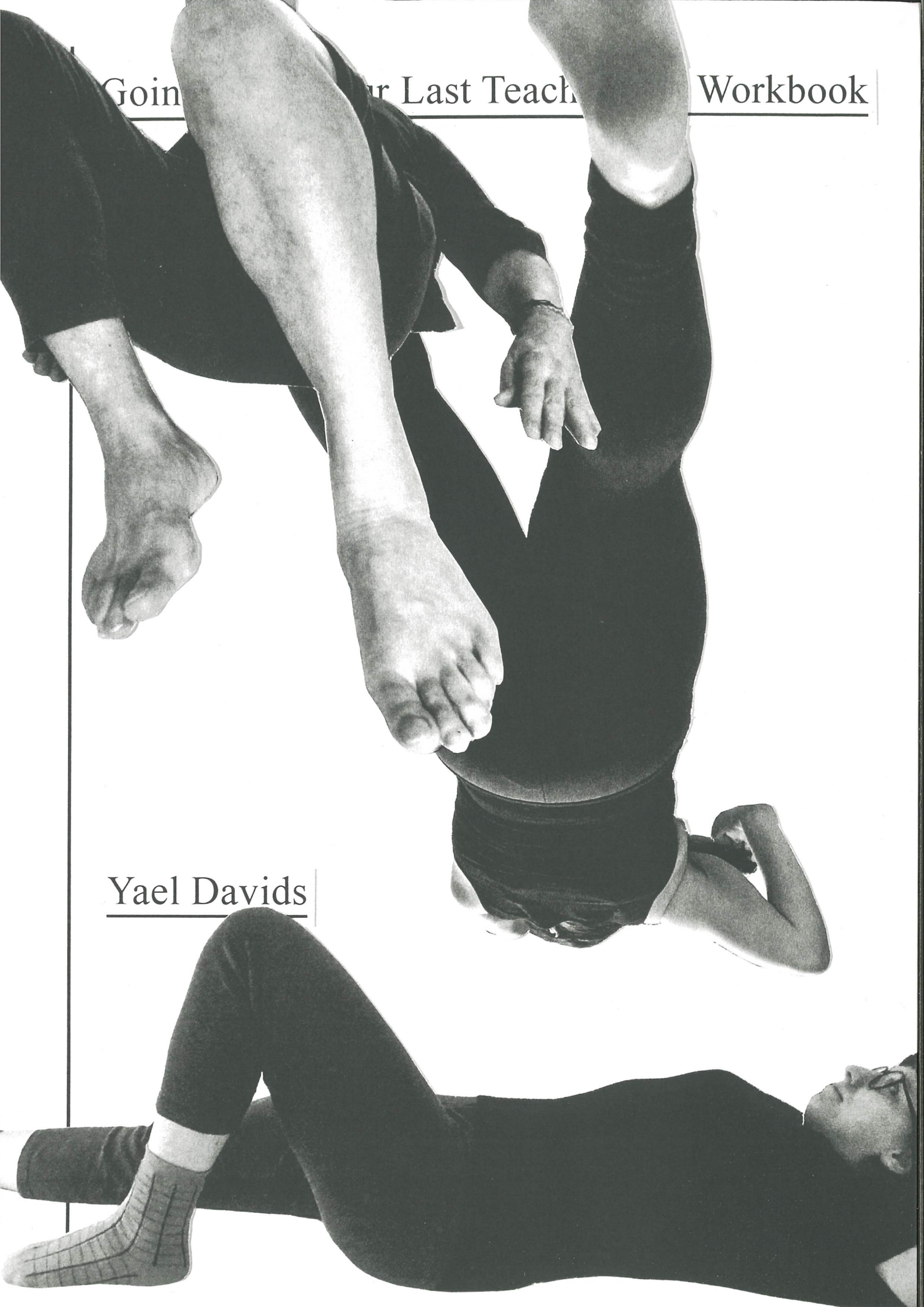
Goin r Last Teach Workbook



Yael Davids

I Am Going to Be Your Last Teacher

A Workbook

Yael Davids

Van Abbemuseum

Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst

Gerrit Rietveld Academie

Floor

Studio

Exhibition

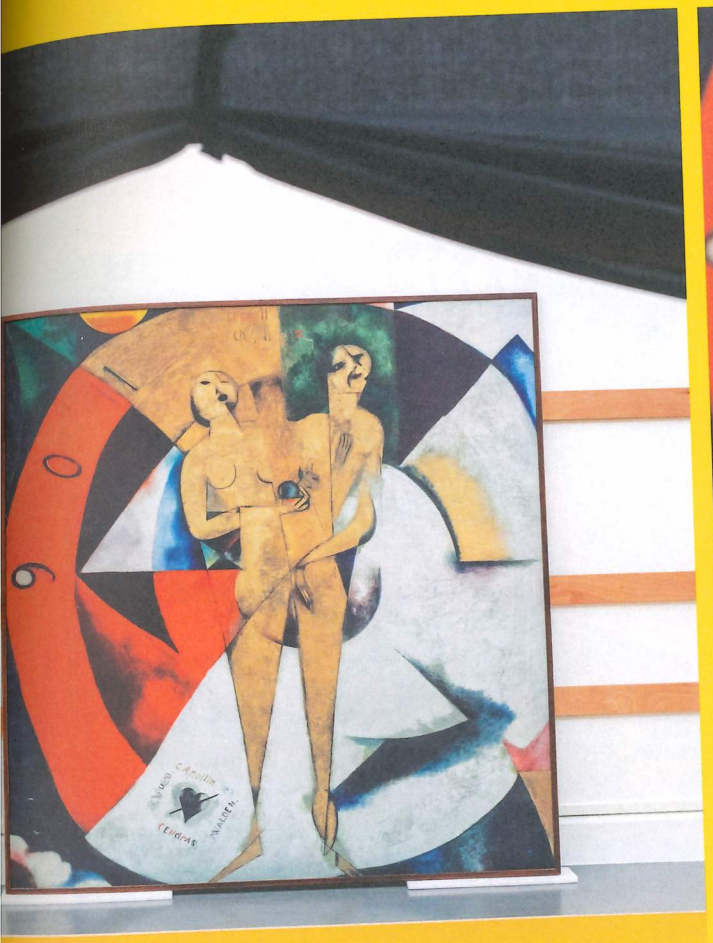
School

Class

Reports

On selecting *Cardinations*, Willy de Rooij wrote: *The softness that starts a movement and is expressed in an angular construction. In my view, the gentleness, not forcing; feeling and exploring represent all that Feldenkrais stands for.*

Our lesson will depart from the following works: *Hommage à Apollinaire* by Marc Chagall, selected by Hannah Dawn Henderson: *I perceive Feldenkrais's ethos as having been driven by the desire to reconcile the simultaneous wholeness and multiplicity that we all inhabit, and that, Chagall's painting is, to me, an ode to a similar wish.*



Marc Chagall, *Hommage à Apollinaire*, 1913

Please lie down. Close your eyes, and see how you are lying – not 'seeing' in a visual sense, but rather through a physical sensing of your body's position, its internal relations, the lines that form your body's image.

Go through this line of the half-circle a few times from twelve up to six. What do you notice? Do you skip any numbers, is the line smooth, without any gaps or jumps? Now bring your attention to the front of your head, to your nose. Does your nose pass through the same line of movement, in tandem? Or does it jump or rush over certain points? Can you initiate the direction of the head movement by moving your nose through the half clock, moving your attention to the front of the face.

Try to observe the effect of gravity – use it to your benefit, so as to allow for soft, comfortable movements. See if there is recuperative effort or held muscles that do not allow the gravity to be sensed.

Imagine the work of De Goey – the looseness of the thread, and how gravity allows for the thread to form a gentle, consistent curve. If the thread was taut, with more tension, it would not be able to produce such a line.

Bring your attention now to your jaw. Do you recognise any unnecessary effort or tension in your jaw or neck?

Leave it alone and rest.

[Pause]

Please bend your legs. Bring your attention back to the back of your head. Now draw a whole circle – around the entirety of the clock, all the numbers. Take your time, moving clockwise. The smaller the circle, the easier it will be to reach all the numbers in equal quality. Start at twelve and eventually arrive back at twelve, following the sequence of all the numbers.

Shift your attention to the nose – see what it is doing. How does its circle appear?

Leave it alone and just rest.

The line that encircles Chagall's Adam – it is an asymmetric circle with multiple planes and dimensions, divided into different sections at different degrees. In Jo Baer's work there are divisions as intersections – these axes, the points where the lines cross, are off-centre – never an exact quarter or half. There is always an opening or gap in these lines, suggesting a circle but resisting a complete enclosure.

As you draw the circle with your head, along with the pelvis, focus on what your nose is doing. Shift your attention between the circle of your nose, to the circle of the back of your head, to the circle of your pelvis. Is it possible to hold all three of these circles in the scope of your attention – at the same time, all together, with the same degree of awareness for each?

See how you are standing, take a few moments to walk in space.

You are invited to look again at the works, please feel free to share any thoughts, questions or observations.

Looking at the Chagall painting, we can see the idea of being both multiple and one, which Hannah mentioned in her reflection. This being, a depiction of the Biblical Adam, contains both man and woman, conjoined at the pelvis. This can imply a harmony within asymmetry. Imagine the pelvis of this being. Generally, males typically develop a much narrower, taller pelvis, whereas females tend to have a comparatively wider pelvis – in order to support a foetus and to eventually allow it to pass through the cervix and vaginal canal. Much like Chagall's Adam, during the first trimester of our foetal development we are neither strictly male nor female. For those first months, we have the potential to develop in either trajectory. In this sense, every human begins their physical existence as both male and female.

Following the lesson, the works are moved back to The School, and placed back amongst the selection of works from the collection.

Lieve Teugels 22.01.21

G Could you say something about your background and how you came to be part of Yael's Feldenkrais workshop?

L I'm a professor in Hebrew and Jewish Studies at the Protestant Theological University in Amsterdam. I was fascinated by Feldenkrais. Of course, Moshé Feldenkrais was an Israeli, coming from Belarus and I suspected that Yael would also be coming from Israel. In August I went to the exhibition and later I participated in the workshop. The first time I went into the exhibition without the workshop I didn't understand her work very well. I didn't see the link with the video of Feldenkrais, I thought it was all fascinating but I didn't really understand it. But then when I went back, and we had the workshop, which was mostly focused on one painting by Marc Chagall, *Hommage à Apollinaire* it sort of all fell together. Actually, I was lucky because this was when there was a spot free; the next day there may have been a different painting.

G Were you previously aware of Moshé Feldenkrais?

L I knew more or less that he had some practice/theory about the body, but I never really delved into it. In the exhibition there is an old piece of video where Feldenkrais is interviewed, and one of the things that he talks about is sitting on a train in Israel in front of an old Yemenite man who is reading his book upside down. He starts talking to him and the Yemenite says it's very normal that he reads upside down, because that is how he would have learned to read. In Yemen children would sit around in a circle with a book in the middle and everyone would look at it from their own angle. That is how Feldenkrais demonstrates the way our brains and our bodies work. For most of us, this looks like an impossible thing, that you can read from different angles. For me the whole video was funny, also because of the Feldenkrais's accent – he has a very European Yiddish accent in Hebrew, or in English, was he speaking English? Could be he was speaking Hebrew with English subtitles.

G When did Feldenkrais move to Israel, do you have any idea?

L He must have moved from Belarus at the beginning of the previous century. He was definitely first generation, you can hear by the accent.

G Are you Israeli?

L I'm not, I'm actually Belgian living in the Netherlands. I was born in a village outside of Antwerp, but when I was six, we moved to Leuven and that's where I grew up. I've been in the Netherlands since 1994.

G And was your family orthodox or non-orthodox?

L No actually my family is not even Jewish. I became Jewish about twenty years ago, in the United States, when I lived there for a while. Conversion was something I had thought about before, but it was easier to do it over there.

G And what provoked that?

L I grew up in a Catholic family. I guess it started because of my studies. I was so much involved in the Jewish literature and culture that I studied, that I found that I belonged to it more than to Catholicism.

G You went to university and took courses in Jewish studies?

L Yes, I started in Leuven, in theology and religious studies. There I focused on the Hebrew Bible and then I learned Hebrew. Sometime later I went to Israel to learn modern Hebrew, and from there I sort of diverted into Jewish studies.

G Was it a form of identification or how did it emerge?

L The fact that I went into religious studies? Just after high school I thought that was an interesting way to go. When I was seventeen, I was inspired by a religion teacher who had a very open mind towards other religions, and I thought, I want to be like that. And that's how it started, and then I fell more into a Jewish track.

G And how was your experience going to Israel?

L I started going to Israel first as a tourist with a university group in the '80s; I went a couple of times. Then I took groups myself, also for my university. I also lived there, I went two times for a summer course to learn Hebrew in 1987–88. And then I got a scholarship to go for a year and studied at the Hebrew university while I was doing my PhD at the university in Leuven. Then I lived there for a year. Israel has had a special place for me. Especially Jerusalem, because that is where I lived and that is where I always go back to if I can. Like most people who go to Jerusalem, I feel like it's sort of a nexus, it's such an important place for so many people that there are crazy things going on there, like religious fanaticism. Everybody wants to be there. It's also a beautiful place, the way it's built with the white stones, and the climate. Of course, it's also difficult, there is constant tension.

G Do you think about moving to Israel?

L I've thought about it, of course, in general terms, but I've never made any concrete plans. I go quite a lot now for my work, we have an exchange programme with a school in Jerusalem. Usually once or twice a year. Now of course I can't go there because of Covid. The country also has its problems; I don't really like the political developments.

G I'm not so clear about the conversion process, you said you went to the United States, why was it better or easier?

L I was in the United States because I was working there, I lived there. In Europe, I mean in Holland and in Belgium, the whole conversion process is very difficult and long, it's not very inviting. In the orthodox community certainly, but even in Reform Judaism. When I came to the United States, I got in touch with a Conservative rabbi; Conservative Judaism is a form of Reform Judaism, it's not what it sounds like. Immediately they were very welcoming, and when I asked him if he ever converted people, he said, 'of course all the time'. In the US it's more common, because many people intermarry. I immediately felt that they appreciated what I knew; they let me teach, it was very different, very open and welcoming. Once I was there I felt: this is what I have to do now.

It must have been quite profound to make that change.

It was profound, but still, since I didn't convert to orthodox Judaism, it didn't involve really big changes. I wouldn't have to have a kosher kitchen or dress differently or something like that. It's very egalitarian; whatever they do in synagogue is the same for men and women. I never experienced it as something difficult.

But more in the positive sense, was it like being part of a new community?

Yes absolutely. And still actually, I miss the community in the US. Here in Holland it's more difficult. In Amsterdam there is a big Jewish community. But I don't live in Amsterdam, I just work there. I became a member of the synagogue but it's a little more difficult. It's a closed community, and because it's a smaller part of the population it's a little more isolated.

Do people wonder, who is this person, what is their agenda?

Yes sometimes. Because I work at a Protestant university, sometimes they think I've got one foot in the other camp.

A dilettante.

Yes, I felt it more in Amsterdam than in other parts of Holland. The Jewish community here is very marked by the Holocaust and the war. If your family hasn't experienced that somehow, some people feel you don't understand them or you don't belong. But as a scholar they welcomed me, because they ask me to do lectures; so that is my entrance, they see that I know things.

I lived in Belgium for four years, I lived close to the orthodox community in Antwerp. It was very cosmopolitan. I remember there was a little café where I would go and people would come in with their kids and chat, and I would hear conversations about relatives in the United States or in Israel. Of course, I was aware of the traumatic events of World War II and was curious about how that community had reassembled after the war and become such a pillar of Antwerp life.

L Yes, that community marries within an international network, from London, from the United States, to keep them healthy. It's planned through arranged marriages.

G But to go back to Moshé Feldenkrais, I'm very curious about his history.

L What I found out is that he was born in Ukraine, but he spent some of his youth in Belarus. He went to Paris for his studies, but I don't know exactly what he studied there, perhaps engineering. In World War II he moved to London for a while and then after that he moved to Israel. I think he sort of escaped everything just in time. In Israel he even became a personal trainer to Ben-Gurion. There are all kinds of legends about this – that he taught Ben-Gurion to stand on his head. Maybe he was also another kind of trainer, yoga perhaps. But you probably know the way he came to Feldenkrais, to his method?

G No.

L Apparently, he was a soccer player and he had a knee injury and then he somehow, since he was very much into motor skills because of being an engineer, by studying the body he found out that everything is connected from the toes to the head. If something is problematic, like in this case his knee, there are ways to compensate for it or even to fix it by doing something with another part of the body. That is how he developed the method of the whole body as a system where everything reacts to other parts. But the link that Yael made between Feldenkrais and art is new for me, because I don't think Feldenkrais had a lot to do with art.

G I think Yael told me you had written about Marc Chagall?

L No. But we talked about him because she used a painting by Chagall for the workshop. I was very lucky that she picked that one because it's a beautiful painting and it has Hebrew letters. And she talked about Hasidism, because Chagall and Feldenkrais both came from Belarus, so they both had that same background. There I saw how Feldenkrais and Chagall came together. I still don't really see how her own artwork relates to Feldenkrais.

G I think it comes from the body as a site. She is a performance artist. And her performance art really comes from the body and from text.

L That's it: the text. Because in her artwork she had cut-out sentences, she made a whole letter from cut-out letters, and these letters were from women in Jerusalem, so I found them fascinating, but how she relates that to Feldenkrais I didn't see.

G I suppose performance art and a focus on the body led to the body practice, which is Feldenkrais. In the workshops the idea was to experiment with how to bring art and Feldenkrais together. You went to a workshop in the museum, maybe you could describe your memory of it?

L It was in the room where the paintings were hanging, the Apollinaire and some other paintings, but there was some link between the paintings and the exercises. There were all these mats in the room, a bigger mat in the middle and smaller mats on top of it. Most of the time we were laying on our back, it was like a guided meditation. And I recall that she used some images from the painting, the painting has a clock in it and she would say – now you will lie down and you should focus in your mind on three o'clock, or six o'clock, she did these things with a clock in your body. It wasn't always easy, you had to imagine things in your body that were not very logical. I don't recall if we moved a lot. It was mostly in your imagination and how your body relates to the space around you. It is all about the relation between what goes on in your brain and how you perceive things and how your body feels. Like the guy reading the book upside down. I had never really paid so much attention to the Chagall painting before. Of course it's an amazing painting, it looks beautiful because of the colours and the size, but now I was really studying it closely. I saw all kinds of details that I had never seen in it. It's amazing that they have that painting in the Van Abbemuseum.

G They have an incredible collection.

L The whole Jewish thing, a lot of people in the workshop probably didn't know about it, or it wasn't important to them, but it made me relate to it even more.

G Could you enlarge a bit on the Jewish elements in the painting?

L In the painting there is this male/female figure splitting, which comes from legends of the creation of the world, and that's from Jewish mysticism.

G What about your own research in that area?

L I'm not really dealing with art, I'm not even so much dealing with history, mostly I'm dealing with literature from antiquity, especially midrash. These are rabbinical interpretations of the bible from the third to the eleventh century. It's often very narrative. For example, there is an interpretation of the creation story where a myth is told that actually also occurs in Plato and in Greek literature about how the first human was created as androgynous, two figures joined back-to-back.

G In Plato's *Symposium*?

L Exactly, so this exact same story occurs in rabbinical texts. It is important to realise that Jews at that time were part of a wider culture and that they took over these stories. And a lot of the things in the painting, which you see in Jewish mysticism and coming back in Hasidism, are already occurring in these earlier texts that I'm working with. This whole current of mystical thinking was usually suppressed in rabbinical literature, but there are traces even there.

G The bible that I know is the King James Bible, which has the Old Testament in it, and I guess this is inherited from the Jewish tradition. Are you saying that what your research points to is a much more complex and different creation myth than the one that we've inherited in that bible?

L King James is a translation of the Hebrew Bible, so the Old Testament in the Hebrew Bible contains whatever you know from the King James. But then, interestingly, if you look in Hebrew and even in English, you can see that in the creation story there are some really difficult things. For example, the change between the singular and the plural. God's says: 'let us create man in our image' and 'male and female, he created them' and then, elsewhere, he created 'him'. So it goes back and forth: God speaking about himself in the plural, and when it's about the human, it's sometimes singular and sometimes plural. The ancient rabbis read the bible in a very literal way, they wanted to make sense of all these details. So, if it reads in the plural: God says: 'let us create men in our image', then they ask: 'who is our? We cannot say it's two Gods, so who is it?' Then they conclude it may be God and the angels, for example. Every detail they try to explain. The phrase 'male and female, he created him' is explained by the Platonic myth about the androgyne.

Also, they needed to make sense of two creation stories. Because in the first story, one human is created male and female, and in the second one there is Eve coming from Adam's rib. These are essentially two different stories, but if they're in the same bible they both need to be true, so they tried to harmonise it. First there was one human created, and then God split it in two. The story with the rib is explained by the fact that the Hebrew word for rib can also mean 'side'. Thus they conclude that male and female were originally two 'sides' of the one human.

G Fascinating, and I'm wondering as an aside, out of my own curiosity – that if you don't take the bible literally and you think back to the way that it was written – how would you account for it? Do you see it as a series of stories that were brought together into one document, different histories and mystical traditions that were collated?

L Well, there are of course a lot of theories about this. Because we don't know. But that it's a composite work, definitely. I mean, the religious Jewish and Christian traditional view is that this was all written by God and given to Moses on Mount Sinai. But of course biblical scholars don't deal with it like that, even if they are religious. There are many sources for the bible, and they were not written all at the same time. Some of the stories like the creation story go back to very old myths that also existed in other Near Eastern cultures like Babylonia and Egypt. And some of the stories are meant to be historical, let's say about the kings. Others are poetry, and poetry is never meant to be history; or there are prophecies, which have yet another function. And then you've got ancestral history like the exodus. There are all kinds of readings about that event, with some scholars saying it never happened, and others saying that only some Hebrew people were in Egypt, and not all of them had to come back. Every piece of the bible has its many explanations. And with the creation stories, these are two mutually contradictory versions of how ancient people tried to make sense of what they saw. Because they didn't know. All they knew was that they saw the sun above, and the sea and the earth – which they thought was flat.

G Going back to the Chagall painting and the creation myth, can you describe it?

You see literally the splitting of a male and a female, and then there is a clock.

G Can you be sure that Chagall was referring to that creation myth in the painting?

I'm pretty sure he was. Because she's holding an apple, and it's definitely two people who are partially together, they have only two legs, and they are sort of split above that. There are also some Hebrew words there.

What does the Hebrew say?

It's his name. It's a normal M, a Hebrew A, a Hebrew R and then the C is a normal C: Marc. Then it reads: Chagall, but here he omits the vowels, which is how it is done in Hebrew. In Hebrew you don't write vowels. He mixes Roman and Hebrew script in a playful way.

Do you think the creation myth that he represents was seen as heretical?

No, first of all, if it is in rabbinical literature, it is not heretical because it became mainstream. Hasidism, which is also not heretical, was a very special movement in the seventeenth century in Eastern Europe. Judaism had become very brainy, so there were rabbis who wanted to bring religion closer to the people. They paid a lot of attention to physical experiences, like dancing and ecstatic prayer. You wouldn't think it if you see them in Antwerp, but that is their heritage. Hasidism was revolutionary in its time, it was modern, but now it's very conservative. So Hasidism also took a lot of these more mystical traditions from rabbinical literature, and these are very important for them. Therefore, I'm sure that this creation story, this idea of man and woman coming out of the same figure, is something that Chagall knew from the Hasidic tradition.