. As a hybrid temporality, "longing lasts longer, longer than anything else," as Arcade keeps repeating, since it does not close down into one point in time. It is immortal like the knight of despair, and takes different forms; longing is constantly born anew. Longing can make metamorphosis happen because it prepares for it. As I am sitting at my writing table, I read the novella *Mokusei!* by the Dutch writer Cees Nooteboom: "When does such a thing as a great love begin? [...] probably started with the longing for one [...] That had been the preparation for the moment" (50). For the moment that Fabre's theatre company meet their audience in theatre venues; for the moment that quarantine will end.

Longing is related to length, to distance in space and time of waiting. When Fabre closes down in his home during the night, when BIC blue lines cannot cover the paper smoothly and when I cannot touch the drawings, distance does not lead to disruption of experience but to its metamorphosis into creativity. Distance from others, which is essential to keep us safe from the pandemic, can be approached as a creative limitation, the way Fabre is coping with his insomnia. As I am sitting at my writing table, I re-view the exhibition in order to explore the possibility of a metamorphosis of my body of the desperate Tantalus into a body of longing. Fabre achieves metamorphosis, can I do the same?

Although the distance of a few metres among windows in the inner yard seems unbridgeable, we can be in touch online by seeing each other. We can change our point of view on time and refuse to experience the pandemic as a temporal parenthesis in our lives. Instead of leaving contact in the past, we may take advantage of the fact that we can be on the verge of touch thanks to technology and approach it as an opportunity which makes things more intense and urgent. Longing becomes a pressing need for action when there is a limitation. When touch was possible and I could not imagine that I could be deprived of it, the viewing of Fabre's exhibition where touch was not allowed prepared me for it as I coped creatively by experiencing the tactile features of

drawings through a hybrid sense of vision and touch. I was “long-prepared” for the loss. This long preparation is called longing, a longing for loss, by Leonard Cohen in his *Book of Longing* (60–61) where he made his own metamorphosis of the poem “God abandons Anthony” by Constantine Cavafy. The hybrid temporality of longing extends to a past that is not nostalgia. When longing for something, we are in touch with the whole temporality instead of suffering inside a parenthesis of time; being in touch with time prepares for being in touch with people.

The distance mediated by screens during a video call may activate the game of the senses, since my gaze has been prepared to long for tactile characteristics and the touch of skin, like the “prepared skin” of Fabre’s drawings. In the same exhibition space, my gaze was also prepared to touch the skin of the castle of Tivoli, through photographs and a film. The prepared gaze does not only perceive tactile characteristics but also creates and changes its environment, an act that also “changes the environment of others,” as Coccia suggests (156). Thus, the intensity of being on the verge of touching people, leads to a metamorphosis of the sense of touch, so that people who are in touch through screens may participate in each other’s activities through the mutual creation of an environment of shared life defined by longing to touch and be touched.

French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty proposes “the flesh of the world” as the ontological element that guarantees the intertwining between our bodies and the world thanks to reversibility (1968, 147), the intertwining between the body and the world as well as between senses. Since our bodies are nodes in the fabric of this flesh of the world, they are open to the world and our gazes “envelop” things and bodies (131). This reversibility makes possible the game of the senses that leads to the hybrid sense of vision and touch. Merleau-Ponty grounds intersubjectivity on reversibility. He describes the relationship that we have with our own bodies not as a relationship with an object but as a reversibility of touching and being touched: when my two hands touch each other, each of them is both touching and being touched from the other (1964, 166). Intersubjective relationships happen as intercorporeal relationships when the two hands do not belong to one body, but two: “The handshake too is reversible” (1968, 142). Through longing I can have something without possessing it, unlike Tantalus, who sees what he cannot have. Others are not near but are close enough. The challenge for which longing prepares us during the video calls is to move from gazes that touch to touching each other; to move from having without possessing to grasping each other’s hands.

When the digital distance is approached as a creative limitation that may change the environment of experience, it can transform the restrictive function of distance in the physical space as well. The lights from the rectangular windows in my inner yard can create the longing that has been practised online, so that I may not be shut outside the lives of others but participate in their activities through having without possessing them. Such participation is possible not by visiting them, which is not safe during the pandemic, but by realizing that by turning on and off the light in my room I change my environment as well as theirs, as Coccia claims (156). The light of my rectangular window is not outside but a part of the changing pattern of lights that I observe and corresponds to time that passes. Indeed, I can only see one of the four sides of the rectangular inner yard and the kaleidoscopic installation of flashing lights includes all four sides; someone on

the opposite side perceives my window as part of the kaleidoscopic installation. Therefore, time is not outside my room, it does not pass without me being able to have an effect on it.

Creative coping with distance, closing down in order to open up, leads to creative coping with time. My body is not the body of Tantalus anymore, since by opening up towards the activities of others it becomes a body in the course of metamorphosis, a hybrid of temporalities of contact; the present of longing for the future of a new contact. Longing defines my present experience and makes it more intense, as I am not dreaming of the moment of contact with people, but I am already in touch with them and their activities. This also means, though, that my existence is overwhelmed by longing; the same as metamorphosis as co-existence of opposites and new birth is not smooth, longing involves risk. Being desperate is not only related to loss of hope but to willingness for great risk as well (Partridge 1991, 168). Longing prepares for a future birth through a hybrid of vision and touch; it does not guarantee its advent. Being on the verge, the experience of urgency allows me to prepare to move “from longing to skin” (Cohen 2006, 68) by opening up towards a possibility. “Longing lasts longer than anything else,” as Arcade keeps repeating, because opening up lasts longer. Or in Merleau-Ponty’s words: “so long as we are alive, our situation is open” (2012, 467).

What time is it? I do not need to look at my laptop’s clock; it is the hour of metamorphosis, the hour of longing, the Hour Blue of the future of birth. By changing point of view upon distance, protection not only from the pandemic but also from isolation from past and future are achieved; only together may we protect each other, only together may we have a future. Thanks to distance I can become a hybrid body of longing, a body that risks the hope of the knight of despair. I can become a Castle in the Hour Blue and shape *my* Hour Blue, this essay that proposes the temporality of longing.

Her green light has sprouted.

“Why are you active so late at night? Are you all right? How about a brief chat? ... I am still sitting at my writing table,” is my message to her.

And when my friend and I make a video call, we always touch each other’s hands by touching our screens before we say good bye. The idea was mine. It is the gesture that Mr Monk made when he watched a video message that his beloved wife had recorded shortly before her death. Our new ritual of longing until we meet again. As we are longing for each other in order not to lose touch, we are already in touch with each other.

Acknowledgements

The author receives funding from the TECHNE/AHRC Doctoral Partnership

The author would like to thank Angelos/Jan Fabre for granting permission for the publication of images of Jan Fabre's works.

Notes

¹ The first draft of the essay was written in London, UK during the winter 2021 lockdown and the final version was revised in the same London room in December 2021, when work-from-home and "be cautious" guidance returned as a result of a surge of cases because of a variant of COVID-19.

Works Cited

Translations from French and Dutch sources were made by the author.

Augé Marc. 2014. *The Future*. London: Verso. Kindle.

Bernadac, Marie-Laure, ed. 2008. *Jan Fabre Au Louvre: L'ange De La métamorphose*. Paris: Gallimard.

Bousset, Sigrid, Katrien Bruyneel, and Mark Geurden, eds. 2016. *Troubleyn Laboratorium*. Brussels: Mercatorfonds.

Coccia, Emanuele. 2021. *Metamorphoses*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Cohen, Leonard. 2006. *The Book of Longing*. London: Penguin Books.

Fabre, Jan, and Ludo Bekkers. 2006. *Conversation avec Ludo Bekkers*. Gerpennes: Éditions Tandem.

Fabre, Jan. 2002. *Je Marche Pendant 7 Jours Et 7 Nuits*. Paris: Ed. Jannink.

———. 2005. *L'histoire Des Larmes ; L'empereur De La Perte ; Le Roi Du Plagiat ; Une Tribu, voilà Ce Que Je Suis ; Je Suis Une Erreur: Cinq pièces*. Paris: L'arche.

———. 2007. *Requiem für Eine Metamorphose - Requiem for a Metamorphosis*. Salzburg: Kulturverl. Polzer.

———. 2011. *Nachtboek 1978–1984*. Antwerpen: De Bezige Bij.

———. 2014. *Nachtboek 1985–1991*. Antwerpen: De Bezige Bij.

Hegyí, Lórán, ed. 2012. *Les années de l'Heure Bleue: Dessins Et Sculptures, 1977–1992*. Cinisello Balsamo: Silvana Editoriale.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1964. *Signs*. Trans. Richard C. McCleary. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

———. 1968. *The Visible and the Invisible*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

———. 2012. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Trans. Donald Landes. New York: Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203720714>

Nooteboom, Cees. 2017. *Mokusei! a Love Story*. Trans. Adrienne Dixon. London: Seagull Books.

Partridge, Eric. 1991. *Origins: an Etymological Dictionary of Modern English*. London: Routledge.

Van Dale Groot Woordenboek Nederlands-Engels. 2008. Utrecht: Van Dale. Kindle

van den Dries, Luk. 2001. "Jan Fabre: Metamorphology." *Interakta* 4: 59–66.

Zehentner, Steve. 2021. "Penny Arcade's Longing Lasts Longer." *Vimeo*. April 19.
<https://vimeo.com/groups/pennyarcade/videos/469743764>.

Biography

Sylvia Solakidi is at the final year of a PhD at the Centre for Performance Philosophy, University of Surrey, which explores contemporaneity, presence and duration in postdramatic theatre. She has published research papers in: *Platform Postgraduate Journal*, *Antennae Journal*, *Kronoscope Journal*, *Performance Research Journal*, *Global Performance Studies Journal*, *Streetnotes Journal*, *Critical Stages/Scènes Critiques*.

© 2022 Sylvia Solakidi



Except where otherwise noted, this work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).