

# FRANCIS ALÿS

## A STORY OF DECEPTION

**Edited by**  
**Mark Godfrey, Klaus Biesenbach**  
**and Kerryn Greenberg**

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*Le Temps du sommeil* 1996–present  
Pencil and oil on tracing paper

[FSC LOGO]

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## Foreword

In 1997, Francis Alÿs spent thirty-five days travelling around the world, passing through sixteen cities to avoid crossing the Tijuana/San Diego border. By taking this roundabout route, Alÿs drew attention to how impermeable the American border can be for ordinary Mexicans. Curators and artists – even those mindful of this border as a contested space and the difficulties facing illegal immigrants – are not bound by the same rules. To me, this work, *The Loop*, embodies both Alÿs’s weightlessness and his gravity. It now exists as a simple postcard, but still successfully addresses one of the most important issues facing thousands of Mexicans and the United States government today.

Jules Verne’s hero Phileas Fogg attempted to circumnavigate the globe in eighty days; to recall the title of Julio Cortázar’s book of 1967, Alÿs goes around the day in eighty worlds seeing everything before him through new lenses. He has the ability to notice the most humble things – bottle tops embedded in tarmac, chewing gum under a table, a bottle being kicked around a square, dogs sleeping on pavements, and to use all sorts of starting points – children’s games, myths, rumours, visionary images. With all this he makes works addressing subjects such as urbanism, homelessness, or the division of cities and countries. He is an artist who embraces modest means to engage with weighty ideas.

Many artists are afraid of failure. Alÿs uses the inevitability of failure to great success. He embarks on projects that require huge amounts of energy but often lead to nothing, like pushing a large block of ice through Mexico City until only a small pool of water remains. The actions are fleeting, but as the stories unravel and the rumours spread, the ramifications of his works are felt long and far afield.

When I first saw Francis Alÿs’s work in the early 1990s I was struck by the lack of hierarchy in his practice. Alÿs is an artist whose work can be found anywhere, in a corner here, on a screen there, as a painting, in a drawing or on a scrap of paper. The material does not matter. You just have to choose it. What sets Alÿs apart is that he chooses well.

It gives me great pleasure that Tate has been able to realise this exhibition with Francis Alÿs. He is comfortable creating works alone, but is also a natural collaborator with an infectious enthusiasm. How else could he have convinced 500 Peruvians to ‘move a mountain’? Alÿs’s passion and dedication to this project has been matched by the curators. Mark Godfrey, Curator, and Kerryn Greenberg, Assistant Curator, have worked closely with Alÿs on the exhibition and this accompanying catalogue from its inception to final form, bringing Alÿs’s signature works together with pieces that have never been shown before.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX THANK YOU  
TO LENDERS – TEXT TO BE CONFIRMED NEAR DEADLINE  
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The challenges of realising this exhibition were manifold, not least financially, which is why our final thanks go to those who continuously enable Tate to realise its vision. XXX

I look forward to Alÿs presenting himself again.

**Vicente Todolí**  
Director, Tate Modern

## Curators’ Acknowledgements

It would not have been possible to realise this ambitious exhibition without the help and support of many individuals. We would especially like to thank Cuauhtémoc Medina, Rafael Ortega and Julien Devaux, Alÿs’s long term collaborators, who have generously shared their expertise with us. Raul Ortega and Jorge Golem at Alÿs’s studio, have provided tremendous support.

We are delighted to have collaborated on this exhibition with The Museum of Modern Art, New York and Wiels, Brussels. We would like to thank Klaus Biesenbach and Cara Starke at MoMA and Dirk Snauwaert at Wiels for their enthusiasm and collegiality.

We are grateful to the esteemed authors of this catalogue who have each written focussed texts on aspects of Alÿs’s practice: Eduardo Abarroa, Francesco Careri, T.J. Demos, Laymert Garcia dos Santos, Carla Faesler, Lorna Scott Fox, Boris Groys, Miwon Kwon, Tom McDonough, and Eyal Weizman. Herman Lelie and Stefania Bonelli have sensitively designed this book in close collaboration with Alÿs. Rebecca Fortey, Project Editor, has ably managed all the different aspects of this project and Melissa Larner and Lorna Scott Fox have meticulously edited all text material. Emma Woodiwiss has overseen production, and James Attlee and Francesca Vinter have organised the sales and co-editions.

Many people have shared their research on Alÿs’s work with us. We would like to thank Dawn Ades, Lynne Cooke, Anna Dezeuze, Corinne Diserens, Russell Ferguson, Maggie Iversen, Catherine Lampert and Kitty Scott.

Bellatrix Hubert at David Zwirner and Peter Kilchmann were extremely generous with their help in all aspects of the exhibition. We would

particularly like to thank David Zwirner for their generous support of the catalogue. Their commitment to Alÿs’s work is evident and deeply appreciated.

Exhibitions rely on the trust and generosity of their lenders and we are greatly indebted to those who have placed their works in our care. We thank the MLA and DCMS for providing and administering British Government Indemnity for this exhibition, without which it would not be possible to mount exhibitions of such scope within the context of a public institution.

We would like to thank all our colleagues for their boundless energy and dedication without which Tate would not be able to operate. Susan Thompson, Exhibitions Registrar, has overseen the transport and insurance of the works. The Tate Time-based Media Installation team led by Shuja Rahman have worked tirelessly on this exhibition and our sincere thanks and appreciation are due to them. Katy Norris, Curatorial Intern, has provided valued support. Stephen Mellor, Phil Monk, Glen Williams and Marcia Ceppo orchestrated the complex installation process together with Tate’s experienced team of art handlers. Our thanks are also due to Vicente Todolí, Director, Sheena Wagstaff, Chief Curator, and Helen Sainsbury, Curatorial Programme Manager who have supported this exhibition from the beginning.

Finally, we would like to extend our deepest appreciation to Francis Alÿs for his extraordinary work and collaboration. It has been immensely pleasurable and fulfilling to work on this exhibition together.

**Mark Godfrey and Kerryn Greenberg**  
Curators, Tate Modern



Jerusalem 2004

## Politics/Poetics: The Work of Francis Alÿs

Mark Godfrey

‘In the realm of political theory, a kind of realism reigns supreme in which the range of possibilities open to us is remarkably narrow ... What is most necessary in politics today are precisely those powers of creation and imagination that can break through the barriers of this purported realism and discover real alternatives to the present order of things. Even artistic experimentation and creation that is not explicitly political can do important political work, sometimes revealing the limits of our imagination and at other times fuelling it.’

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, 2009<sup>1</sup>

‘Poetic licence operates like a hiatus – an “agent provocateur”, a short circuit – into the atrophy of a situation that finds itself in a state of political, social, confessional, ethnic, economic or military crisis or lethargy. Through the absurd and sometimes impertinent nature of the poetic act, art provokes a moment of suspended meaning, a sensation of senselessness that may reveal the absurdity of the situation. Via this act of transgression, the poetic act makes one step back for an instant from the circumstances. In short, it may make one look at things differently.’

Francis Alÿs, 2008<sup>2</sup>

What makes Francis Alÿs’s practice one of the most compelling in recent art is that he manages to find poetic and imaginative ways to address the urgent political and economic crises of contemporary life. His projects confront subjects such as informal labour and homelessness in Mexico

City, the promises and failures of modernising programmes in Latin America, contested territories in Israel/Palestine, and immigration routes between Africa and Europe. Rather than using dry and didactic forms of documentation or narrative, his works involve actions such as pushing an ice block through city streets or trailing a dribbled line of green paint over dusty ground, getting hundreds of students to move a sand dune, or orchestrating lines of children carrying toy boats into the waves. The poetic qualities of Alÿs’s projects reside in their fantastical absurdity, their transience or incompleteness, their imaginative imagery, and most of all in their enigmatic openness to interpretation. The most significant question he poses – to himself as well as to his viewers – is whether such poetic acts, while underlining the ‘senselessness’ of particular real situations, can also create a space for new ways of thinking that will lead in turn to ‘the possibility of change’.<sup>3</sup>

I will trace some of his major subjects and consider this question in some depth here, reflecting on the terms ‘poetics’ and ‘politics’ insofar as they relate to Alÿs, but not before contemplating the formal nature of his work. For if his strategy of creating imaginative actions to address real-world subjects invites us to assess the relationship between poetics and politics, then poetics and politics are also at stake in the materials and structural tendencies of his practice. This is an essay in two parts: the first considers Alÿs’s ways of working, the second, his explicit subjects, but though these parts appear consecutively, they overlap like layers of tracing paper, since everything that is discussed in the first part maps on to the projects described in the second.



*La Leçon de Musique 2000*  
Oil and encaustic on canvas  
21.6 x 27.9 cm

## DISTILLATION AND PROLIFERATION

Alÿs's individual works have no definitive material form and can be encountered in different places and formats. One viewer might witness a particular action as it unfolds in real time, while another could learn about it months later through an image on a postcard or as a rumour in a conversation: all these are equally valid ways of discovering the work. In the gallery or museum, meanwhile, a project might be presented through videos, objects, documents, drawings or paintings. It would be as misguided, however, to take account of all these forms in his work by studying each in turn; to emphasise his commitment to painting for instance, even though it is so very rare in critical practice today, or to prioritise the importance of video or text in his work. Instead, to understand his practice, we can begin by looking at how his projects come about, asking what kinds of objects, ideas and images emerge as they develop. We can do this by locating two major impulses that structure his practice and that are themselves bound up with politics and poetics: distillation and proliferation. These might seem contradictory, but

they are at work side-by-side in everything he does.

### Distillation

By distillation, I am thinking about the ways in which the artist condenses each project into a succinct, concise image or form or sentence. In fact, many projects actually begin with distilled images. This is often overlooked, because attention is usually drawn to the processual nature of Alÿs's work and to the unfolding of the actions in his videos and films, but despite the durational character of the work, it is possible to claim that Alÿs is an artist who thinks more through images than through imagined narratives or events. These mental images can take various material forms – a small collage of a mountain raked by a hair comb, a painting of a ring of men, their hands on each others' shoulders, or a drawing of a young girl stepping over the gulf between land masses. These visionary dream-pictures are the fantastical inventions of the artist's imagination, but they come from his immersion in an image world of fairy tales, children's books, Belgian Surrealism and early Italian Renaissance painting. Without wanting to be overly biographical, one

could say that Alÿs has been particularly open to this image-world for two reasons: first, on account of his late coming to art (he never studied at art school, which meant he could always enjoy paintings without the anxiety of having to make them) and second, on account of his re-acquaintance with children's books as a father. In any case, these images are the origin of many of his projects and it is with them that we locate the foundational poetics of his practice: his images are always enigmatic rather than illustrative, and they often contain perplexing incongruities of scale (a comb as large as a dune; a sea as small as a stream).<sup>4</sup> The images sometimes exist singly, but there is also a kind of image bank in the series of postcard-size paintings on panels collectively titled *Le Temps du sommeil* 1996–present (p.79) to which Alÿs has often returned for subsequent projects. This series now comprises over a hundred paintings, and in each one, luminous green circles appear against terracotta backgrounds forming miniature landscapes in which tiny besuited figures act out strange rituals reminiscent of children's games and gymnastic experiments. The paintings have formed a repository of images from which Alÿs has often drawn but only after substantial delays: an image that is first drawn or painted in one place and time might well lead to a project that takes place many years later in another part of the world.

Not every project starts with an image – sometimes Alÿs begins with an anecdote, such as the story of the Tehuelche in Patagonia, who captured their avian prey simply by tracking it until it was exhausted (this story led to the 16mm film *A Story of Deception* 2006, p.139).<sup>5</sup> However, these anecdotes, like the images, are extremely concise and enigmatic. Images and anecdotes lead on to projects, and these differ vastly from one another in terms of their scale: some projects are so modest as to simply involve the artist taking a walk through a city, whereas others require months of planning and financing, negotiations and permits, finding volunteers, hiring equip-

ment and teams of cameraman and so on.<sup>6</sup> It is worth keeping in mind that this inequality of organisational scale does not lead to a hierarchy of works in terms of what is important to the artist: a short walk can be as significant in Alÿs's oeuvre as an epic enterprise. But what unites all the actions is that whatever their scale, while working on them the artist tries to find a single image and the briefest of descriptive texts that can serve as crystallisations of the entire project. He uses these as the two components of the postcards that are the most concise representations of his works. In the context of the history of performance art and video, these are unusual. Though many of the most famous performances have come to be known through single images (Chris Burden stumbling forward with his shot arm, for instance), artists have always struggled with the fact that a durational event is reduced to such a representation. Not Alÿs, though, since he recognises that in boiling down a project to its postcard text and image, its poetic character can be retained, its openness to new interpretations and new uses guaranteed.

Even without the single images that are printed above them in the postcards, Alÿs's short text for each project would enable a reader to imagine it. Another aspect of distillation in Alÿs's use of language involves his aphorisms. In the process of working towards a project, or working through the material accumulated during its realisation, the artist will always jot down single words or phrases in his notebooks, and will often find an axiom to accompany the work such as 'Maximum effort Minimum result'. We should not see a work merely as an illustration of this phrase; rather, the phrase acts as one concise interpretation of the work. These axioms will often become titles or alternative titles of works and while suggesting ideas to the viewer, they also have an important function for the artist: once a work is distilled to such an axiom, another work can be formulated to suggest a counter principle. For instance, after

making *Paradox of Praxis 1* 1997 (p.82), which was also known as ‘Sometimes doing something leads to nothing’, Alÿs tried to find a work that could accompany the phrase ‘Sometimes doing nothing leads to something’.

Another form of distillation is his use of ideograms for each work. In a chart that Alÿs drew up around 2004, each work was represented by a simple line diagram such as a series of loops or a curled zig-zag. These ideograms are not abstracted illustrations of the images in the works, but condensed diagrammatic representations of their principle actions, and because they are so compact, they allow the artist to intuit relationships between his works that do not rely on the particularities of each work’s narrative or geographical circumstance. These distilled forms can be arranged and re-arranged as Alÿs diagrams his own practice. In addition to tracing threads between works, the ideograms help a process of self-criticism in which Alÿs thinks through how one work can answer a problem posed by another. They also allow him to identify holes in the greater panorama of his opus.

### Proliferation

The impulse towards proliferation (the words ‘expansion’ and ‘propagation’ are also apt) running through all of Alÿs’s work can be tracked in various ways. During the maturation process of a project, while considering whether it might take form as a video, a multi-screen projection, a film and so on, as well as finding a concise image for a postcard, Alÿs works in parallel on drawings and paintings, sometimes *en plein air* and sometimes back in his home or studio. This is a very private process that offers a space for thinking away from the logistics of production, editing, and post-production; it also involves a different kind of labour – intricate manual work rather than administration and the constant computer editing of footage. Drawing allows the artist to keep a personal link to the project, to hold it

close and let its resonances unfurl. Scores of new images might surface in drawings and paintings as the artist interprets and re-interprets the action in different ways. For instance, concurrently with his recent project on the Strait of Gibraltar, paintings have emerged that show a line of children walking to the sea, as well as other images that are far less obviously tied to the action: snakes and ladders running between two land masses, for example. Alÿs’s paintings have a very precise material character – they are carefully made with many layers of oil paint but are also humble in appearance, often stretched imperfectly over small recycled frames or slabs of wood. Tracing paper has always played a crucial role in Alÿs’s drawing practice: the material is a leftover from his training in architecture, but whereas in architectural drawing it is a reproductive apparatus facilitating the careful copying of motifs, Alÿs now uses it to copy, break up and reconfigure fragments of an image – and to re-imagine and re-invent it. And rather than serving simply as a preparatory material, tracing paper finds its way into completed drawings, often in roughly torn slivers held together by bits of masking tape.

Alÿs often displays groups of drawings and paintings along with the projections that arise from specific projects; Another indicator of the proliferation impulse within Alÿs’s installations is his working tables. Under glass, arranged across their surfaces, is a plethora of preparatory material and ephemera relating to the project: faxes and printed emails between the artist and the curator, Post-it notes with thoughts from Alÿs’s notebooks, more drawings, newspaper cuttings, photographs taken during an action, and so on. His preparedness to show the logistical and theoretical work behind his actions is very unusual in the context of contemporary practice, where most artists want viewers’ attention to be concentrated on the spectacle of a finished piece, but this tendency relates Alÿs’s work back to moments in twentieth-century art such as



Study for *Don't Cross the Bridge Before You Get to the River (Working Title)* 2008, oil on canvas, dyptich

Constructivism and 1960s process sculpture: if in these moments there was an unveiling of material processes, with Alÿs we see an unveiling of organisational ones. The proliferating preparatory material functions in less obvious ways to open up the potential readings of each piece. A viewer might encounter a phrase in a note that seizes his or her imagination, yet since there is so much material, it is quite unpredictable what some viewers will attend to and others ignore.

Distillation and proliferation both have a hand in the many objects presented in Alÿs’s installations. Often these objects are not noticeable at first: Alÿs might position something in a doorway, or on a small shelf high up on a gallery wall. Small and large things begin to play an equal part in charging the space and defying the spectator’s viewing habits, reminding them that there is never a straightforward way of looking at a piece.<sup>7</sup> As for the larger objects, rather than complex constructed sculptures, these are concise combinations of materials: an elastic band stretched around a globe, for instance. The artist’s most recent objects are the material equivalent of portmanteau

words, fusing two things to release ideas. The *Camguns* 1994 (p.137) are wooden machine guns with a reel of film replacing the magazines of bullets; the *Shoe-boats* are flip-flops and Moroccan sandals pierced with small masts and sails. When displayed, these tend to be shown in generous groups so that they never assume the status of auratic sculptures, retaining instead their identities as toys or tools or props – the kind of things that are produced serially and casually used.

The proliferation impulse courses through Alÿs’s practice. There is his interest in accumulation, evidenced both in his collection of *Fabiola* paintings and in the objects from *The Collectors* 1990–2 (p.51), small dog-like constructions of magnetised metal, trailed behind the artist on his urban walks to gather metallic detritus as a second skin. (Remarkably, in these objects Alÿs manages to use something usually thrown away [the metallic packaging] to accumulate, reversing a cycle of consumption and waste and initiating a process of production.) Then there are those projects that involve proliferating production, such as the *Sign-Painters Project* 1993–7 (p.59), for



Study for *When Faith Moves Mountains* (*Cuando la fe mueve montañas*), Lima 2002, pencil and oil on tracing paper, 28 x 21 cm

which Allys employed sign-painters to copy and modify his own paintings, after which he would make new paintings with new variations incorporating the most significant elements of each sign painter's interpretations, continuing the production until the market demand was exhausted.<sup>8</sup> Less well known are the rubber mats (*Silencio* 2003–present, p.132) he has made with a simple image of a finger being held up to lips in a 'hush' sign; each mat uses six colours and Allys is producing these with all possible combinations of the eighteen commercially available rubber samples. Proliferation is also the impulse for the production of consecutive works. An idea first explored in one work might be redeveloped in a consequent one, usually with a shift of scale, or a change of location. Though the basic mechanics of the action might stay the same, its implications will of course change profoundly, yet one work nonetheless serves as a rehearsal for the next. As we will see later, Allys has been drawn to the idea of the rehearsal because it serves to allegorise an aspect of the history of 'development' and modernisation in Latin America, but the logic of rehearsal – the logic of proliferation – was embedded in his practice well before he perceived its allegorical force.

Proliferation also applies to the artist's long-standing ambition to disseminate his work in as many ways as possible beyond the conventional distributional and display networks of the gallery-museum. Allys has for a long time offered free postcards and included DVDs in his books, and at the time of writing he is also developing an open-access website of his works; visitors will be able to download for free a selection of around twenty videos that the artist considers 'public domain' works. He has often made canny use of art-world vehicles such as magazines, for instance publishing images of his Havana-Florida project, *Bridge/Puente* 2006 (p.159) in *Artforum* days after the action and before he had had a chance to edit any footage of the event.<sup>9</sup> Yet the dynamics of

distillation and proliferation fuse most powerfully when it comes to rumour rather than report. If a work can be encapsulated in a succinct way, then it can be spread as a rumour, and the artist embraces all of rumour's capacities for distortion, exaggeration – indeed for re-interpretation and re-use. Allys described this process most powerfully in the course of making *When Faith Moves Mountains* 2002 (p.127), when he wrote that the action could 'become a story that survives the event itself. At that moment it has the potential to become a fable or an urban myth ... We shall now leave the care of our story to oral tradition. Only in its repetition and transmission is the work actualized.'<sup>10</sup>

Recognising the structuring roles of distillation and proliferation helps account for Allys's work without having to worry too much about questions like why an artist with his concerns might continue to paint, or what led him to choose 16mm film or video. We can also begin to appreciate the ways in which Allys's practice merges different tendencies in twentieth-century art that might have previously seemed irreconcilable. Magritte's Surrealist images and the late paintings of Philip Guston; George Brecht's scores and Cildo Meireles's *Insertions into Ideological Circuits*; Alighiero Boetti's outsourced production of hundreds of word-squares and Robert Smithson's shattering of the idea of a monolithic work into a new concept of a work that could exist in different forms, locations and temporalities: all these precedents are crucial for Allys.

But what are the political stakes of this dynamic of proliferation and distillation? Most obviously we can point to a democratisation of information – condensed and dispersed, the artwork can be accessed and used by a vast public. Proliferation has also had its more aggressive side: Allys has written about the attempt – in the *Sign-Painters Project* – to 'sabotage' the market by producing so many paintings that they would no longer be



treated as rare singular objects. He has openly acknowledged the failure of this ambition – the market embraced his paintings – but this circumstance has fuelled the production of his work, since projects can be funded by the sale of drawings and paintings. (Indeed, Alÿs has been remarkably candid about this, disclosing the sales figures for paintings that helped to fund the production of *When Faith Moves Mountains*.)<sup>11</sup>

Alÿs's oeuvre is full of images of people working – street-sellers pushing carts, shoe-shiners, the artist shunting his block of ice through the streets – but before we even attend to these images, the recurrent operations of distillation and proliferation raise artistic labour to the level of a central subject.<sup>12</sup> The proliferation of hand-made drawings and artisanal objects in his work persuades us to situate his practice in the context of informal labour and craft work in urban centres such as Mexico City – forms of labour that are threatened with obsolescence. Instead of appearing heroic, artwork is shown to be equally vulnerable, its future precarious.<sup>13</sup> Other dimensions of the work's politics emerge as we compare Alÿs's distillations and proliferations to those that thrive in the wider world, such as the compressed and dispersed forms of info-mercial culture: sound bites, jpegs, logos, viral marketing devices, and so on, forms characteristic of what Maurizio Lazzarato has termed an age of 'immaterial labour'.<sup>14</sup> Yet while all these forms solidify sales messages and function as the marketing tools and propaganda mechanisms of the society of the spectacle, Alÿs's compressions have a resistant capacity because of their openness: an image or phrase might distil a work, but the moment it is contemplated, its meanings multiply.

### A STORY OF DECEPTION

We can now track a series of projects in which politics and poetics intertwine – works concerned

with everyday life in the megalopolis of Mexico City, with economics and modernisation in Latin America, with art-world circuits of travel, and with international borders. Of course, it would be possible to survey Alÿs's practice and identify other equally significant strands – projects involving rhythm and sound for instance, such as *Duett* 1999 (p.98), *Railings* 2004 (p.146), or *Guards* 2004–5 (p.151); works concerned with museums such as *The Mouse* 2001 (p.116), *MATRIX 1-2-3* 2001, *The Modern Procession* 2002 (p.131), and *The Nightwatch* 2004 (p.149); what follows is a necessarily partial account of Alÿs's work.

Alÿs arrived in Mexico City from Belgium in the mid-1980s, a country described by the sociologist Roger Bartra in 1992 as 'frozen in the backwardness of its authoritarian political system, uncertainly struggling to keep afloat an impoverished and inefficient economy.'<sup>15</sup> Having trained as an architect, for some years Alÿs continued to practice architecture, gradually situating his projects within the context of art, even though he still addressed the built environment and the uses of public space. In *Placing Pillows* 1990 (p.49), for instance he placed pillows in broken windows in a way that was at once caring and absurd enough to suggest the failure of civic authorities to repair damaged buildings in the aftermath of the 1985 earthquake. His displacement from Europe to Mexico gave him a unique vantage point on the city, yet he wanted to underline the problematic aspects of his position as the outsider-witness, well aware of the critiques made of past artists and their exoticising representations, and of the objectifying nature of the 'tourist gaze'. Indeed, his action *Turista* 1994 (p.61) simply involved him standing by the railings of the cathedral with a hand-painted placard reading 'Turista' at his feet, next to ready-for-hire workers identified by their signs as electricians, plumbers and so on. By lining up in the middle of these workers, Alÿs pointed to the distance between his labour and theirs and

questioned the claims that many previous artists had made in similar situations when they represented their activities as work. He suggested that artists visiting from abroad were no more than tourists, however much they might like to think of themselves as legitimate observers – tourists effectively employed by the audience to look at and report back on a new city, just as other labourers along the railings were hired by their employers.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, he asked whether this fate – for him – was inevitable.

In the actions and walks that followed, Alÿs began to record and re-imagine the ways in which public space was used in the city. Some walks suggested his debt to Situationist theories of the *dérive* – particularly those he made as he accumulated metallic detritus with his magnetised collectors – while other projects located Situationist strategies in the everyday behaviour of the people around him. In *Sleepers* 1999 – present (p.96), he photographed street vagrants asleep, but instead of representing them only as pitiable outcasts, he attended to what Carlos Monsiváis called the 'unexpected energies' of the city, the creative ways in which they appropriated unused portions of streets and squares: so many instances of *détournement*.<sup>17</sup> Having come from a city where commerce is mainly confined to shops and market stalls, and where traders earn regulated wages and pay taxes, Alÿs was particularly drawn to informal labour and the omnipresent street vendors in the city, whom he photographed for the slide piece *Ambulantes* 1992–present (p.56). With the increasing administration of the city centre, *Ambulantes* would soon become an archive of obsolete traders somewhat akin to Atget's photographs of ragpickers. And if ragpicking had mostly disappeared from European capitals, Alÿs was also attentive to the resourceful re-use of materials in Mexico City, and the processes of sifting and re-purposing what otherwise might be considered waste (*Seven Lives of Garbage* 1995, p.69).



Untitled 2004, cut painting, oil on canvas, 24.5 x 20 cm

In the video *If You Are a Typical Spectator, What You Are Really Doing Is Waiting for the Accident to Happen* 1996 (p.76), Alÿs focused his camera on a bottle being blown about by the wind and kicked around the Zócalo plaza, but, failing to concentrate on anything else besides the bottle, he was run over while crossing a street. It was impossible to take a position as an observer without being implicated in the situations around him, and recognising this, in some of his Mexico City projects the artist began actively to address local politics. The first such action was *Housing for All* 1994 (p.62), for which Alÿs taped together the plastic posters of the different political parties contesting the 1994 elections and tied them to air vents of the subway on the Zócalo to form a temporary inflated tubular shelter. Staged on the day of the election, this was an illegal intervention (political posters have to be taken down then) and one that exposed the failure of all the candidates to address urgent housing issues. A little later, a very different work (*61 Out of 60* 1999) reflected on the govern-

ment's response to the Zapatista movement: Alÿs created sixty plaster soldier figurines, cracked them apart and glued them together again, using the chips and dust to make an extra soldier, as if to indicate that the more the Mexican government tried to repress the movement, the stronger it became. Early one morning in 1997, Alÿs circled the Zócalo flag followed by a line of sheep, one more joining the circle on each rotation. With *Patriotic Tales* 1997 (p.85) he recalled a protest orchestrated in 1968 by bureaucrats who, forced to gather in the square as a flock to show support for the government, began to bleat like sheep to protest their submission. Drawing from the imagery of this event, Alÿs's work lamented the repetitive cycles of Mexican political history between the 1960s and late 1990s, and the continuing fatalist acceptance of stagnant situations.

Several poetic devices animated these works, even those that seemed closest to documentary or direct actions. In *Sleepers*, pictures of humans are interspersed with those of dogs, also recumbent, but often looking towards the camera. While the canine gaze pulls one into the work, it makes the experience of looking at unaware human subjects all the more uncomfortable. In *Housing for All*, instead of simply making a protest placard, Alÿs appropriated existing posters and put them to imaginative use. Yet as *Patriotic Tales* indicates, the poetic strategy to which he was primarily drawn was allegory, where there is a marked separation between the content of the image (a circle of sheep, for instance) and its meanings (the circular rut of politics in Mexico). Indeed Alÿs's practice is the most important renewal of the allegorical impulse identified in the early 1980s by Craig Owens, who wrote that 'allegory is consistently attracted to the fragmentary, the imperfect, the incomplete'.<sup>18</sup>

The subject to which Alÿs has been drawn again and again in his allegories is the incomplete, fragmentary project of modernity and the failed processes of modernisation in Latin America and

in Mexico – which for Carlos Monsiváis is 'the country that at once postponed and urged on modernity'.<sup>19</sup> Incompletion is not only the theme of the individual allegories, but also characterises the trajectory of Alÿs's allegorical works: a central set of concerns around modernisation have been explored and re-articulated from one work to the next, necessarily without resolution, since the subject itself is unresolved. In *Paradox of Praxis 1* Alÿs pushed a block of ice around the centre of Mexico City until it melted into a puddle some nine hours later. Here for the first time, the artist dramatised the aphorism that 'sometimes doing something leads to nothing', expending maximum energy with minimum results. The action reflected on the everyday pursuits of all those working in the streets around him, and more generally on the vanity of the modernising efforts of successive Latin American governments.

The most frequent allegorical mode that Alÿs has used is that of the rehearsal. In *Rehearsal I* 1999–2001 (p.103), a red Volkswagen endlessly attempts to drive up a hill as a Mariachi band rehearses a song; each time the band loses track of the tune and pauses, the car slides down again. The sound/image relationship is more disjunctive in the next iteration, *Rehearsal II* 2001–6 (p.110), where a stripper performs her act while a singer rehearses a German *lied*, so that there is a constantly expected but never reached climax. For Alÿs, the rehearsal serves precisely to allegorise the processes of modernisation in Latin America, where economic changes are always promised but never ultimately achieved. However, these works are not intended as direct critiques of governmental failures to devote sufficient resources to modernisation, so much as reflections on the impasse reached due to conflicted politico-economic desires: on the one hand, the desire to modernise, and on the other, a compulsion to resist the imposition of Western economic practices. In the resulting impasse, all that is left is the process of working towards an always-deferred

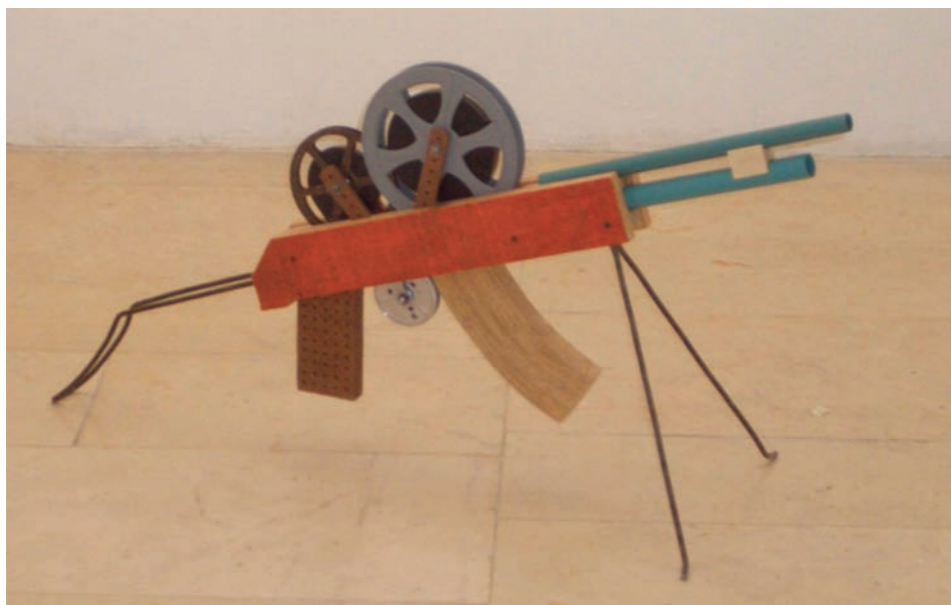
result: this is akin to the process of rehearsal. In a voice-off interview by the artist in *Politics of Rehearsal* 2004 (p.144) these themes are clarified and given historical context by the critic Cuauhtémoc Medina, who elaborates on the problematic discourse of development in Latin America. From the inaugural presidential address of Harry Truman in 1949 onwards, the United States constructed itself as 'developed' and Latin American as 'underdeveloped'. As such, modernity could never be achieved, modernisation never accomplished, and Latin America would always be seen to lag behind the north. The discourse 'provokes an experience of history as a Sisyphean punishment'.<sup>20</sup>

The most famous of Alÿs's Latin American allegories is *When Faith Moves Mountains*, the shifting of a sand dune on the outskirts of Lima. The work was conceived during a visit to Peru by the artist in 2000 a little before the collapse of the Fujimori government, 'a desperate situation ... that called for an "epic response", at once futile and heroic, absurd and urgent'.<sup>21</sup> Alÿs's words suggest the contrasting ways in which the work could be read. Since the whole enterprise resulted merely in the miniscule shifting of sands that would be blown back and forth in the next storm, the action vividly exemplified the principle of 'maximum effort, minimum result'. It was Alÿs's most powerful allegory of a circular politics of promise, bureaucratic organisation, disproportionate efforts, eventual underachievement, new promise, new effort and so on. And yet such was the poetic conciseness of this allegory that it could be read in completely different ways.<sup>22</sup> Firstly, there was the actual accomplishment of moving a mountain: however transient this feat, however minimal, it was movement nonetheless, an actualisation of what had only ever been a popular saying. This was an achievement on such a grand scale that the story might inspire hope, and other kinds of actions. What was more, during the process a

community had come together not bound by nationality, religion, ethnicity nor other forms of identity, but by a joint purpose that, however absurd, was a real one.<sup>23</sup>

Alÿs described the work as 'land art for the landless',<sup>24</sup> which suggests yet another way of reading the project: just as *Paradox of Praxis 1* could be seen as a critical reflection on Minimalism involving the re-positioning of the classic Minimalist object (the cube) from the gallery to the street, the Lima work looked back to Land art's social aloofness. However, possibly the most interesting way to approach *When Faith Moves Mountains*, and a way that opens up an alternative reading of many of Alÿs's Mexican and Latin American projects (and indeed the entire proliferation impulse in his work), is to see it in terms of non-productive expenditure. As Georges Bataille argued in *The Accursed Share* (1949), though Western economic discourse has always privileged production and efficiency, the problem for what he termed 'the general economy' has always been expenditure: taken together, all life forms produce more energy than they can use, and so ways have to be found to expend wealth and energy.<sup>25</sup> For Alÿs, Bataille's account of economy has critical force: by initiating projects that waste energy, he has found a way to contest Western bourgeois principles of efficiency and progress, and no more so than in Lima. In the discussions around *When Faith Moves Mountains*, Alÿs was always keen to emphasise that the condition *sine qua non* of the enterprise was that the volunteers were not paid: they had to willingly waste their energy on the project.<sup>26</sup> The hope and exuberance of the project were mandated on this waste more than on any actual movement of the mountain.

Alÿs has said that he sees 'each new piece as another episode of a much more extended narrative, as part of a personal investigation looking into Latin America's relationship with the concept



**Camgun 2003**  
film, reels, wood  
and plastic  
40 x 65 x 110 cm

of production, with the dogma of efficiency and grand programs or promises of development.<sup>27</sup> Since *When Faith Moves Mountains* he has continued this investigation with the action *Barrenderos* 2004 (p.141) for which he organised street sweepers to line up and push an elongated mound of rubbish through the historical centre of Mexico City until its growing weight prevented any further movement. As well as answering back to *Paradox of Praxis 1* with the reverse principle of 'sometimes doing nothing leads to something', *Barrenderos* re-purposed the forms of the Lima project (many people pushing material and proceeding in a line). In this return to the urban setting, the meanings of waste were differently inflected: energy was wasted on actual garbage. Yet as in Lima, the action and accompanying video had such an exuberant feel that the critical-celebratory dimension of non-productive expenditure was still palpable. In his other recent Latin American projects, however, Alÿs has also continued to articulate the less than jubilant experience of a society where everyday life is frustrated by unfulfilled promises. In 2006 he completed a film in Argentina made while driving towards a mirage glimmering at the end of a desert high-

way. In its 'endless escaping' the watery illusion seemed the perfect allegorical image of 'a historical goal that vanishes perpetually into thin air as soon as it looms on the horizon.'<sup>28</sup> Alÿs called the work *A Story of Deception*, a title that at first seems to describe a feeling of being cheated by failed dreams of modernisation. However the phrase can also suggest a situation where all is not what it seems, and with this in mind we might consider that the most obvious reading of this work – that it is about disappointment and disillusionment – could itself be deceptive. Another approach to the film is to see it as a work about production and desire. Alÿs has said that 'our advance towards it [the mirage] triggers its life.' 'It is in the obstinacy of our intent', he continues, 'that the mirage comes to life.' Something is produced, therefore, in this movement towards a goal, even if the goal is elusive. Certainly, watching the mesmerizing film, it appears that the ground is about to melt below us, leaving us in a precarious space of suspension, but we do feel a powerful attraction towards this situation, towards a better future, even though we know that this future will not be easily reached. Alÿs has chosen *A Story of Deception* as the title for the

present show, and we should keep in mind the double-meanings of the work, and the title, in turning to a different set of projects.

## BORDERS AND BRIDGES

Alÿs has always maintained his studio in the old centre of Mexico City and a focus on Latin America, but I want to turn now to those works that he has made further away. He began to be invited to participate in international biennials and museum exhibitions in the mid-1990s. Long-distance travel and the experience of dislocation became a part of his life, and these conditions were immediately reflected within his practice. The first works he made were attempts to negotiate new cities without being subject to the restrictions of official routes or the habits of tourist sight-seeing. In 1996 he made *Narcotourism* (p.81), spending seven days walking around Copenhagen, each day under the influence of a different drug, concentrating on his changing inner states rather than the sites around him. In São Paulo in 1995 he realised *The Leak* (p.66), for which he walked out of a gallery dribbling a line of blue paint from an open can, wandering around and then following the trail back into the gallery, finally sticking the can onto the wall where the walk had begun.

Such projects recall Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's descriptions of 'lines of flight', their metaphor for 'deterritorializing' actions and ideas that contest existing conditions of controlling, mapping and experiencing the world. The philosophers made clear that lines of flight were not escapist routes away from such conditions: 'Lines of flight never consist in running away from the world but rather in causing runoffs, as when you drill a hole in a pipe.'<sup>29</sup> What makes *The Leak* exemplary in this regard is that Alÿs not only wandered away from the gallery but returned to it, exposing the paradoxes of a prac-

tice that relied on the institution for its visibility even as it enacted 'runoffs'. For Deleuze and Guattari, the 'nomad' was the figure most associated with lines of flight ('It was along lines of flight that nomads swept away everything in their path and found new weapons, leaving Pharaoh thunderstruck.')<sup>30</sup> and their concept of 'nomadology' was crucial to many accounts of 1990s art practice, a period in which so many artists began to move around the world from one biennial and museum show to the next. Yet it makes little sense to see Alÿs's practice in terms of a free-moving nomadism. Not only has he continued to maintain a base in Mexico City (which serves as a basis for his art, and the place where the processing of all his projects happens) but as he participated more in these circuits of travel and display, he began to reflect critically on the idea of unimpeded international movement of the kind heralded by those trumpeting the dawn of globalisation.

The key project here was *The Loop* from 1997 (p.87): invited to participate in the *inSite* biennial held between Tijuana and San Diego, Alÿs recognised the problematic circumstances of this border. While Americans and art-world visitors could cross south with ease, Mexicans were unable to move so freely. The artist determined to go from one city to the other without crossing the Mexico/United States border, using his production fee for the project to travel south from the border, down through Central and South America, across the Pacific Rim and upwards through China and Russia, then back down via Canada and finally the States. With this utterly extravagant action, he underlined the inability of others to travel so freely, but with its hyperbole the tour also exposed the excesses of his artist-contemporaries and their comparatively uncritical global travel habits.<sup>31</sup> Alÿs would continue to direct his attention to the circuits and circuses of the art-world, refusing in some instances to participate: in 2001 for his work

*The Ambassador* (p.113), he sent a peacock to the opening of the Biennial, making a postcard reading 'Mr Peacock will represent Mr Alÿs at the XLIX Biennale di Venezia'.

As *The Loop* indicates, it was precisely the opportunities of art exhibitions and biennials that allowed Alÿs to begin to address his work to the politics of migration and of international borders, and in the past few years he has made some ambitious projects in contested and dispersed geographical locations. These are now places that he has chosen, sites selected through his initiative rather than places he has happened to visit following the unpredictable occasions of invitations. He has been drawn to such 'unresolved' places, noting that 'where everything works perfectly under its own rules, I don't feel any urgency to get involved'.<sup>32</sup> However, he is also clear that when his works do productively address the 'anxieties' of a given locale, it has not just been because of a sensitive response to the situation he finds there, but because of a coincidental coming together of the then current concerns of his practice and the particular character of the situation.<sup>33</sup> This means that his works neither appear as unconnected and opportunistic reactions to quickly visited, quickly left-behind places, nor as imported projects that could take place anywhere the artist happened to be. A case in point is *The Green Line (Sometimes doing something poetic can become political and sometimes doing something political can become poetic)* 2004 (p.143), for which Alÿs walked through the city of Jerusalem for two days trailing a line of green paint behind him. As much as it was a response to the prevailing situation in Israel/Palestine, this was a revision of *The Leak* and a self-critical response to *When Faith Moves Mountains*, which Alÿs had come to view as too ambiguous in its oscillation between the political and poetic.

Alÿs took as his starting point the green line drawn by Moshe Dayan on a map at the ceasefire of the

1948 conflict between Israel and Jordan. He was aware that this act of mapping was already an act of violence: not only did it separate communities, but since it was drawn with a blunt pencil, the line, when translated to actual ground, was in some cases as thick as 60 metres and thus occupied precious territory. The green line constituted Israel's eastern border until after the 1967 war, when it occupied territory up to the River Jordan. Whatever discussions had taken place in the early 1990s regarding the Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank and the formation of a Palestinian state in formerly Jordanian territory, few Israelis – even on the left – advocated a return to the green line when it came to the area of Jerusalem. Most argued that the city should not be divided. Meanwhile, the strategic government-supported settlement of thousands of Israelis east of the line made such a withdrawal a demographic impossibility.

In this context (necessarily simplified here), Alÿs's action of following and re-drawing the green line with a dribble of paint could be read in various ways. It could be seen as a visual reminder of the 1948 armistice line at a time when a new boundary – to the east of the green line – was being marked by the 'separation wall', and when even those on the mainstream left in Israel preferred to ignore the earlier boundary. Another approach would be to see it in the context of the changing physical and conceptual status of the border. In 1948, a linear idea of a border had some purchase on reality, but by 2004, as Eyal Weizman has recognised, the 'border' in this area was actually a three-dimensional complex.<sup>34</sup> Parties contested the ownership of the water table and of air space, and indeed of tunnels, overpasses, even the various floors of houses. By making his green line so feeble, Alÿs could be seen to recognise the obsolescence of a purely linear idea of a border in the present age. In the video Alÿs makes no attempt to keep the line straight, but follows the historic route in a rough



*Explosion 2009, oil on canvas, 14.4 x 20.8 cm*



*Snakes and Ladders* 2008, oil and encaustic on canvas, 28.7 x 22 cm

way, wandering off pavements or across streets at will, at times zig-zagging to avoid checkpoints along his route. As such, the action could also be understood as mimicking the randomness (and inherent violence) of all borderlines and acts of mapping. Or, to take yet another tack, we might emphasise the impermanence of Alÿs's line, which will disappear as people walk over it. With this in mind, perhaps the action gestured towards a borderless Jerusalem, where all lines might be similarly erased, and its people share its space.<sup>35</sup>

So there are various ways to read Alÿs's action – all of them placing it broadly in accordance with a leftist view. But in the subsequent installation that Alÿs created around the action, he raised more fundamental questions and opened up the scope of interpretations. Firstly, he prominently displayed the work's title alongside the video of the action. What do the terms 'poetic' and 'political' mean in the formulation *Sometimes doing something poetic can become political and sometimes doing something political can become poetic?* The term 'poetic' presumably refers to the absurdity,

simplicity, muteness and transience of the act, and its openness to interpretation. But if Alÿs were also to claim this work as a 'political' act, it might be expected to have made an impact on the actual negotiations around territory and rights in Jerusalem. This raises the question as to whether it is precisely the 'poetic' character of Alÿs's act that prevents it from having a political charge. Surely to make an identifiable and measurable impact, a work needs to represent in a clearer way the conditions of territorial contestation and the everyday abuses of rights (in the manner of some of Emily Jacir's videos, for instance), and advocate a specific goal.

However, there are other understandings of the political that help us retrieve Alÿs's work from the criticism of poetic ineffectuality. After making the walk, Alÿs played the video to eleven activists of different political affiliations and asked for their commentary and critique. In the installation, the viewer can select which commentary to listen to while watching the video (here is yet another example of the proliferation impulse). Unusually, the action is opened up to scrutiny (which other artist would incorporate critical reflections on his work into his own installation?) but what is more, viewers can feel empowered to make their own interpretations and critiques. The installation therefore becomes a kind of arena for discussion and dissension rather than for the mere passive witnessing of an absurd act, and it might even serve as an allegorical model for a potential forum where people from opposing communities can discuss the city.

But there is yet another way to understand the 'political' here. For Jacques Rancière, 'politics is not the exercise of, or struggle for power',<sup>36</sup> but instead 'consists in reconfiguring the distribution of the sensible'. He means by this that politics takes place whenever there is contestation over the matter of who has a voice or a visibility, over how something is visible, and therefore political

acts are those that achieve 'a reconfiguration of the given perceptual forms'.<sup>37</sup> Alÿs's poetic act is not concerned with reconfiguring the visibility of the plight of people living in this area of the world, but in briefly making visible the invisible green line as a dribble of paint that will soon disappear. The act disrupts existing ways of visualising or understanding the situation, and creates new ways of making it visible. Thus poetics and politics are one. For Rancière:

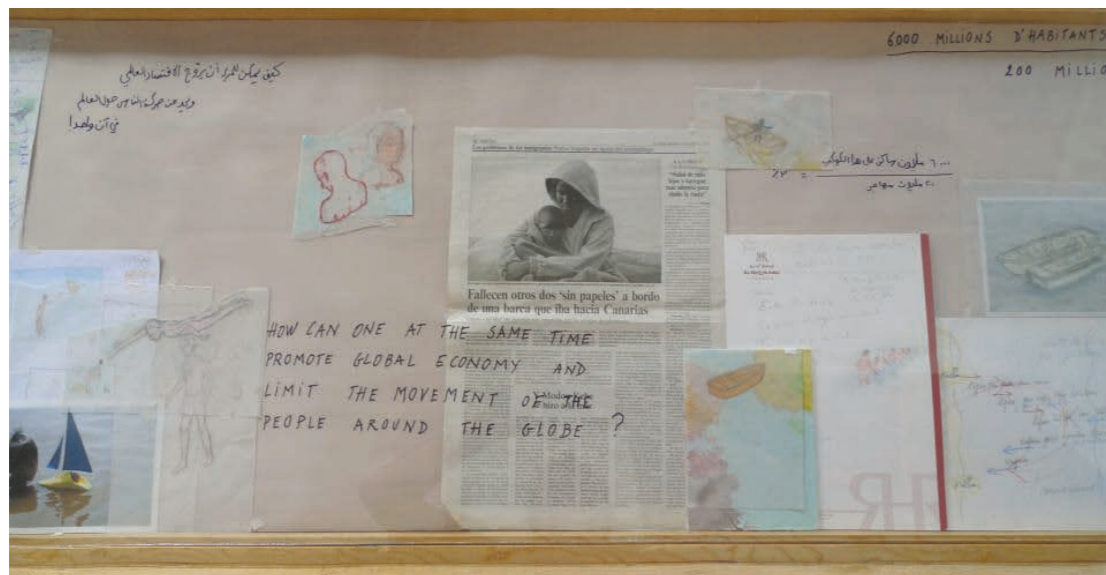
The dream of a suitable political work of art is in fact the dream of disrupting the relationship between the visible, the sayable, and the thinkable without having to use the terms of a message as a vehicle. It is a dream of an art that would transmit meanings in the form of a rupture with the very logic of meaningful situations.<sup>38</sup>

Alÿs's words are very close to this: 'Can an artistic intervention truly bring about an unforeseen way of thinking, or is it more a matter of creating a sensation of "meaninglessness" that shows the absurdity of the situation?'<sup>39</sup>

Since the Jerusalem work, Alÿs's projects have imagined ways of spanning the seas separating nations and continents in similarly complex geographical regions. The first of these took place in 2006 in Havana and the Florida Keys. As a Mexican-based artist who had made several projects in Cuba and the States, Alÿs had long been interested in the relations between the two countries. He has commented that the excessive focus on immigration functions to 'divert attention from their respective internal problems'.<sup>40</sup> But what prompted this project was a quirk of US immigration policy brought to light by a recent event. The policy states that while Cubans apprehended at sea are deported, those apprehended on US land are granted residency. When, in summer 2005 a number of Cubans were found on a bridge between the Florida Keys,

the authorities were in dispute as to whether the bridge constituted land or sea. What if the terms of the policy were further confounded so that boats themselves formed a bridge? Alÿs worked with fishermen in Havana and Florida to co-ordinate the simultaneous formation of two lines of boats, starting from each shore and extending out towards the horizon. The boats were lined up together so that when complete, a passer-by on the beach could imagine that they extended past the horizon, forming a bridge to the opposing country. Meanwhile, the fishermen would walk up and down the boats. The action would create an image of connection and dialogue in a situation where this was usually absent, until the vessels would eventually disperse. *Bridge/Puente* (p.159) took place in March 2006, but there were some logistical glitches. Alÿs became frustrated because he was forced to dissemble his intentions for the project, misrepresenting it to participants as a kind of synchronised-swimming-with-boats rather than an attempt to create the illusion of a bridge, in case revealing this intention cost the necessary participation of the Floridian fishermen and so as not to fall foul of the Cuban authorities.

In the following months, Alÿs wondered whether it might be possible to transpose the action. He chose for his next location the Strait of Gibraltar. This situation carried different connotations, since it was a location powerfully connected to the current discussion around immigration from Africa to Europe. There was also an important topographical difference. Cuba and Florida are separated by over a hundred miles of sea, whereas Morocco and Spain are just nine miles apart. Here, it *would* be possible to complete a bridge of boats, yet this would turn the project into an engineering feat. The poetic quality of the Havana/Florida project had emerged from the incompleteness of the bridge, the frustration of the desire to see it finished; were a bridge completed across the Strait, this



Ephemeria of *Don't Cross the Bridge Before You Get to the River* (working title) 2008

poetic idea would be eliminated. With this in mind, Alÿs resolved to take a different approach. Rather than working with real boats, he created small toy-like objects out of sandals and babouches mounted with miniature sails. Children were invited to walk into the waves with these shoe-boats, forming two lines that stretched out towards one another over the seas. New associations now emerged: to the Children of Israel crossing the Red Sea, to Jesus walking on water. And it was only after he made the shoe-boats that Alÿs realised that there was an almost identical construction in Hieronymus Bosch's *Last Judgement*.

The action, which Alÿs has titled *Don't Cross the Bridge Before You Get to the River*, took place in August 2008 (p.166). The children swam against the surf as soon as they entered the sea, so that their lines were fragmented as waves crashed against their bodies and the boats. Working in the same way on both sides of the Strait, Alÿs filmed these actions from several vantage points and used underwater cameras to follow the children right into the sea. For much of the time, these cameras

were submerged so that footage of the children and boats was interspersed with white-blue-brown-green swirls of salt-water, surf and sand, such that any viewer would lose sense of the geographical positions of the two respective actions.

In Marrakech, where he presented some material from the project in November 2009, related drawings were cased in a cabinet on which he wrote the question 'how can one at the same time promote global economy and limit the movement of people around the globe?' Elsewhere he has spoken of 'this contradiction of our times: how can we live in a global economy and be refused free global flow?'<sup>41</sup> The artist's determination to tackle this question confirms his bitter scepticism towards the democratic claims of globalisation. Yet it is possible to anticipate some of the criticisms of this project. His focus on the Gibraltar Strait could be said to misrepresent the geographical complexity of the 'contradiction' to which he is drawn. The Strait serves as a mythical and very visible barrier between Europe and Africa, but since Moroccan authorities tightened security procedures in the area in the early 2000s,

it is now not the route used by most African migrants, who choose far more precarious and much longer crossings, arriving in the Canary Islands or in Sicily, for instance. Invisibility is also the condition of these crossings: migrants stow away in cramped compartments of trucks boarding ships and travel by night. Invisibility, more widely speaking, is the condition of the refugee, who is denied representation both in his or her place of birth and of arrival, and reduced – in Giorgio Agamben's formulation – to a state of 'bare life'.<sup>42</sup> For many artists interested in this subject, the challenge is to find ways to reconfigure the refugee's condition of unrepresentability.<sup>43</sup> With these points in mind, what can be made of Alÿs's decision to work in the Gibraltar Strait with the visible bodies of children play-enacting a ritual of passage, instead of at the sites of real migrant crossings with the normally invisible bodies of adult refugees?

Despite orchestrating lines of children to reach out to each other over a continental divide, Alÿs was never creating an image of free passage where none exists, not the kind of sentimental spectacle we would expect from a Michael Jackson video. Importantly, the bridge of boats was never built; the children's attempts to keep in line are scuppered; they are brought back to the shore just like the waves. The waves, and their impact on the children, serve as a constant reminder of the impediments to, and impossibility of, easy transit from one country to another at the present time. What is more, Alÿs has also collected imagery of, and information about, real migrants; what is only suggested by the images of the action is absolutely manifest in these news clippings.<sup>44</sup>

Yet if the project is therefore honest about the fate of utopian dreams in the present, it is at the same time hopeful about the future. During the action the energy, play, desire and faith of the children was palpable. They did all they could to launch themselves towards the opposite coast and revel

in the effort to conquer each coming wave. Alÿs's recourse to children and to children's toys in the place of refugees and economic migrants is a poetic move that is part of an attempt to find a new way of approaching a situation. Like Walter Benjamin, who in the 1920s understood 'the revolutionary potential of children and their play, expressed in their affinities for the improvised and unexpected, for change, for turning things upside down',<sup>45</sup> Alÿs has long been interested in children's books and games. A recent short video also made in Morocco shows boys skimming stones on the sea, and the joy they take in the improbability of rocks bouncing on water. In the Gibraltar project, the tiny toy boats suggest real ones that might one day cross the waters: an improbable shift of scale, but a potential one. Alÿs uses a child's desire and vision, realising (to use the words of Arjun Appadurai) that 'the imagination is today a staging ground for action, and not only for escape'.<sup>46</sup>

This action is a gesture towards a future generation, to what Agamben calls 'the coming community', and its utopianism finds its corollary in the work of philosophers Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, who have discussed the potentiality of the 'multitude'. The 'multitude' is the largely migrant workforce that fuels what they call 'Empire', who though presently disempowered, will soon demand 'global citizenship'. 'If in a first moment the multitude demands that each state recognize juridically the migrations that are necessary to capital, in a second moment it must demand control over the movements themselves.'<sup>47</sup> 'Increasingly less', Hardt and Negri imagine,

will passports or legal documents be able to regulate our movements across borders. A new geography is established by the multitude as the productive flows of bodies define new rivers and ports. The cities of the earth will become at once great deposits of cooperating

humanity and locomotives for circulation, temporary residencies and networks of the mass distribution of living humanity.<sup>48</sup>

Alÿs's lines of children are perhaps one of the first visualisations of the multitude and the future of which the philosophers dream.

Another dimension of Alÿs's recent works that have addressed the ongoing crises of economic and political situations emerges as we return to the structures of distillation and proliferation discussed earlier. It emerges, for instance, in the way in which Alÿs sent the Gibraltar project into the world. Even before the action, he mailed out hand-painted postcards showing a line of boats spanning the Strait, spreading a rumour of the event before its unfolding. The image was so characteristically concise that it could circulate beyond the borders of the art world, and rather than adding a religious dimension to the work, the associations that later developed to familiar mythic images of the Exodus from Egypt, and the walk on Galilee, maximised its potential to spread. Many of Alÿs's contemporaries address the representation of migration with greater realism, yet their artworks themselves remain rooted to the gallery, tethered by its conventions.<sup>49</sup> By contrast, rather than being fixed as a collection of objects and images, a gallery installation or an idea, Alÿs's project can be all of these. The work itself crosses borders, drawing its lines of flight. Its identity, in other words, is akin precisely to that of the future 'multitude', belonging nowhere, moving wherever it chooses.

#### **A COMING CATASTROPHE OR A WORLD WITHOUT BORDERS?**

*Tornado* 2000–10 (p.169), Alÿs's most recent work, uses footage that he has recorded since 2000. In the video, we see Alÿs running towards and into tornados spiralling around dusty fields

in the Mexican countryside. Most of the footage was taken by the artist himself. He runs forward, his hand-held camera registering the jolty progress towards the tornado; panting, he enters the centre of the storm, and his breath is taken away. Dust engulfs the camera, the already blurred recording of the tornado disappears, and a monochromatic image, grey or sometimes yellow-orange, succeeds. The sequence recurs time and time again during the fifty-minute work as Alÿs runs into more and more and more tornados.

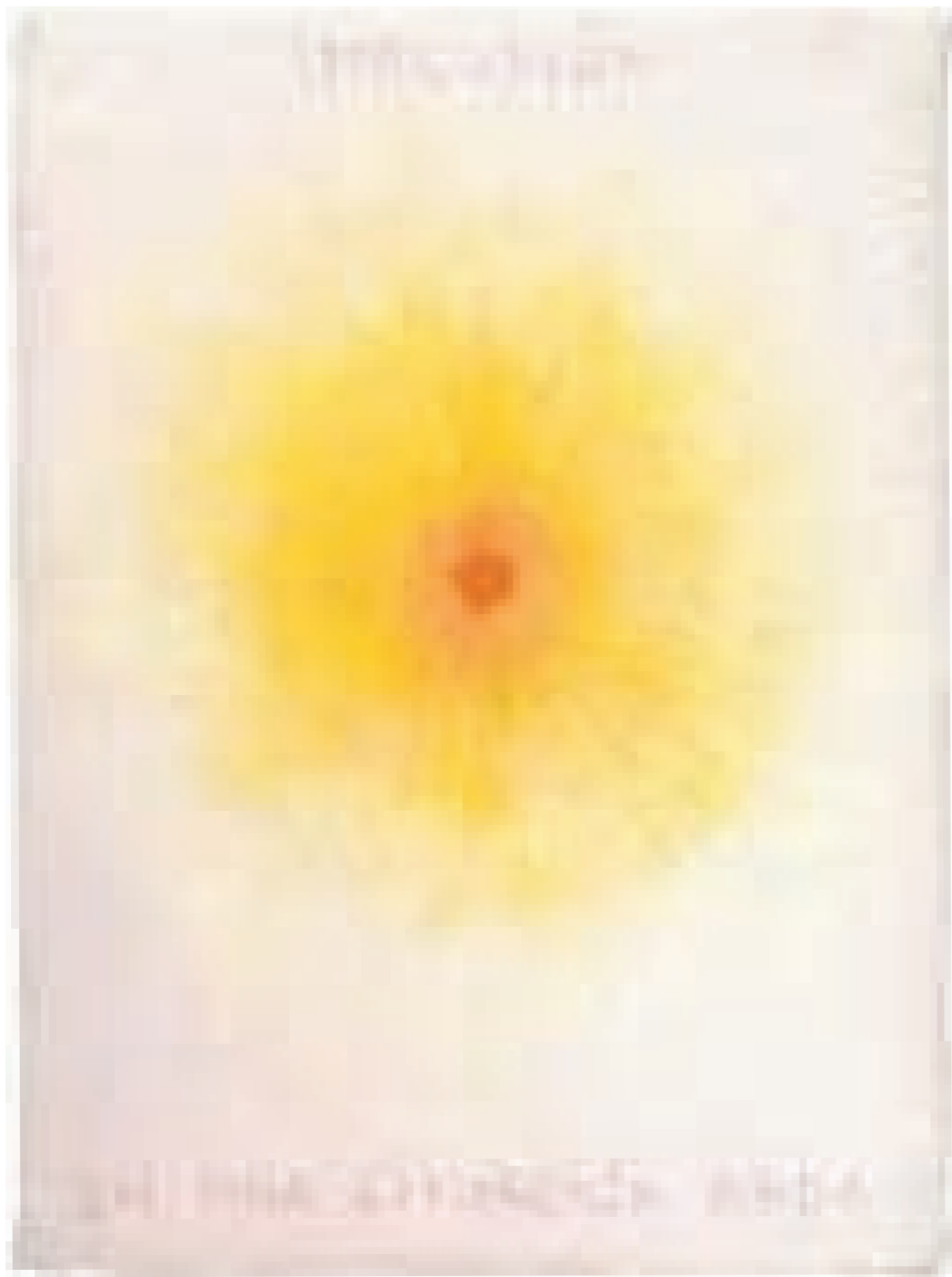
In the context of Alÿs's ongoing concern with Latin American politics, we could read this work as an image of a coming catastrophe – or even as a representation of a response to a disaster that has definitively arrived since the time of *Tornado's* own inception. After all, over the period that Alÿs has worked on his tornado footage, Mexico has not only been the epicentre of the recent swine flu pandemic; it has experienced some of the worst bloodshed on the planet with – in 2008 alone – 'more than 5000 people [losing] their lives in violent incidents connected with drug trafficking.'<sup>50</sup> For Cuauhtémoc Medina, who organised Teresa Margolles's contribution to the 2009 Venice Biennale, the aptly named exhibition *What Else Could We Talk About?* for which Margolles brought blood-stained cloths from murder sites in Mexico to a Palazzo in Venice, the present situation is one of 'chaotic disorder'. Towards the end of his catalogue essay, Medina describes history itself as 'a serial compulsion to disaster' and this phrase speaks to the footage of *Tornado* since we see Alÿs compulsively re-entering the whirlwinds. The worst thing about experiencing history in this way, Medina continues, is the knowledge that 'all too soon, there *will* be something else to talk about: the next massacre, the future failed revolution, a fresh cycle of economic collapse, the renewed disappointment of democracy, environmental cataclysms galore, another looming pandemic.'

History is described here as a spiral of destructive disasters and the account is also reminiscent of the 'catastrophe' that Walter Benjamin imagined Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* witnessing, a catastrophe which 'keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of [the angel's] feet.' Benjamin pictured a storm blowing and propelling the angel away from paradise, a storm so violent that the angel could not stop to mend the wreckage. It is noteworthy that where Benjamin's storm blew in a straight line, in representing current catastrophes, Alÿs no longer thinks in such terms. He has also relinquished the circle – a form that was useful for him in representing the rut of static Mexican politics – for the spiral, with its suggestions of escalation and intensification.

Benjamin wrote that 'the storm is what we call progress' – a bitterly ironic comment, written in 1940 during the zenith of Nazism as he looked back at a century of failed revolutions. Alÿs would feel similarly dubious about the notion of 'progress', albeit in a different historical and geographical context. Indeed the tornado appears in his work at a moment when the promises of modernisation seem meaningless: the tornado in its forcefulness and its shape allegorises the violence *and* escalation of violence of recent history. Alÿs's physical relation to it is also resonant: the artist neither stands outside of the violence in a place where he might attempt to assess it, nor does he implicitly suggest a way of combating it, but nor is he simply blown by it, as is Benjamin's helpless angel. Instead, quite actively, he runs towards and immerses himself in it. In this way *Tornado* might be compared with Margolles's practice of working with blood and dust gleaned from murder sites, even though Alÿs proceeds in such a different register. As Medina explains, Margolles's approach implies a refusal to sanction the governmental response of an intensified 'war on drugs', recognising that such wars are only models for the

'perpetual' continuation of violence; instead, by dealing physically with the materiality of death, with the residue of violence, she has chosen to 'delve more deeply into shock, to dirty our hands with pain and grief, aspiring without knowing how to form a politics of discomfort.' Entering each tornado, Alÿs also 'dirties his hands'; in fact he blinds himself, embracing a situation where he does not know what is going on around him. There is no insight here, but at least in this blindness there is the recognition that any other reaction to the spiralling violence would either add to it, or be a naïve and ill-conceived judgment. Returning to the terms that have been central to this essay, we might now assess the work like this: the tornados indicate the total collapse of a political system, and by running into them, Alÿs stages the corresponding collapse of poetics as an artistic response.

'The emergence of pure destructiveness is the sign of the engine of transition from one period to the next' Medina writes. Perhaps *Tornado* is the work where Alÿs turns from allegorising the failures of modernisation, to a new stage in his oeuvre where he abandons poetics and recognises that all there is left to do is to register the violence of a situation after all patience is lost. This is possibly how Alÿs himself understands the work but I would like to propose another interpretation of *Tornado* – and a more hopeful one – that locates its politics and poetics in a different way, indeed that sees in the work a continued faith in poetics rather than an articulation of despair. This interpretation frames it in the context of Alÿs's interests in borders rather than his concerns with Latin America and modernisation, an interpretation that begins by re-assessing the materiality of the work. The materials of *Tornado* are, after all, dust, air and human flesh. Many of Alÿs's projects involve the elements of earth, air and water, and human interaction with them, but though these elements move, they remain in their distinct places. In the



*Implosion 2008*, oil on canvas, 14.4 x 20.8 cm

tornado, by contrast, earth swirls in the air until the boundary between each is lost, and entering the maelstrom the body loses its co-ordinates. Alÿs is choked, blinded, knocked to the floor, and when the video is projected the viewer feels this violence through the forceful image and the aggressive sound.

This sudden erasure of the limits of land and air to me suggests a wider idea of an undoing of borders. The tornado disintegrates the very bases of nationalism, an ideology that relies on the existence of distinct boundaries around territory. Meanwhile, the body loses its identity as a subject and is reduced to a precarious yet exciting state of 'bare life'. *Tornado* could serve as the allegorical representation of a world without borders, and of the status of life in this situation. In this respect, it is also close to *Don't Cross the Bridge Before You Get to the River*, for in that work too, Alÿs creates a vision of a borderless world. In the underwater images, water and sand swirl around, and a situation is created in which the viewer loses their co-ordinates and is no longer able to tell apart the African and European coasts since both look alike, equal in their disintegration. In the same way, the children become indistinguishable, no longer Moroccans or Spaniards, but humans surrounded by water and sand.

Clearly, these are neither romantic nor placid visions. There is great risk when entering the tornado, just as there is danger in the waves; the space in the centre of the whirlwind cannot be conventionally represented, since the means of recording is obliterated, just as, under the sea, the lens's normal focus and precision gives way to a watery blur. Yet these are exhilarating places to be in: Alÿs enters the tornado again and again, like the children fighting each coming wave. For in the eye of the storm, and above and below the fall and rise of the sea – a place beyond borders and forms of national belonging – there is potentiality: a kind of calm and of beauty, a

blinded and blurred vision of a new form of politics too, what Medina has called 'a moment of bliss in the midst of chaos.' Here there is not just the possibility, but the realisation of change.



1 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, 'The Becoming-Prince of the Multitude', *Artforum*, October 2009, p.178.

2 Francis Alÿs, transcript of a talk given in Beirut in December 2008, sent by email to the author, September 2009.

3 Francis Alÿs, Statement, in *Sometimes Doing Something Poetic Can Become Political and Sometimes Doing Something Political Can Become Poetic*, exh. cat., David Zwirner, New York 2007, unpag.

4 These incongruities often find their way into the projects, as in Gibraltar, where children carry toy boats, or in *When Faith Moves Mountains*, where small shovels are used to move a sand dune.

5 Francis Alÿs, 'Fragments of a Conversation in Buenos Aires', *Francis Alÿs: A Story of Deception*, Frankfurt 2006, p.97.

6 It often helps in the recruitment of volunteers that the project can be presented extremely succinctly. For instance, Alÿs has said that to persuade people to participate in *When Faith Moves Mountains*, the 'simplicity of the metaphor' was crucial (Francis Alÿs and Cuauhtémoc Medina, *When Faith Moves Mountains*, Madrid 2005 p.90).

7 In his recent presentation of the Gibraltar project in Marrakech, Alÿs found two decorative fountains in the courtyards of the palace where he was showing, either side of his rooms, and placed some of his shoe-boats in their pools.

8 For an early account of this project, see Cuauhtémoc Medina, 'Francis Alÿs: 'Tu subrealismo' (Your subrealism)', *Third Text* 38, Spring 1997.

9 The photographs were published in my article 'Walking the Line: The Art of Francis Alÿs', *Artforum*, May 2006, pp.260–7.

10 Francis Alÿs, 'A Thousand Words: Francis Alÿs talks about *When Faith Moves Mountains*', *Artforum*, Summer 2002, p.147. As Lynne Cooke has noted, as a result of this process, meaning is relocated. It no longer resides in the physical work and nor can it be controlled by the artist; instead it emerges in the circumstances of its reception. Lynne Cooke, 'Hearsay', in *Francis Alÿs: The Modern Procession*, exh. cat., Public Art Fund, New York 2004, pp.113–31.

11 See 'Money Makes the World Go Round', in Alÿs/Medina 2005, p.54. Alÿs does not conceal the fact that the recent strong market for his paintings helps support the micro-economy of his studio, where his assistants and collaborators include artisans, film editors, action-producers, and a studio manager. Alÿs has also explained another aspect of his practice in relation to these sales. His projects (no matter their scale) are rarely paid for by commissions or sponsorship, but are self-funded through the sale of paintings and drawings. As a result of this financial independence, he is able to work on projects at his own pace, and to cancel, freeze, or change projects as he wishes.

12 On the subject of work in Alÿs's art, see Christopher Knight, 'Artist rolls out his Sisyphus side', *The Los Angeles Times*, 6 October 1997, E1, E12–13.

13 We might compare this aspect of Alÿs's work with the way in which artwork was characterised in the 1960s when Frank Stella, Robert Morris, Richard Serra and Carl Andre drew heroic connections between their work and that of house painters, steel workers and lumbermen. On Morris's work, see Julia Bryan-Wilson, 'Hard Hats and Art Strikes: Robert Morris in 1970', in *Art Bulletin*, June 2007, vol.89, no.2, pp.333–59.

14 Maurizio Lazzarato, 'Immaterial Labor', in Michael Hardt and Paulo Virno (eds.), *Radical Thought in Italy*, Minneapolis 1996, pp.133–147.

15 Roger Bartra, 'Great Changes, Modest Proposals' in Roger Bartra, *Blood, Ink, and Culture: Miseries and Splendors of the Post-Mexican Condition*, Durham NC 2002, p.216.

16 On this work, see Helen Molesworth, 'Francis Alÿs', in *Work Ethic*, exh. cat., The Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore 2004, pp.149–50.

17 Carlos Monsiváis, *The Historic Centre of Mexico City*, Turner, Madrid, 2006, p.51.

18 Craig Owens, 'The Allegorical Impulse: Towards a Theory of Postmodernism', *October* 12, Spring 1980, reprinted in Owens, *Beyond Recognition*, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1992, p.55.

19 Monsiváis, 2006, p.12.

20 There are of course other ways of understanding this situation. For instance in his essay 'The Malinche's Revenge: Toward a Postnational Identity', Roger Bartra writes that 'ironfisted nationalistic unification smothered multicoloured Mexican society and legitimized underdevelopment and authoritarianism.' Bartra 2002, p.63.

21 Alÿs 2002, p.147.

22 Grant Kester has recently criticised Alÿs's project because it failed to engage the inhabitants of the favelas around the dunes and because of Alÿs's unwillingness to present the accounts of the participants in a sustained way in his installations of the piece. He also finds Alÿs's allegories overly direct, and too bluntly concerned with the failures of Latin American modernisation. Kessler's main critique, however, is that Alÿs's work is symptomatic of a process he sees as starting in 1968: seeing actual political change as impossible, artists retreat into the safe spheres of the poetic. However, Kessler fails to recognise that the work's poetic quality gave it the ability to be read in many ways – for instance, as an epic achievement, and therefore as a spark for actual political change. Grant Kester, 'Lessons in Futility: Francis Alÿs and the Legacy of May 68', *Third Text*, vol.23, no.4, July 2009, pp.407–20.

23 Giorgio Agamben has envisioned such a community, asking: 'What could be the politics of whatever singularity, that is, of a being whose community is mediated not by any condition of belonging (being red, being Italian, being Communist) not by the simple absence of conditions (a negative community, such as that recently proposed in France by Maurice Blanchot), but by belonging itself?' Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, Minneapolis 1993, p.84.

24 Alÿs 2002, p.147.

25 Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, vol.1, New York 1991. See also Miwon Kwon, 'The Art of Expenditure', *Cai Guo-Qiang: I Want to Believe*, exh. cat., Guggenheim Museum, New York 2008.

26 'The *sine qua non* condition of the action was voluntary collaboration, i.e. an exercise of generosity. One of the piece's intentions was to explore alternative methods of action to those of the

capitalist system and its mass media. To pay people for their participation would have contradicted the concept of the piece by involving economic coercion instead of individual wills.' *When Faith Moves Mountains*, Madrid 2005, p.90.

27 Alÿs 2006, p.98.

28 Ibid., Alÿs quoting Cuauhtémoc Medina.

29 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, London 1998, p.204.

30 Ibid.

31 Lynne Cooke discusses this work in Cooke 2004.

32 'Blind Date: A Conversation between Francis Alÿs and Cuauhtémoc Medina', 98 Weeks/Beirut Every Other Day, Beirut 2009.

33 Alÿs comments: 'The cases where I feel I have been successful in offering an answer to the local situations encountered, where the proposals did "hit a nerve" in the local community, and sometimes abroad, these cases did not occur because one proposal was necessarily better than another. It is more because my own concerns at the time happen to coincide with the concerns of a certain place at a certain moment of its history.' Ibid.

34 See Chapters 5 and 6 of Eyal Weizman, *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation*, London and New York 2007. Gerald Raunig has also discussed the changing conceptual status of the border in his book *Art and Revolution*, Los Angeles 2007, p.150.

35 Agamben has imagined a situation where Jerusalem becomes 'simultaneously and without any territorial partition – the capital of two different states. The paradoxical condition of reciprocal extraterritoriality (or better, aterritoriality) that would thus be implied could be generalised as a model of new international relations. Instead of two national states separated by uncertain and threatening boundaries, it might be possible to imagine two political communities insisting on the same region and in a condition of exile from each other.' Agamben, 'Beyond Human Rights', in *Means Without End*, Minneapolis 2000, p.24.

36 Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, Cambridge 2009, p.24.

37 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, London and New York 2004, p.63.

38 Ibid. Rancière continues 'Suitable political art would ensure, at one and the same time, the production of a double effect: the readability of a political signification and a sensible or perceptual shock caused, conversely, by ... that which resists signification.'

39 Alÿs 2007, unpag.

40 Alÿs 2008 (transcript of a talk given in Beirut).

41 Alÿs 2008 (transcript of a talk given in Beirut).

42 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford 1998.

43 An example is Ursula Biemann's project *Sahara Chronicle* 2006–7. See T.J. Demos, 'Sahara Chronicle: Video's Migrant Geography', in Ursula Biemann and Jan-Erik Lundström (eds.), *Mission Reports: Artistic Practice in the Field: The Video Works of Ursula Biemann*, exh. cat., Bildmuseet Umeå and Arnolfini Bristol, 2008), pp.178–90. Demos has also written about the ways in which Steve McQueen and Yto Barrada find ways to represent people (workers, refugees, migrants) who are invisible in the global imaginary. See 'Life Full of Holes', *Grey Room*, no.24, Summer 2006, pp.72–87.

44 When Alÿs premiered the work at the AiM festival in Marrakech in November 2009, he created a series of cabinets in which he juxtaposed photographs from the action with newspaper clippings. In one corner of a cabinet, two similarly sized photographs were positioned side-by-side – the one showing grinning Moroccan boys fresh out of the waves, the other, exhausted West Africans presumably washed ashore after a failed attempt to cross undetected to Europe.

45 Christine Mehring, 'Alma Buscher, "Ship" Building Toy, 1923', in Leah Dickerman and Barry Bergdoll (eds.), *Bauhaus 1919–1933: Workshops for Modernity*, exh. cat., The Museum of Modern Art, New York 2009, p.158. Mehring's text concentrates on a toy boat designed

at the Bauhaus by Buscher, but draws attention to Benjamin's various texts on children's toys – his reviews of toy exhibitions in Berlin, and of Karl Gröber's book *Children's Toys from Olden Times*.

46 Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions in Globalization*, Minneapolis 1996, p.7.

47 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Cambridge, Mass. 2001, p.400.

48 Ibid., p.397.

49 Here I am thinking of Biemann's project, but also of works like Allan Sekula's *Fish Story* 1951.

50 The quotes in this and the four subsequent paragraphs are from Cuauhtémoc Medina, 'Materialist Spectrality' in Cuauhtémoc Medina (ed.), *Teresa Margolles: What Else Could We Talk About?*, exh. cat., published for the Mexican Pavilion at the 53<sup>rd</sup> Venice Biennale, 2009, pp.15–29.

51 Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' in *Illuminations*, London 1992. Alÿs would have seen the drawing to which Benjamin's ninth thesis responded – Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* – while working on *The Green Line* at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem in 2005.

52 Looking back to Greek political terms, Agamben differentiates between 'zoe', or biological life, and 'bios', or political life, to think about the status of the concentration camp prisoner and the refugee. Denied any form of political representation, the life of the refugee is one of 'zoe' or 'bare life', yet the refugee, freed from nationalist forms of belonging, might actually represent a position of potentiality. Giorgio Agamben, 'Beyond Human Rights', *Means Without End*, Minneapolis 2000, pp.20–1. Following Agamben, T.J. Demos has considered artworks where a state of bare life is a form of potentiality. Alÿs's *Tornado* might also carry this suggestion.

53 Cuauhtémoc Medina, 'Fable Power' in Cuauhtémoc Medina, Russell Ferguson and Jean Fisher, *Francis Alÿs*, London 2007, p.58.

## Francis Alÿs: A to Z

Compiled by Klaus Biesenbach and Cara Starke

### A

#### Architecture

When I decided to step out of the field of architecture, my first impulse was not to add to the city, but more to absorb what already was there, to work with the residues, or with the negative spaces, the holes, the spaces in-between.<sup>1</sup>

The invention of a language goes together with the invention of a city. Each of my interventions is another fragment of the story that I am inventing, of the city that I am mapping. In my city everything is temporary.<sup>2</sup>

### B

#### Bridge

When does a line of boats become a bridge? How many boats does it take to create the illusion of a bridge? Enough as to suggest the desire of each community for a bridge to happen, enough so that the two lines of boats will meet on the horizon – which of course is the most relative notion as it depends entirely on the height of the viewpoint, of the camera's eye.<sup>3</sup>

On 29 March 2006, two lines of boats entered the waters in between Florida and Cuba and met on the horizon to create the illusion of a bridge. Can one transpose a similar axiom in the waters running in between Morocco and Spain?<sup>4</sup> (See p.166)

Bridge to cross, to leave, to return.<sup>5</sup>

### C

#### Context / Coincidence

My own reaction to the place [where I arrive to make a project] is itself subjective: it is a bit of a dance in between my own concerns or obsessions that I carry with me over there and their meeting with that place, that clash that will eventually lead to a concrete reaction, a piece, or nothing. And it is never just about the place. Let me make a personal remark: the cases where I feel that I have been successful in offering an answer to the local situations encountered, where the proposals did 'hit a nerve', in the local community, and sometimes abroad, these happy cases did not occur because one proposal was necessarily better than another. It is more because my own concerns at the time happen to coincide with the concerns of a certain place at a certain moment of its history.<sup>6</sup>

... you arrive with a series of little sparks. You try them out in your mind when you're here and they quickly either light up or die away. To begin with you have a kind of penpal relationship to the place, you imagine all kinds of potential scenarios, but really it's only on location that you understand what might be relevant.<sup>7</sup>

This coincidence between your usual narrative and the new situation sparks a series of mental connections that finally gel in the concrete proposal of a physical project. This fortuitous encounter between a person, a place and a moment usually triggers an intellectual acceleration that at the same time makes you revise your own discourse.<sup>8</sup>



It is more like a fortunate encounter. It's a matter of luck and of feeling the air if you want, the expectation in the air. But there is a certain chance factor in my artistic reactions: they are very contingent. They are like a blind date.<sup>9</sup>

## **D** Dogs

One day a friend told me something very interesting in connection with the *Sleepers* series: what gives this series its human quality is the fact that there are dogs in it.<sup>10</sup>

## **E** Event

Once the axiom has been posed and the location set, the development and outcome of the piece happen within an open field of possibilities, in the sense that any outcome of the event becomes a valid answer to the premises of the piece.<sup>11</sup>

Once the action is launched, there is no strict or unilateral plan to follow anymore, only the actual course of action itself will provide a response to the preliminary axiom and the context and moment framing it.<sup>12</sup>

## **F** Fable

Whereas the highly rational societies of the Renaissance felt the need to create utopias, we of our times must create fables.<sup>13</sup>

*When Faith Moves Mountains* attempts to translate social tensions into narratives that in turn intervene in the imaginal landscape of a place. The action is meant to infiltrate the local history

and mythology of Peruvian society (including its art histories), to insert another rumor into its narratives. If the script meets the expectations and addresses the anxieties of the society at this time and place, it may become a *story* that survives the event itself. At that moment, it has the potential to become a fable or an urban myth.<sup>14</sup>

We shall now leave the care of our story to oral tradition, as Plato says in the *Republic*. Only in its repetition and transmission is the work actualized. In this respect, art can never free itself from myth. Indeed, in modern no less than premodern societies, art operates precisely within the space of myth.

In this sense, myth is not about the veneration of ideals – of pagan gods or political ideology – but rather an active interpretive practice performed by the audience, who must give the work its meaning and its social value.<sup>15</sup>

## **G** Globalism

...half of what a contemporary artist does in the global art system has to do with these kinds of interventions in places that are totally alien to them, and that might even be at a critical stage in their history. And you're asked to make a comment, or import some type of practice into it.<sup>16</sup>

What we know today as the Strait of Gibraltar imposed itself naturally when it came down to defining a site where to address issues of human flow. It was the obvious place where to represent this contradiction of our times: how can we live in a global economy and be refused free global flow?<sup>17</sup>

## **H** Humour

Humour has a critical dimension. To laugh can be a way of abstracting yourself from a situation, a way of negating its reality.<sup>18</sup>

Humour can be a double-edged weapon ... *The Last Clown 2000* was trying to illustrate that situation, with the artist and the curator in their ultimate roles: the great entertainers, the acrobats, the ones expected to fall.<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps because of its ridiculous or absurd quality, an artistic action becomes excusable, and sometimes it can make its way through unlikely situations because it simply cannot be taken seriously. Humour – or a humorous dimension – often allows you to bypass situations that would not otherwise have been allowed to happen if I had, for instance, a militant attitude.<sup>20</sup>

## **I** Images

I construct images because I feel – as you can see – great limitations or doubts when it comes to translating them into words; that's why I work in the field of visual arts; I set off sparks, images, events, even allegories, but I try – to the greatest possible extent – to leave the narrative, or interpretation, if you like, open.<sup>21</sup>

## **J** Jerusalem

There were specific reasons why I chose Jerusalem as the site for that project. It wasn't a commission, it was a project that I sought out, and I think I chose Jerusalem because it was – in terms of an intervention within a conflict situation – the one that was the most archetypal.<sup>22</sup> (See p.153)

## **K** Knowing

As long as I'm walking, I'm not knowing.<sup>23</sup>

## **L** Local

I think I am quite local but I'm not. Or I'm not but I am. It's a trap. It's funny, you have to leave the place you came from to be asked if you belong to it.<sup>24</sup>

Summer 2006, temporary move of the family to Europe, back to the old continent yet feeling considerably out of my shoes after more than twenty years away. In between two waters, local and immigrant, all around too familiar and foreign at once.<sup>25</sup>

## **M** Mexico City

Mexico City forces you to constantly respond to its reality, it requires you to resituate your presence all the time, to reposition yourself in the face of this unacceptable urban entity. That is exactly what I see happening in my neighborhood every day, with all these people who keep inventing themselves—the people who one day feel the need to construct a personality, an identity, to find their place in the urban chaos.<sup>26</sup>

The flâneur is a very nineteenth-century European figure. It goes with a kind of romanticism that does not have much space in a city like Mexico. The city is too crude and too raw, and everything seems to happen in an immediate present. There is no space for nostalgia.<sup>27</sup>

The city always offers the perfect setting for accidents to happen.<sup>28</sup>

There is a personal need to constantly position yourself in relation to a changing urban entity, and to record these changes, as well as an urge to make people aware of what is being lost, and what may be gained eventually.<sup>29</sup>

### Modernity

I think you could say that all the ingredients are present for Mexico to enter modernity, but there is this inner resistance. Somehow it's a society that wants to stay in an indeterminate sphere of action as a way of defining itself against the imposition of modernity. It's this capacity of flirting with modernity without giving in that fascinates me.<sup>30</sup>

What immediately seduced me in the mirage's endless escaping was that it materialized the very Latin American scenario in which development programs function in precisely the manner of a mirage, a historical goal that vanishes perpetually into thin air as soon as it looms into the horizon.<sup>31</sup> [see p.139]

I see each new piece as another episode of a much more extended narrative, as part of a personal investigation looking into Latin America's relationship with the concept of production, with the dogma of efficiency and grand programs or promises of development.<sup>32</sup>

### Nothing

Sometimes, to make something is really to make nothing; and paradoxically, sometimes to make nothing is to make something.<sup>33</sup>

### Optimism

I think today it's difficult to pass on an attitude that doesn't conform with the climate of skepticism or systematic criticism, an attitude that's more optimistic or even naïvely utopian. Words like 'change,' 'faith,' or 'bridge,' when they are not coming out of the mouth of politicians or even evangelical preachers, seem somehow out of place.<sup>34</sup>

### Painting

What justifies my recourse to painting is that it's the shortest way – or the only way – to translate certain scenarios or situations that cannot be said, that cannot be filmed or performed. It's about entering a situation that could not exist elsewhere, only on the paper or canvas. They are images, and I want for them to live as such – like in a children's book.<sup>35</sup>

Also painting allows me to retreat from the sometimes hectic rhythm of the performances and film productions ... Painting functions as a sort of therapeutic space in the middle of the rat race. When I am translating an ongoing film plot into an image, I'll try to create an image that reflects the intention behind the plot rather than illustrating the facts of the film. It functions more like a correspondence.<sup>36</sup>

... figurative painting is still accessible to a wider public, and can be used as a means to limit (and sometimes hopefully bridge) the actual gap existing between a general public and a more elitist contemporary art scene, without denying or diminishing the eventual contemporaneity of the content. I hope.<sup>37</sup>

### Poetic/Political

Sometimes doing something poetic can become political and sometimes doing something political can become poetic.<sup>38</sup>

Poetic licence functions like a hiatus in the atrophy of a social, political, military or economic crisis. Through the gratuity or the absurdity of the poetic act, art provokes a moment of suspension of meaning, a brief sensation of senselessness that reveals the absurdity of the situation and, through this act of transgression, makes you step back or step out and revise your prior assumptions about this reality. And when the poetic operation manages to provoke that sudden loss of self that itself allows a distancing from the immediate situation, then poetics might have the potential to open up a political thought.<sup>39</sup>

What I try to do really is to spread stories, to generate situations that can provoke through their experience a sudden unexpected distancing from the immediate situation and can shake up your assumptions about the way things are, that can destabilize and open up, for just an instant – in a flash – a different vision of the situation, as if from the inside.<sup>40</sup>

I think the artist can intervene by provoking a situation in which you suddenly step out of everyday life and start looking at things again from a different perspective – even if it is just for an instant. That may be the artist's privilege, and that's where his field of intervention differs from that of a NGO or a local journalist.<sup>41</sup>

Society allows (and maybe expects) the artist, unlike the journalist, the scientist, the scholar or the activist, to issue a statement without any demonstration: this is what we call poetic license.<sup>42</sup>

### Questions

Can an artistic intervention truly bring about an unforeseen way of thinking, or it is more a matter of creating a sensation of meaninglessness that shows the absurdity of the situation? Can an artistic intervention translate social tensions into narratives that in turn intervene in the imaginary landscape of a place? Can an absurd act provoke a transgression that makes you abandon the standard assumptions on the sources of conflict? Can those kinds of artistic acts bring about the possibility of change? In any case, how can art remain politically significant without assuming a doctrinal standpoint or aspiring to become social activism?<sup>43</sup>

### Re-enactment

... in São Paulo I performed a walk with a leaking can of paint (*The Leak*) that was described as a poetic gesture ... More recently ... I re-enacted that same performance by tracing a line through the city of Jerusalem (*The Green Line*). Whereas the original walk belonged more to what you called the drifting category, the second walk strictly followed the section of the Green Line that runs through the municipality of Jerusalem. By re-enacting the same action but now performing it in a completely different context, I was questioning the pertinence of an artistic intervention in a context of political, religious and military crisis.<sup>44</sup>

[Talking about the work *Re-enactments*] I wanted to address the practice of the performance which is characterized by something that is quite unique: its underlying condition of immediacy. I wanted to question the *rapport* we have today with the practice of the performance, which is usually transmitted by way of another

medium, mediated exactly, and thus ‘delayed’ by the document.<sup>45</sup>

### Rehearsal

It was another dimension that interested me, the way in which through repetition the narration could be indefinitely delayed, recalling the Latin American scenario in which modernity is always delayed. The recourse to the mechanics of rehearsal was more a method to physically render this constant postponement, the avoidance of the conclusion.<sup>46</sup>

The intention behind these short films [see pp.103, 110, 144] was to render the time structure I have encountered in Mexico, and to some extent in Latin America. It also recalls the all-too familiar scenario of a society that wants to stay in an indeterminate sphere of action in order to function, and that needs to delay any formal frame of operation to define itself against the imposition of western Modernity. ‘It is a metaphor of Mexico’s ambiguous affair with Modernity, forever arousing, and yet, always delaying the moment it will happen.’<sup>47</sup>

### Rhythm

Sound and rhythm also have key tools in that process, as a means to destabilize the perception of time, a way of diluting time.<sup>48</sup>

### Rumour

I always try to keep the plot of a project as simple as possible so that it can be told as a story, an anecdote, something that can be transmitted orally without the need to have access to images. If the scenario is clear, if it is coherent and relevant, its basic storyline will hold along the process of oral propagation and the story can travel on its own, like a rumour.<sup>49</sup>

I was interested in the parallel circuits of diffusion – and circulation. A good rumour

evolves and takes on a life of its own.<sup>50</sup>

I think you could even say that the project [see p.127] ... addresses four different publics: the people who experienced the moment, others will see the documentation, but there are also those who will listen to the stories and could spread rumors about the events. And, finally, there are the people who will read this book. I think these four ‘statements’ may function in parallel and also complement each other independently.<sup>51</sup>

Because of the immense amount of material produced on a daily basis by a huge city like Mexico City, it is very difficult to justify the act of adding another piece of matter to that already saturated environment. My reaction was to insert a story into the city rather than an object. It was my way of affecting a place at a very precise moment of its history, even just for an instant. If the story is right, if it hits a nerve, it can propagate like a rumour. Stories can pass through a place without the need to settle. They have a life of their own. If the script meets the expectations and addresses the anxieties of that society at the right time and place, it may become a story that survives the event itself. At that moment, it has the potential to become a fable or an urban myth.<sup>52</sup>

If the rumour hits a certain place at a certain moment of its history, if it manages to materialise a fear or corresponds to an expectation, then it can grow. It circulates if it hits a nerve.<sup>53</sup>

### Studio

[The studio is] the great receptacle of all complaints and illusions, the purgatory space for all projects. My studio has become something in between a sentimental refuge, a logistical base and a storage space. It is a place I need to go

back to on a regular basis, but only to recharge batteries and leave again.<sup>54</sup>

I think most of the creative process happens in the spaces in between – in between home and the studio, the studio and the lab, in between conversations with collaborators, and also, as I am always working on several projects in parallel, in between different states of mind over the course of a day. And bouncing back and forth between these different scenarios is the only way for me to have a critical distance with any of them and for me to progress.<sup>55</sup>

### Tourist

When in 1994 I went and stood outside the cathedral next to the Zócalo with a sign at my feet saying ‘turista’, I was denouncing but also testing my own status, that of a foreigner, a *gringo*. ‘How far can I belong to this place? How much can I judge it? Am I a participant or just an observer?’ By offering my services as a tourist in the middle of a line of carpenters and plumbers, I was oscillating between leisure and work, between contemplation and interference.<sup>56</sup>

### Unresolved

[Speaking about Beirut, and why he is drawn to such places] You could call this an “unresolved society”; the feeling that such a state is richer than Stockholm where the administration has virtually defined how people live and how they act, and where there is no urgency to intervene or interfere. Where everything works perfectly under its own rules, I don’t feel any need to get involved.<sup>57</sup>

### Valemadrisimo

... the capacity to accommodate oneself to ‘mala fortuna,’ to bad luck, and even more, to actually turn one’s misfortune into an advantage.<sup>58</sup>

### Walking

There is no theory of walking, just a consciousness. But there can be a certain wisdom involved in the act of walking. It’s more an attitude, and it is one that fits me all right. It’s a state where you can be both alert to all that happens in your peripheral vision and hearing, and yet totally lost in your thought process.<sup>59</sup>

Walking, in particular drifting, or strolling, is already – within the speed culture of our time – a kind of resistance. Paradoxically it’s also the last private space, safe from the phone or email. But it also happens to be a very immediate method for unfolding stories.<sup>60</sup>

Walking is not a medium, it’s an attitude. To walk is a very immediate and handy way of interacting and eventually interfering within a given context.<sup>61</sup>

Walking brings a rich state of consciousness. In our digital age, it’s also one of the last private spaces.<sup>62</sup>

### XXX

The mechanics [of *Rehearsal II*, see p.110] are pretty basic. It involves three performers: a pianist, a soprano and a stripper. The stripper undresses and dresses again, following the rehearsal session of the soprano and pianist. When they are playing and singing the stripper

does her act, meaning she undresses. But as they are practicing, learning a piece they hardly know, they often lose track, stop, and discuss how to perform that part properly. As they talk, the stripper dresses again. Then they try again – play and sing – and the stripper undresses again, and so on. So it's this constant game of doing and undoing, dressing and undressing, extending the striptease, which, in a classic situation, would last no longer than two or three minutes. The mechanics are sort of three steps forward four steps back, five steps forward, et cetera, and although the progression is not linear, there is some kind of progress at the end of the act. It's just a different pace ... The frustration comes from the constant postponement, the delaying of momentum. But this is not leading to stagnation, but rather to a different mode of pace or progress. The performance tries to render a different understanding of time, one that is lived in Latin American society, and through that time scheme to comment on a certain relation to modernity.<sup>63</sup>

## Y

### Youth

The arrogance of youth  
(vs the doubt of age)<sup>64</sup>

## Z

### Zócalo

It is kind of like a negative space of the city, a miracle of resistance against the saturation of the urban texture of the metropolis. There have been so many attempts at filling this hole, this enormous current of air within the dense colonial grid, which so easily transforms itself into an inevitable and essential platform of public expression.<sup>65</sup>

The term *Cour de miracles* [by which Alÿs calls the Zócalo] may be open to discussion but this is my way of sublimating a situation that might otherwise turn desperate and sordid. Of course it also reflects the basic policy adopted by these same people in my neighborhood, who have come to fictionalize, at any cost, an everyday life that would otherwise be unbearable.<sup>66</sup>

**1** From 'Rumours: A conversation between Francis Alÿs and James Lingwood', in Francis Alÿs, *Seven Walks*, exh. cat., Artangel, London 2005, p.44.

**2** From texts by Francis Alÿs in *Walks/Paseos*, exh. cat., Museum of Modern Art, Mexico 1997, p.15.

**3** Francis Alÿs, 'Beirut Lecture', unpublished transcript sent by email to Mark Godfrey, September 2009.

**4** Ibid.

**5** Ibid.

**6** 'Blind Date: A Conversation between Francis Alÿs and Cuauhtémoc Medina', 98 Weeks / Beirut Every Other Day, Beirut 2009, unpag.

**7** Lingwood 2005, p.12.

**8** 'Shoulder to Shoulder, A Conversation between Gerardo Mosquera, Francis Alÿs, Rafael Ortega and Cuauhtémoc Medina (Cuba, 5 September 2003)', in Francis Alÿs and Cuauhtémoc Medina, *When Faith Moves Mountains*, Madrid 2005, p.90.

**9** Medina 2009, unpag.

**10** 'La Cour des Miracles: Francis Alÿs in Conversation with Corinne Diserens, Mexico City, 25 May 2004', in Francis Alÿs, *Walking Distance from the Studio*, exh. cat., Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg 2004, reprinted in Francis Alÿs, *Walking Distance from the Studio*, Antiguo Colegio de San Ildefonso 2006, p.73.

**11** Russell Ferguson, 'Interview', in Francis Alÿs, London 2007, p.25.

**12** Diserens 2004, pp.81–3.

**13** Francis Alÿs, text published in *The Prophet and the Fly*, ed. Catherine Lampert, Madrid 2002, p.29.

**14** Saul Anton 'A Thousand Words: Francis Alÿs talks about *When Faith Moves Mountains*', *Artforum*, Summer 2002, p.147.

**15** Ibid.

**16** Mosquera, Ortega and Medina 2005, p.86.

**17** Beirut lecture 2009.

**18** Ferguson 2007, p.29.

**19** Ibid.

**20** 'Walking the Line: Francis Alÿs interviewed by Anna Dezeuze', *Art Monthly*, February 2009, no.323, p.4.

**21** Francis Alÿs, 'Fragments of a Conversation in Buenos Aires' in Francis Alÿs: *A Story of Deception*, Frankfurt 2006, p.100.

**22** Dezeuze 2009, p.3.

**23** Ferguson 2007, p.133.

**24** Ibid., p.14.

**25** Beirut lecture 2009.

**26** Diserens 2005, p.99.

**27** Ferguson 2007, p.32.

**28** Ibid., p.31.

**29** Dezeuze 2009, p.3.

**30** Ferguson 2007, p.21.

**31** Ibid., p.52.

**32** Alÿs 2006, p.98.

**33** Anton 2002, p.147.

**34** Ferguson 2007, p.48.

**35** Ibid., p.26.

**36** Ibid.

**37** Gianni Romano, 'Francis Alÿs: Streets and Gallery Walks', *Flash Art*, no.211, March – April 2000, p.73.

**38** Francis Alÿs in Francis Alÿs: *Sometimes Doing Something Poetic Can Become Political and Sometimes Doing Something Political Can Become Poetic*, exh. cat., David Zwirner, New York, 2007, unpag.

**39** Ferguson 2007, p.40.

**40** Ibid.

**41** Dezeuze 2009, p.3.

**42** Alÿs 2007, unpag.

**43** Ibid.

**44** Ferguson 2007, p.39.

**45** Diserens 2004, p.95.

**46** Ferguson 2007, p.45.

**47** Francis Alÿs, 'Politics of Rehearsal' in Francis Alÿs: *Blue Orange 2004*, exh. cat., Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin, 2004, p.10.

**48** Ferguson 2007, p.45.

**49** Beirut lecture 2009.

**50** Lingwood 2005, p.24.

**51** Mosquera, Ortega, Medina 2005, p.74.

**52** Ferguson 2007, pp.25–6.

**53** Lingwood 2005, p.24.

**54** Ferguson 2007, p.29.

**55** Ibid., p.31.

**56** Ibid., p.11.

**57** Medina 2009, unpag.

**58** Diserens 2006, p.85.

**59** Ferguson 2007, p.31.

**60** Ibid.

**61** Medina 2009, unpag.

**62** Lingwood 2005, p.48.

**63** Francis Alÿs and Rosalee Goldberg, 'Interview about Rehearsal II' in Rosalee Goldberg (ed.), *Performa*, New York 2007, p.207.

**64** From an email to Mark Godfrey, December 2009.

**65** Diserens 2004, p.77.

**66** Ibid., p.83.

## **Titles**

English titles are listed first with Spanish translations in brackets afterwards, but only in those cases where Alÿs has frequently used the Spanish title. In some cases, Alÿs has given a work an English, French, German, Spanish, or a bilingual title which he has not translated as its specific allusions are important.

## **Place**

The place listed is the city or country where a work was first realised.

## **Date**

In most cases the year or period is given for each work. In some cases the date corresponds to the moment the action took place, even if the documentation was produced later.

## **Medium**

Individual works by Francis Alÿs take different material forms and can be shown in different ways. Many works consist of actions and their video documentation. They are often accompanied by related paintings, textual, photographic or graphic material. In the medium credits in the following section, the most prevalent material form of each work is listed. Many works have also been disseminated as postcards. The word 'documentation' has been used where photographic, textual, or video material closely relates to an action, but it should be understood that the material is often highly mediated rather than being unedited straight documentation.

## **Texts**

The texts in italics at the top of each entry are written by Francis Alÿs and have often been reproduced elsewhere in the ephemera related to each work. The accounts of each below are written by Cuauhtémoc Medina.

# Entries

**Francis Alÿs and Cuauhtémoc Medina**





**1****Péchés de jeunesse**

Mexico City 1989–90

Photographic documentation of actions

The everyday is rich in social and physical overlaps, playful interactions between people, objects and social forces, which occur almost unnoticed, more akin to the sequences of a story than to the consistency of an object. In his early actions and interventions, Alÿs responded to the way Mexico City offered a phenomenology alien to modern systems of economic and cultural control. Through the constructions that he produced both indoors and outdoors during this phase, Alÿs worked on developing a sculpture language open to the social practices he observed in the streets. Most such concepts involved tenuous assemblages characterised by a precarious articulation. Some were no more than minute actions recorded in photographs, like the trick of inviting a boy to balance a spoon on the tip of his nose just by rubbing the spoon on a sweater to produce static. Alÿs understood such acts as challenges to the authority of the notion of social and industrial design, and to the then current understanding of sculpture as a permanent material construction above the ground. They all reacted against the idea of architecture and urbanism as the production of the city viewed as a predetermined field of trajectories and transactions.





## 2

### Placing Pillows

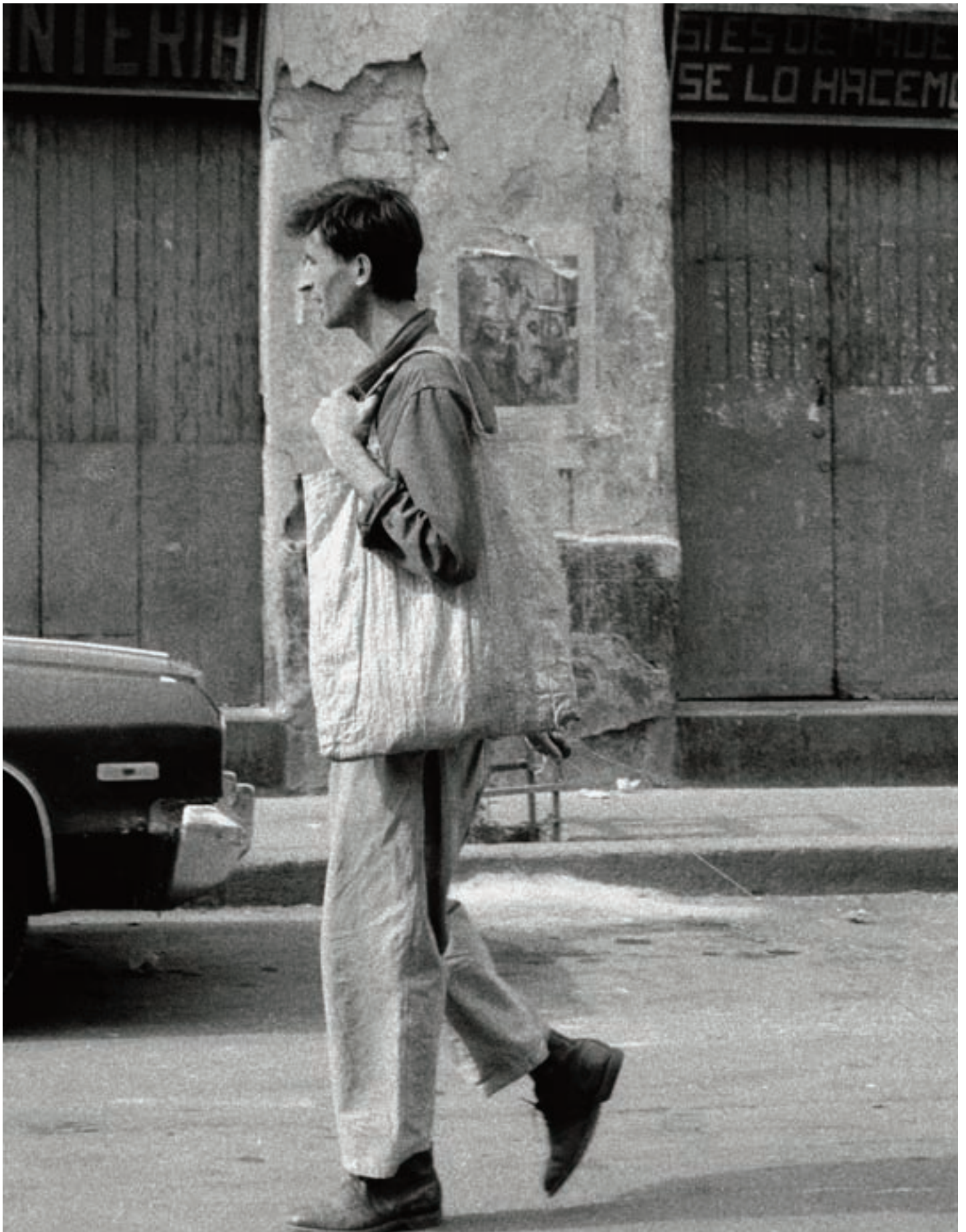
Mexico City 1990

Photographic documentation of an action

*While walking around the centre of Mexico City, I place pillows in the frames of broken windows.*

One of the first interventions that derived from Francis Alÿs's daily walks around the Historical Centre of Mexico City consisted in 'repairing' broken windows by placing pillows in their frame. The whole of that sector of Mexico City showed the open wounds left by the 1985 earthquake, which killed several thousand people and put into question the legitimacy of the Mexican political regime. While social organisations and new political movements were attempting to capture the quasi-anarchic spirit of civic solidarity that followed the catastrophe, Alÿs brought to the ruins subtle gestures of symbolic healing applied to the shaken buildings of his new neighbourhood.

'Sculptural situations' of this kind collapsed public and domestic space, and infused oneiric passages into daily life. Such interventions forged the vocabulary that the artist was to develop through the years; an artistic methodology where walking became a means to physically inscribe narrative notations into the city fabric. *Placing Pillows* was his first attempt to turn walks into sculptural operations.





### 3

#### The Collector (Colector)

Mexico City 1990–2

Magnet sculptures with rubber wheels and video documentation of an action. In collaboration with Felipe Sanabria

**Visible Science: (Magnet)** *A body that attracts metal by virtue of a surrounding force field produced by the motion of electrons from the positive to the negative poles (south and north).*

**Context:** *Political in the Greek sense of polis, the city as a site of sensations and conflicts whence the materials to create fictions, art and urban myths are extracted.*

**Process:** *For an indeterminate period of time, the magnetised collector takes a daily walk through the streets and gradually builds up a coat made of metallic residue lying in its path. This process goes on until the collector is completely smothered by its trophies.*

*The Collector* is rightly considered a turning point in the making of Alÿs's work. Its inspiration comes from his postgraduate research, which investigated how, in the late Middle Ages, the eviction of animals from inside the City walls coincided with the birth of modernity. This prompted the emergence of a modern, restricted rationality developing as a science to control nascent urban life and to project an 'ideal' model of city planning. Years later in Mexico City, Alÿs conceived *The Collector* as a means to hail street dogs and other wild urban fauna as heroes and metaphors of a widespread resistance to

modernisation. It was also the defining moment of a whole methodology that deployed urban myths and rumours to affect the urban imaginary.

In 1990, Alÿs produced a magnetic 'dog' that would attract nails, bottle caps, wire and other scraps of metal waste until they became like a second skin. Beyond alluding to the people who lived from recycling the garbage on the street, *The Collector* evoked the refusal of a whole urban population to accept the notion of public space as a mere site of circulation and trade. As Alÿs stated at the time, such an action-fable reclaimed the notion of the *polis* as a space of conflicts, narratives and desires which involved the life of the community.

*The Collector* placed the notion of the walk-as-fable at the core of the artist's work over the next decades, while formalising his need to realise projects through a complex process of collaboration. Working with the help of a technician in a standard machine workshop, Alÿs arrived at a form of practice that involved a cross-class and inter-cultural dialogue. Although he retained authorship of the final product, this method meant the creation of a social network that is one trademark of his career. Over and above the often-noted analogies between Alÿs's walks and the tradition of the Baudelairian *flâneur* and the Situationist *dérive*, the artist has consistently undertaken his actions as narratives intended to affect the social imaginary; works harnessing an allegorical and poetic power to be disseminated by means of images and objects.

## 4

### **As Long as I'm Walking**

Mexico City 1992

**Alÿs understood walking, strolling and drifting as a form of social resistance, but also as a poetic discipline that inspired ideas for works and conditioned his urban perception. It was always an exercise analogous to thinking, with a temporality akin to that of narrative. For years, he kept in a corner of his studio a list of things he wasn't doing while walking, compiled on a piece of polystyrene, almost as if it were a dogma that would govern his practice. Not by chance, those aphorisms were written in terms of negations: the potentially endless number of temptations, forms of production and feelings which the walk forbade. This first attempt to theorise on his personal methodologies reflected on walking as a state of freedom from art, production and emotion. It encapsulated the way drifting through the city became his philosophy of living even more than an artistic medium.**

AS LONG AS I'M WALKING, I'M NOT CHOOSING  
 " " " " " , I'M NOT SMOKING  
 " " " " " , I'M NOT LOSING  
 " " " " " , I'M NOT MAKING  
 " " " " " , I'M NOT KNOWING  
 " " " " " , I'M NOT FALLING  
 " " " " " , I'M NOT PAINTING  
 " " " " " , I'M NOT HIDING  
 " " " " " , I'M NOT COUNTING  
 " " " " " , I'M NOT ADDING  
 " " " " " , I'M NOT CRYING  
 " " " " " , I'M NOT ASKING  
 " " " " " , I'M NOT BELIEVING  
 " " " " " , I'M NOT FHEKING  
 " " " " " , I'M NOT DRINKING  
 " " " " " , I'M NOT CLOSING  
 " " " " " , I'M NOT STEALING  
 " " " " " , I'M NOT MOCKING  
 " " " " " , I'M NOT FACING  
 " " " " " , I'M NOT CROSSING  
 " " " " " , I'M NOT CHANGING  
 " " " " " , I'M NOT CHEATING  
 " " " " " , I'M NOT TALKINGG  
 " " " " " , I'M NOT REACHING  
 " " " " " ,  
 " " " " " ,  
 " " " " " ,  
 " " " " " , I WILL NOT REPEAT  
 " " " " " , I WILL NOT REMEMBER

1992







## 5

### Bridge (Snails)

Brussels 1992  
Installation

*For the duration of the exhibition, 1,300 snails are contained on the walls and ceilings of the gallery by a perimeter of green soap (8 cm wide and 112 m long).*

*On the walls are displayed preliminary drawings of the project.*

*The mechanics of the piece could be summed up in two axioms:*

- Soap stops snails*
- Snails eat paper.*

*A race of sorts starts between the consumption by the snails of a finite number of drawings, the gradual evaporation of the soap barrier and the snails' approaching winter hibernation.*

*The line of soap turns into the hygienic filter separating and protecting the artwork from the public and vice-versa, while a play of territories takes place in between the floor occupied by the visitors and the walls and ceiling invaded by the snails. In the middle of the gallery stands one column free of soap barrier.*

In 1992, Alÿs returned to Europe for a period of six months. While barely surviving on odd jobs (having abandoned his practice as an architect), he made an almost unnoticed exhibition side by side with British-Mexican artist Melanie Smith in the L'Escaut gallery in Brussels. His main intervention consisted in an installation that thematised the social and

spatial divisions between animals and humans, using as its medium one of the great delicacies of Belgian cuisine: the snail or escargot.

Alÿs painted a line of bright green soap along the walls of the gallery, similar to the black lines that keep the public at a distance from vulnerable paintings in museums, leaving a single passage or bridge in a column at the centre of the exhibition space. The artist then released hundreds of snails in the area of the ceiling and on some of the walls of the gallery, where he had also placed the paper studies of the project in order to feed the animals. The smell of the soap – the proud symbol of hygiene in industrial civilisations – was an unbreachable barrier for the snails, effectively forcing them to keep their distance, just as elephants avoid the ditches that separate them from visitors to the zoo.

The segregation and communication between both spaces suggested the fantasy of their unification. But even that utopian possibility was disturbing. Not far away was the memory of the disruption of civilised order by an invasion of animals or insects, as in the great plagues of Egypt. Given that symbolic framework, the snails turned into participants in an allegorical machine that stood for the borders and classifications at the heart of the structure of civilisation. It is reported that all through the duration of the exhibition, only one snail made its way to the floor via the passage in the central column.

## 6

**Ambulantes**

Mexico City 1992 – present  
Slide projection

Over the years, Alÿs has been compiling a photographic archive of street situations and characters that attest to a lifestyle in defiance of the pressures of modernity. These images record a social taxonomy, not so much of 'traditional peoples' and exotic clothes as of informal economies and alternative uses of public space that embody the refusal of urban populations to conform to the technological, social and cultural yardsticks of the modern West.

*Ambulantes* registers a rich variety of carts, objects and containers that are pushed, carried or pulled along the street by deliverymen or vendors. Serving as examples of a much greater phenomenon – the alternative usage of the street as a space of informal trade – these people appear to be carrying out a walking action, or more precisely, they appear to be taking their merchandise for a walk. Shot systematically at eye level, Alÿs's slide shows allude to other social photographic archives such as August Sander's documentation of daily life in Germany in the interwar period, or to the nineteenth-century series of engravings of typical characters by artists such as Pancho Fierro in Lima, or Claudio Linati in Mexico. At the same time they offer another figuration of the act of walking in the public sphere, a parallel to many of the artist's actions that likewise involve the effort of pushing, carrying or displacing objects, artworks and physical matter, but with a poetic rather than utilitarian purpose.



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## 7 Sign-Painters Project (Rotulistas)

Mexico City 1993-7  
Paintings

*I started playing with still images in the spring of 1993. My work was getting trapped within its own hermetic logic, and it seemed urgent to practice a breakdown of my methods and obsessions in sculpture through a string of figurative scenes that would illustrate the interventions I was doing on the streets of Mexico City. I began combining a man in a suit with a piece of furniture or some object, subjecting the body of the protagonist to a range of physically feasible relations of weight, balance, tension etc. The style of these paintings was directly borrowed from painted advertisements encountered in my neighbourhood.*

*By the summer of 1993 I had completed a first body of paintings (...). I commissioned various sign painters to produce enlarged copies of my original images. Once several versions had been completed, I produced a new 'model' that incorporated the most significant elements of each sign-painter's interpretation. This compiled image was in turn used as the basis for a new generation of copies made by sign-painters and so on, according to market demand (...).*

Alÿs's sign-painters series were at the outset an attempt to defy the esoteric values of contemporary art, using popular commercial painting as a quasi-pedagogical means of communication. Nonetheless, such

populist intent was accompanied by the creation of a complex structure of artistic production. For three and a half years, Alÿs worked with three sign painters established in downtown Mexico City to create a circuit of copies and translations of fantasy installations and actions. Alÿs illustrated his 'sculpture ideas' on small canvases that were to be copied, enlarged and interpreted by his collaborators, in search of variations and poetic transformations. Later on, the artist's new motifs would take their cue from the intuitions of his associates, blurring the genealogical lines of invention.

Although Alÿs was well aware of the way other artists in the past had either developed their styles from their experience as commercial painters, like René Magritte, or had used copyists to conceptually defy the concept of modernist painting, like John Baldessari or László Moholy-Nagy, his project was more focused on the economic and dialogical aspects of collaboration than on the tension between fine and commercial art. He saw the *rotulistas* working in the manner of an ancient *scuola*, sharing a common iconography and a set of social codes, as well as a 'play of translations' that transmitted 'an idea from one person to another'. However, his hopes of sabotaging the art market with a saturation of handmade copies proved naïve in the long run. A decade later, these paintings had become significant commodities on the secondary market, priced far beyond the pockets of the artist and his circle of collaborators.





## 8

**Turista**

Mexico City 1994

Photographic documentation of an action

*On 10 March 1994 I went to the Zócalo and stood in a line of carpenters, plumbers and house painters, offering my services as a tourist.*

On a daily basis, all kinds of workers offer their services outside the railings of the Metropolitan Cathedral in Mexico City, as if it were an informal employment agency. To photograph himself alongside these workers, wearing sunglasses and next to a sign that read 'Turista', was more than an ironic gesture. His attempt to offer his expertise as 'professional observer' of other people's lives reflects both on his condition as a foreigner and on his role as an artist. This intervention is the first of many actions in which the artist explores the ambivalent status of art in relation to the economic divide between leisure and work, work and labour, foregrounding his own oscillation between observation and intervention. *Turista* is perhaps the first work in which he explicitly addresses the figuration of practices which question the obliged association of time and money, a principle that underpins the idea of productivity in capitalism. Here he identifies with the apparent inefficiency of local economic circuits based on the skilful pursuit of survival.



## 9

**Housing for All (Vivienda para Todos)**

Mexico City 21 August 1994

Photographic documentation of an action

There are few scenes in American movies as famous as the one in which Marilyn Monroe's skirt is lifted up by the wind emanating from a subway grating. On 21 August 1994, the day of presidential elections in Mexico, Alÿs used a similar technique to carry out a sculptural critique of political manipulation. Recycling banners printed with party slogans, Alÿs created a temporary shelter that was held up by the wind from the Zócalo underground station. The title of the installation, *Housing for All*, was a withering irony on Mexican demagoguery: this was one among many irresponsible slogans mouthed by the candidates in their campaign. In the guise of the illusion of an artistic installation, the work materialised an empty phrase. Conflating Alÿs's disillusion with both architecture and professional politics as part of the same dreamworld of power, *Housing for All* offered an extraordinary combination of immanent critique, black humour and concrete utopianism, that highlighted the way political demonstrators, homeless people or squatters all were able to build temporary shelters using just three pieces of cardboard and two ends of string.









## 10

### Magnetic Shoes (Zapatos Magnéticos)

La Havana 1994

Video and photographic documentation of an action

*During the Fifth Havana Biennial, I put on my magnetic shoes and took daily walks through the streets, collecting scraps of metal lying in my path. With each trip I incorporated the newly discovered neighbourhood.*

Despite not being officially invited,

Alÿs made his presence felt at the Fifth Havana Biennale with a street action that combined the concept of the *Collector* with an anecdote he had encountered in the Mexican popular press, about a tribe of men who had been empowered by the gift of magnetic fields. The artist made a pair of magnetic shoes that collected any metallic residue lying on his path; an activity that, in the context of the economic shortages of the early 1990s 'special period' in Cuba, also commented on the allure of consumer gadgets in this decaying socialist economy. While stepping out in his magical shoes,

Alÿs wore a sandwich board bearing the documentation of the action, displaying its sources and adding Polaroid images of the event day by day. If *Magnetic Shoes* is one of the clearest examples of Alÿs's intention to make his mark on the city by means of a made-up myth, it also conveyed a commentary on the extension of the consumer mentality even to the surviving territories of the revolutions of the twentieth century.

## 11

### The Leak

São Paulo 1995

Photographic documentation of an action

*Having left the gallery, I wander through the neighbourhood carrying a leaking can of paint. The dripping action ends when, thanks to the paint marks, I find my way back to the gallery and hang the empty can on the wall of the exhibition space.*

This walk is a homage to 'action painting': an extension of Jackson Pollock's drip techniques applied to the space beyond the implicit architectonic frame of the 'white cube' of the gallery, and a performance that transforms the city into a canvas. However, Alÿs's intent was not so much a parody of the art of painting as an attempt to create a narrative produced by a material expenditure or dissipation. In that sense it is related to other actions such as *Paradox of Praxis* 1996

or *Fairy Tales* 1995, where a fable is built around the moral of a productive unmaking akin to the unravelling of tales and stories. Not by chance *The Leak* is practically the only performance which Alÿs has re-enacted in different contexts, including a re-tracing of the *Green Line* in Jerusalem in 2004: it is a paradigm of his desire to leave a permanent trace in the fabric of the city and the collective imagination of its inhabitants, through the act of walking.







## 12

### Seven Lives of Garbage

Mexico City 1995

Photographic documentation of an action

*People say that all garbage in Mexico City goes through seven stages of sifting, from the moment it is thrown on the street until its final destination at the municipal dump on the outskirts of the city.*

Right at the time of the 1994–5 Mexican economic and political crisis, Alÿs made a number of works that explored the underground economies on which the metabolism of a whole society in the so-called Third World relies. Having heard that Mexico City's garbage is sorted seven times between the dustbin and the municipal dump, he put seven bronze snails painted in different colours into different bags, mixed with trash, and abandoned them in different parts of the city. In the following months, the artist managed to locate two of the sculptures being sold at flea markets. This work is the equivalent of throwing a bottle into the sea of refuse produced by a megalopolis of twenty million people, before witnessing the slow progress of the snails back to their creator. It was an experiment that exposed the importance of contingency and speed in the workings of his host society, and the extent to which social and economic circuits involved a whole ecology that explained the functioning of the city despite its resistance to the standards of modernity.







## 13

### **NarcoSalinas**

Mexico City–New York 1995

Photographic documentation of an action

*Project of smuggling 6.35 grams of cocaine from Mexico City to New York City under the guise of a painted figurine of former president Carlos Salinas.*

In 1995 the streets of Mexico City were full of vendors selling all kinds of satirical images of President Carlos Salinas, who had become the number one popular villain after the political and financial debacle of 1994. It is said that the artist had the effigy of the disgraced politician carved from a rock of cocaine imported from Colombia, and took it to New York in his pocket. Alas, the evidence of this action is not longer available to the public.





## 14

### Déjà Vu

1996 – present  
Paired paintings

*Paint an image. Paint its exact copy.  
Display the pair of paintings in  
separate rooms so that the visitor  
experiences a sensation of déjà vu*

*along his journey through the  
exhibition spaces.*

The *Déjà vu* series consists of pairs of identical oil paintings, hung separately in different exhibition rooms. If an experience of *déjà vu* is disturbing, it is because it suggests that the memory anticipates the event. The intention here is to insert

a species of punctuation, disrupting the linearity of the viewer's experience. The work triggers a double-take in the midst of an often distracted stroll, an uncanny suspicion of circularity, a doubt about one's itinerary. The recurrent images provoke a feeling akin to listening to a scratched vinyl record.





## 15

### The Swap (Trueque)

Mexico City 1996

Photographic documentation of an action

*In the beginning, there is a given situation where many people cross paths. The protagonist enters the situation with an object. He swaps it for another. A succession of transactions follows in which each object is, in turn, exchanged for another, and so on, until the end of his visit.*

Whenever global capitalism slides into its cyclical crisis, bartering re-emerges as an alternative form of economic circulation within a depressed market. So it did during the economic crisis in Mexico in the mid-1990s: after the financial catastrophe of December 1994, it was possible to find exchange offers of the most varied kinds, including that of trading one's labour for other services, advertised in local newspapers and on a multitude of street signs. In *The Swap*, Alÿs spent a whole day riding the underground, persuading passengers to exchange one thing for another. Starting with a pair of sunglasses, the artist went on to exchange dozens of objects, as if the metro system were a network of nomadic traders. Over the following decade the activation and exploration of the alternative economies that inhabit the margins of city life became a prominent feature of Alÿs's work, as brutal integration into the global economy pushed countries like Mexico into a constant ebb and flow of social and financial catastrophes.

## 16

### **If You Are a Typical Spectator, What You Are Really Doing Is Waiting for the Accident to Happen**

Mexico City 1996

Video (10 minutes)

In this video, Alÿs followed the movements of a plastic bottle pushed by the wind around the Zócalo, the main square of Mexico City. His original intention was to play an entirely passive role: to video-document a situation in which he would be 'waiting for the accident to happen', without pre-arranging or managing the scene in any sense. However, soon enough, passers-by encouraged by the presence of the camera began to kick the bottle around. Just as Werner Heisenberg showed in the case of subatomic particles, the very act of observation altered the variables in the scene, turning the spectator into an agent that, beyond any specific perspective, helps to produce the event rather than merely witnessing it. In the end, though, the 'accident' the artist was waiting for did occur: absorbed as he was in filming the bottle, Alÿs trespassed onto the roadway surrounding the square and was hit by a car. Although he was not seriously injured, the video records the death of Alÿs's self-image as a mere observer of his adopted territory. The event freed the artist from the self-imposed taboo against getting personally involved in the social equation of his newly acquired territory, and made him acknowledge that any art document is, by nature, a self-conscious intervention in the complex texture of reality – at least in terms of provoking a hiatus in the customary order of things.











## 17

### Le Temps du sommeil

1996 – present

111 paintings; oil, encaustic and crayon on wood

Average size 11.5 x 15.4 cm

*Paint an image,  
record the image,  
paint another image over it,  
to leave only the sign.*

*Le Temps du sommeil* is a polyptich of more than a hundred small canvases of approximately 11 x 15 cms that Alÿs continues to rework, as a sort of evolving record of visual ideas (both sculptural and pictorial) that develop out of actions or precede them. The oneiric implications of their title is underlined by the fact that Alÿs dates each of their stages with a rubber stamp, as though they constituted a journal of recurrent fantasies and obsessions. This storyboard and image archive is habitually painted on an earthy Venetian red background. Figures and elements are sketched on tracing paper before being painted into miniature background landscapes, where a golden-green grass fades into a dark olive sky. *Le Temps du sommeil* encapsulates the way in which Alÿs has absorbed the role of painting as a narrative of prodigies, attitudes and object relationships – a recurrent theme in primitive religious painting as much as in Venetian vedute. The fact that the images are never final but rather are palimpsests, suggests the deep connection between figurative painting and action art that lies at the heart of Alÿs's work.

NARCOTOURISM / KBH 5-11 MAY 1996

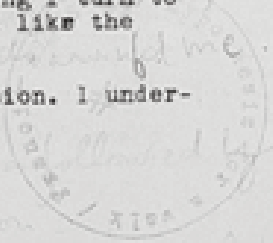
(2) I will walk in the city over the course of seven days, under the influence of a different drug each day. My trip will be recorded through photographs, notes, and any other media that become relevant.

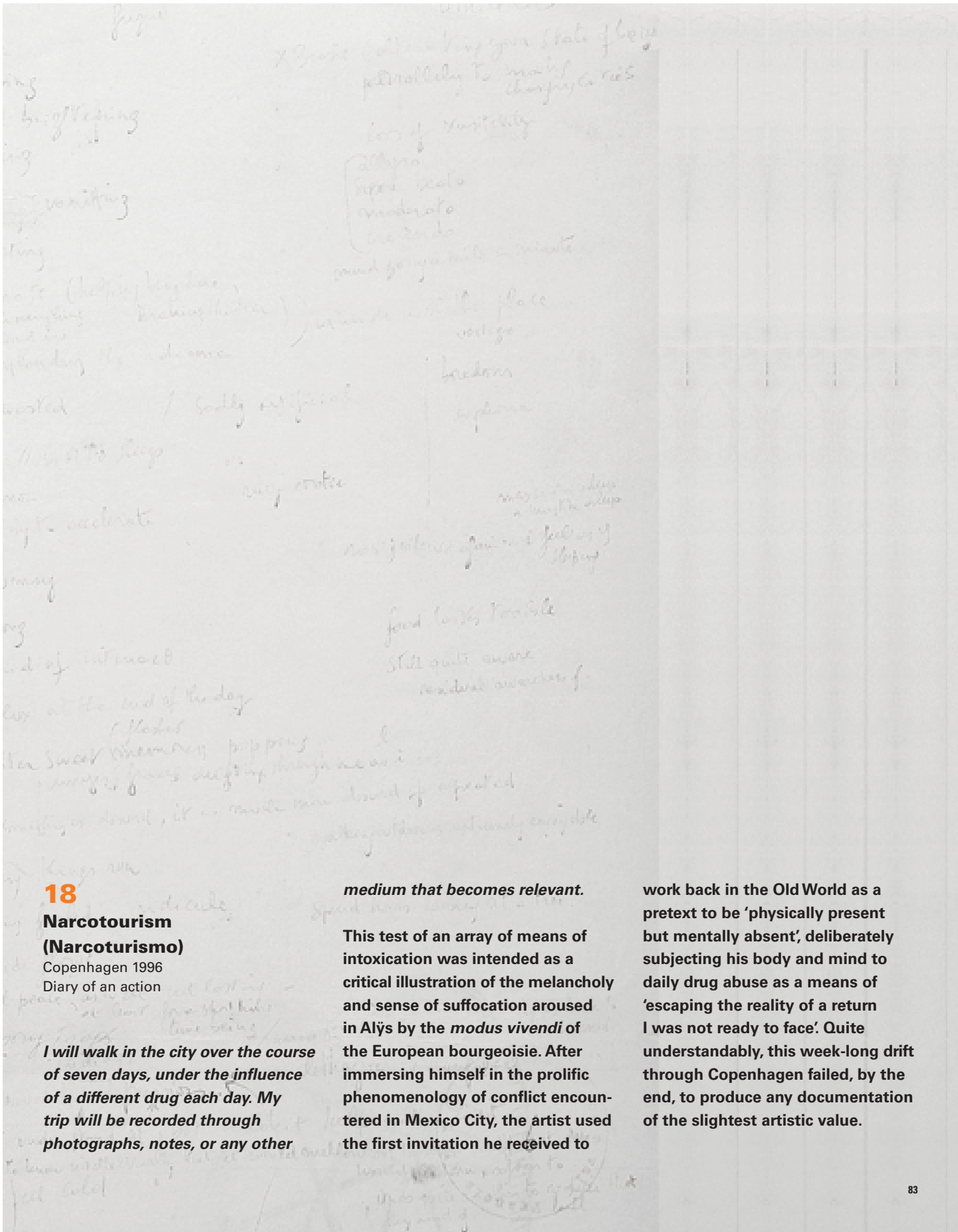
the project is about being physically present in a place, while mentally elsewhere.

dosage: drugs were consumed in order to maintain a continuous effect for 14 h.a. day.

- May 5 ..... Spirits (1)
- May 6 ..... Hashish (2)
- May 7 ..... Speed (3)
- May 8 ..... Heroin (4)
- May 9 ..... Cocaine (5)
- May 10 ..... Valium (6)
- May 11 ..... Ecstasy (7)

- (1) Spirits. (due to practical problems in finding the stuff, I decide to start with local liquors and alcohol). Difficulties in connecting mentally with my physical state. inner resistance. inability to trust my reflexes or sight. I walk clumsily among many strange occurrences.
- (2) Hashish. Slow motion. Awareness of every muscle in action. everything is enormously funny. Soundless speech. walking with my eyes closed. A pastrami sandwich tastes heavenly.
- (3) Speed. Deambulatory paranoia. Cold feet. I fear the signs of my own presence, and avoid encounters on the street. As I walk, I always keep a familiar spot in sight.
- (4) Heroin. feeling of inner warmth which helps me break the ice and feel attuned to the place. A sequence of frozen images as I walk along the Danube. the effects fade fast, but they return at the end of the day. difficulty breathing at night.
- (5) Cocaine. Awareness of a change of state, but not followed by a visual echo. Auditory acuity enhanced. Appetite gone. Smoking diminished. At night, nausea and thirst.
- (6) valium. weariness. Aesthesia. indifference to context. regular smoking. frequent passing and occasional vomiting. while walking, bittersweet memories pop up at regular intervals.
- (7) Ecstasy. visual brightening and erotic impulses. My shoes move and I feel the urge to walk out. everything I turn to moves, not physically but conceptually. I feel like the epicenter of the world.
- (8) the journey was followed by a period of depression. I understood it but could not help sinking into it.





18

**Narcotourism  
(Narcoturismo)**

Copenhagen 1996  
Diary of an action

*I will walk in the city over the course of seven days, under the influence of a different drug each day. My trip will be recorded through photographs, notes, or any other*

*medium that becomes relevant.*

This test of an array of means of intoxication was intended as a critical illustration of the melancholy and sense of suffocation aroused in Alj's by the *modus vivendi* of the European bourgeoisie. After immersing himself in the prolific phenomenology of conflict encountered in Mexico City, the artist used the first invitation he received to

work back in the Old World as a pretext to be 'physically present but mentally absent', deliberately subjecting his body and mind to daily drug abuse as a means of 'escaping the reality of a return I was not ready to face'. Quite understandably, this week-long drift through Copenhagen failed, by the end, to produce any documentation of the slightest artistic value.

## 19

### **Paradox of Praxis 1 (Sometimes Doing Something Leads to Nothing)**

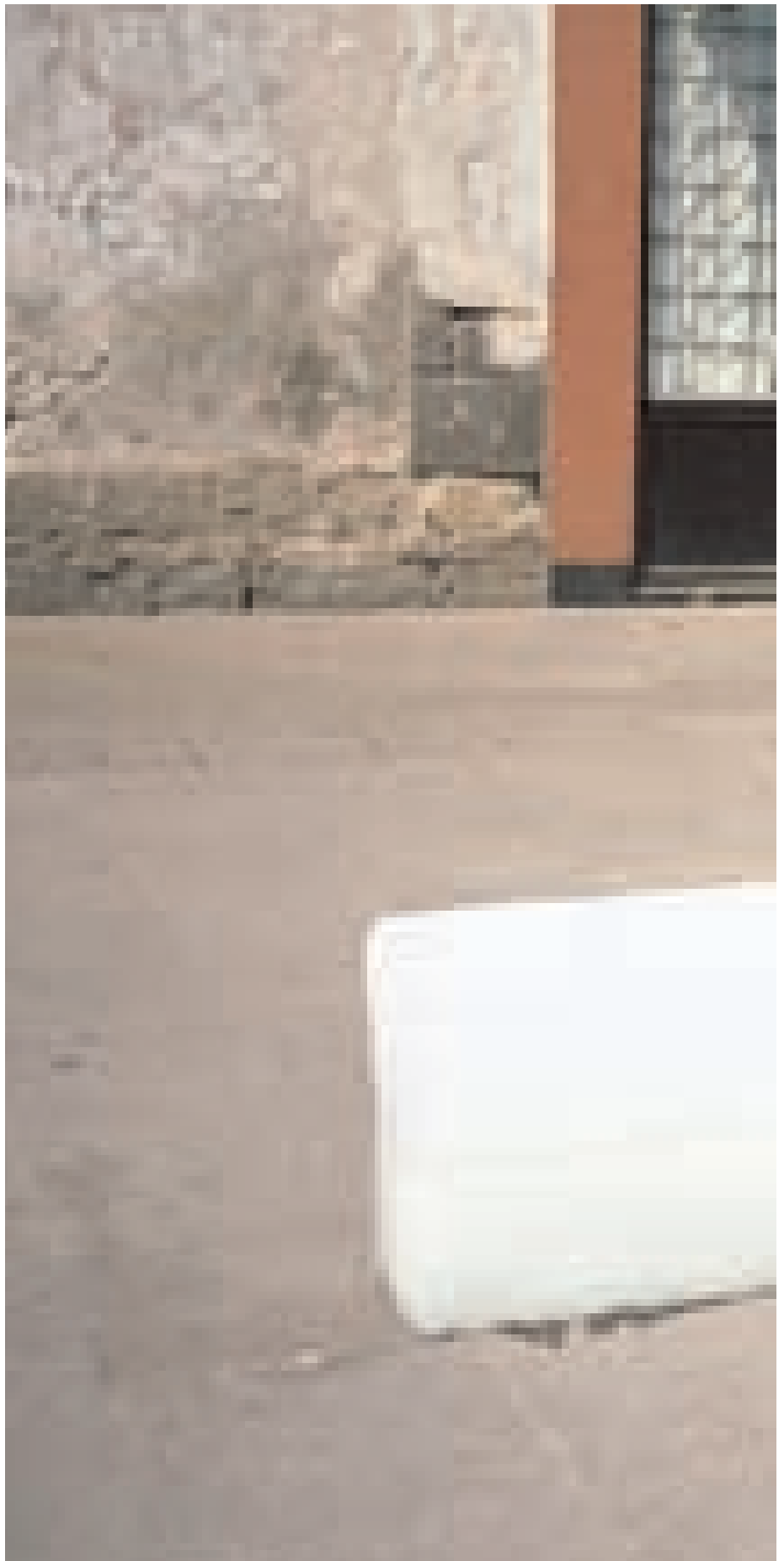
Mexico City 1997

Video documentation of an action  
(5 minutes)

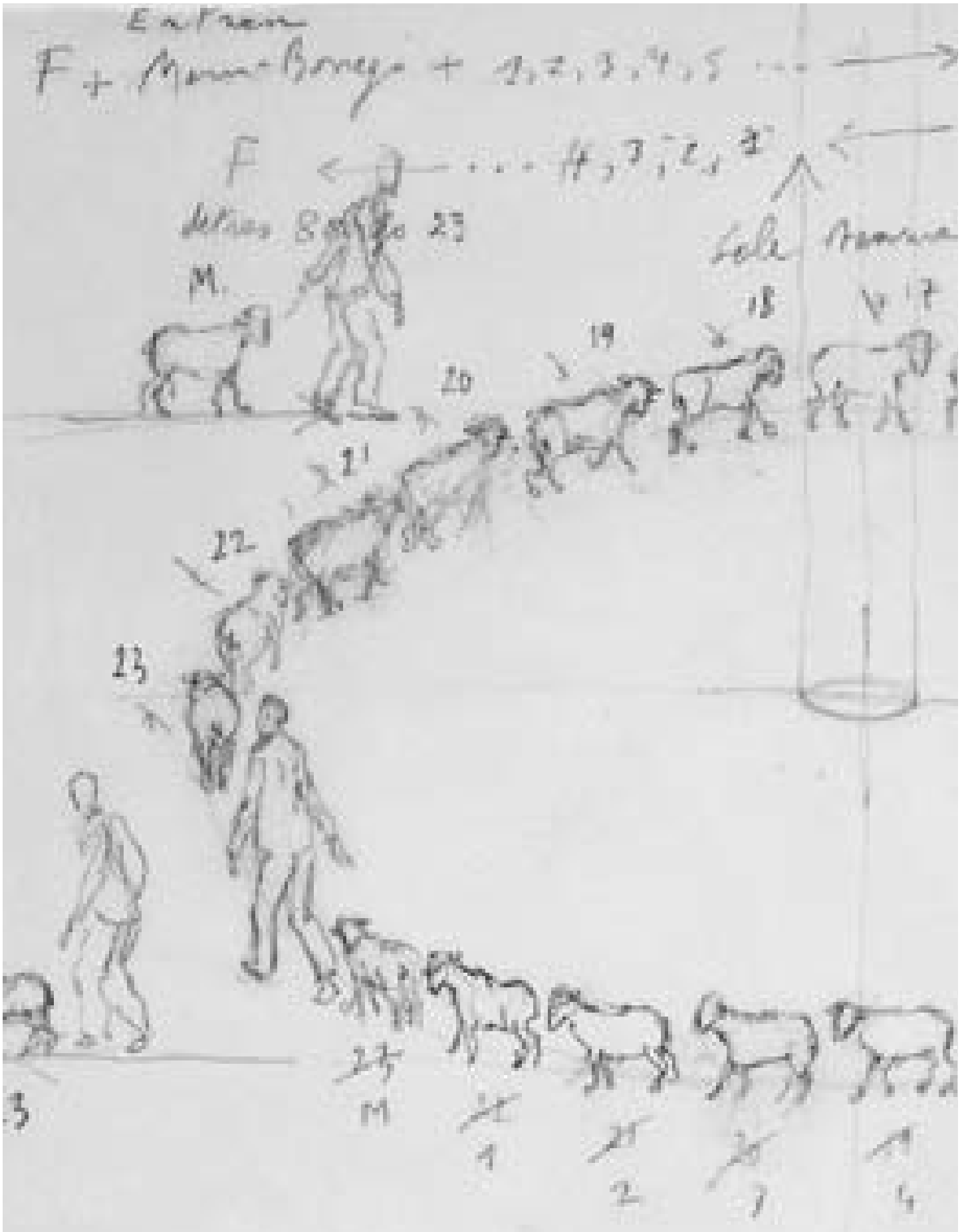
#### ***Sometimes Doing Something Leads to Nothing.***

This action was the synthesis of several themes explored by Alÿs during the mid-1990s, and a decisive moment in his attempt to reflect on the underlying logic of the peripheral economies of the South. The performance is a parody of the massive disproportion between effort and result in much of Latin American life, at the same time as it is a settling of scores with the aesthetics of the minimalist object. By pushing a block of ice around the centre of Mexico City for more than nine hours until he was left with nothing but a small puddle of water, Alÿs alluded to the seemingly unproductive hardship involved in the daily survival tactics of most people in the region. The block, identical to the thousands that are delivered every morning to street businesses all around the city, was also a sly means to figure the melting of the generic object of contemporary art.

For more than ten years, Alÿs has tried to concoct a logical sequel to *Paradox of Praxis 1*, with an action that would illustrate the contrary principle: 'Sometimes doing nothing leads to something.' His failure to think up the proper proposal for such a script has, however, inspired a number of other works based on the questioning of efficiency.









## 20

### Patriotic Tales (Cuentos Patrióticos)

Mexico City 1997

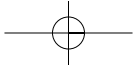
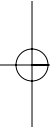
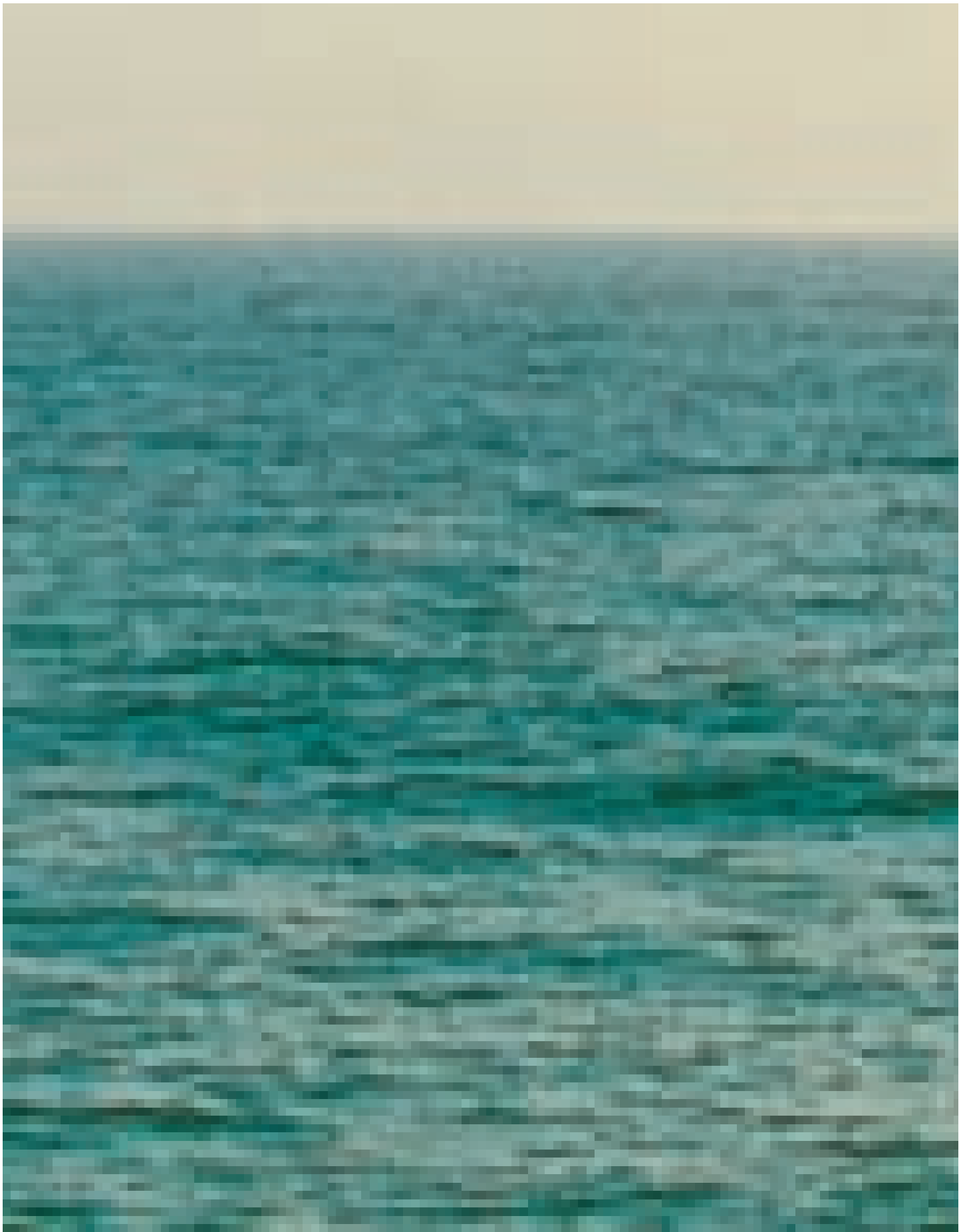
In collaboration with Rafael Ortega

Video documentation of an action

(24 minutes 40 seconds)

This fiction refers to a key event in the student protests against Mexico's government that were occurring throughout 1968: on 28 August of that year, thousands of civil servants were brought to the Zócalo or main square of Mexico City to demonstrate in favour of the government, claiming that the students had defiled the national symbols by raising the Red and Black flag on the Zócalo pole. But in a spontaneous gesture of rebellion, the bureaucrats turned their backs on the official tribune and began to bleat like a vast flock of sheep, forcing the authorities to disperse them with armoured tanks and infantry. Three decades later, Alÿs commented on the way 'the whole political scene was frozen by a corrupted and dysfunctional political apparatus'. The apocalyptic image of these sheep invading public space brings to mind the final scene of Buñuel's *Exterminating Angel* (1961), where the animal presence in the public arena similarly suggests the returned of the repressed and the impossibility of breaking a historical spell. In the video, Alÿs first leads a line of sheep around the Zócalo flagpole, then follows them, as if forecasting a hypothetical moment when the leader would become the follower. This video has become one of the iconic works of recent political art in Alÿs's host country, to the point of becoming part of the permanent display of the Memorial Museum to the 1968 events.





## 21

### The Loop

Tijuana–San Diego 1997  
Ephemera of an action

*In order to go from Tijuana to San Diego without crossing the Mexico/ United States border, I followed a perpendicular route away from the fence and circumnavigated the globe heading 67° SE, NE and SE again until I reached my departure point. The project remained free and clear of all critical implications beyond the physical displacement of the artist.*

As a reaction, both to the increasing obstacles imposed by the US government on the entrance of illegal migrant workers across the southern border, and to the concept of site-specific art as it was commonly understood in the early 1990s, Alÿs's contribution to the *InSite* binational contemporary art festival was an absurdist response to the issue of border crossing. For twenty-nine days, the artist went around the world travelling south-east, taking the longest possible route so as to return to his departure point, but now on the other side of the fence between Mexico and the USA. This epic of anti-economic creative logic offers a foretaste of the principle of 'Maximum effort, minimum result' that would be the slogan of *When Faith Moves Mountains* 2001.





## 22

### The Rumour

Tlayacapan 1997

Photographic documentation of an action

*In the beginning, there is a situation where many people cross paths. If somebody were to say something to someone, and that someone were to repeat it to someone else, and that someone were to repeat it to someone else ... then, at the end of the day, something is being talked about, but the source will have been lost along the way.*

Alÿs had long harboured the idea of setting off a rumour in a small community, with an action that would eventually conflate fiction and reality by means of a certain objective trace without any further intervention. Finally, in 1999, with the help of three local associates, he put about the story of a 'person who had left the hotel for a walk the night before and had not come back' in a town south of Mexico City. The skimpy anecdote was quickly filled in by people's imagination, so that little by little the fictive character acquired a more or less fixed physiognomy, sex and age, plus a story explaining his disappearance. Three days later, the local police issued a poster with an identikit portrait of the missing person, giving flesh to the character of a undercover fiction. The work explored the dynamics of the social circuits activated by gossip and rumour, exemplifying Alÿs's interest in the way the production of myths by communities is a major element of their social cohesion.

## 23

### Fairy Tales

Mexico City 1995

Photographic documentation of an action

*Whereas the highly rational societies of the Renaissance felt the need to create utopias, we in our times must create fables.*

*Fairy Tales* is a fable of loss. While walking, Alÿs unravels his own sweater to leave a trail, as if unrolling a text. The action embodies a common literary figure: we have here the 'thread' of the narrative, in this case a blue one that weaves and unweaves the story. The title makes explicit the fact that this image is the condensation of a multitude of myths. Hansel and Gretel marking their path with pebbles, the thread Ariadne gives to Theseus in the Minotaur's labyrinth, but above all the story of Penelope who in Ithaca unpicks every night the shroud she weaves during the day. The simplicity of the action involves, however, a reversal of the principle of gathering that characterised several of Alÿs's early works, to become a model for actions that turn the artist's route into a procedure for urban drawing.





## 24

### Song for Lupita (Mañana)

1998

In collaboration with Lourdes Villagómez, Philippa B. Day and Antonio Fernández Ros

Installation with projected animation (12 second loop), record player and vinyl record

*'Mañana, mañana is soon enough for me.'*

This animation is a reflection on the extended struggle against the work ethic and its linear temporality, presented as a contemporary expression of mythical time. The depicted act has no beginning or end, as a woman pours water from one glass into another in an ebb and flow that suggests the abolition of time. The image, Alÿs argued, follows the rule of 'doing without doing' or, for that matter, of 'not doing but doing'. Instituting a paradox in time, the song speaks of putting off the task until a 'tomorrow' that loops eternally. 'Tomorrow,' of course, is always and never, that is, 'now', or in the artist's words, 'a present to be continued'. This mise en scène of Latin America's conflictive relation to modernity has also been interpreted as an ironic reflection on the way in which 'time-based works' are in effect allegories of suspended history, trapped inside the spell of sameness. The woman in the film also could stand for a peculiar devotion for relentless futility.







## 25

### Patriotic Songs (Cantos Patrióticos)

Mexico City 1998–9

In collaboration with Rafael Ortega

Three channel video installation

(28 minutes 30 seconds)

Invited in 1997 to participate in the São Paulo Biennial, Aljys was faced with a riddle. As a European, how did he stand in relation to the ways of living in Latin America? *Patriotic Songs* tells the story of a boatman who ferries people from one side of a river to the other on the Mexican-American Border. Looking into the sun, the boatman is dazzled by the light. Disorientated, he no longer knows which side to row to and, going in circles, becomes trapped 'between two waters'. This anecdote is a excuse to create an image of Latin America as a broken mirror, a reality constituted of a multiplicity of incongruous fragments. The piece also shows a game of musical chairs, which continually interrupts the progression of the narrative. Although the work was directly inspired by the Mexican tradition of the *corrido*, an epic genre of ballads commemorating events with a moral, it marked the artist's turn towards film structures where the musical score takes precedence, and defines the image. Thus the experience of time in Latin America is staged in terms of an interspace that suffers from 'an aspiration to something that cannot be defined', but that nonetheless becomes essential if society is to operate in the refusal of an imported concept of progress. As the artist has put it, *Patriotic Songs* is 'a story of struggle more than one of achievement, an allegory of process more than of synthesis'.





## 26

### Sleepers

Mexico City 1999–present  
Slide projection

Since the end of the twentieth century, Alÿs has been documenting people and dogs sleeping on the pavement, on park or street benches or any other outdoor platforms. As a rule, the subject are always framed from ground level on a horizontal plane, both to avoid any implicit hierarchy with the viewer, and to enhance the placid abandonment of these bodies. More than a record of misery, Alÿs registers the private use of the street as an amicable domestic space against the concept of traffic and civic regulation which has virtually become the despotic regime of urban life in the West. In that sense, equating animals and people is also a claim for a complex ecology of the *polis*, alien to the orthodoxies of hygiene and order. Rather than intruding into other people's lives, *Sleepers* records the way dreaming might have a role in a possible re-thinking of our conviviality.





## 27

### **Duett**

Venice 1999

In collaboration with Honoré d'O  
Video and photographic documentation  
of an action

*(moderato)*

*A and B arrive at opposite ends of  
Venice.*

*A is carrying the upper part of a tuba  
helicon.*

*B is carrying the lower part of a tuba  
helicon.*

*(andante)*

*A and B wander through the city  
looking for each other.*

*(crescendo)*

*Upon meeting, A helps B re-assemble  
the tuba.*

*(vibrato)*

*With one breath B plays a note for as  
long as he can.*

*A claps for as long as he can hold his  
breath.*





As on similar occasions, Alÿs first participation in the Venice Biennale was not part of the official programme but a self-prompted intervention. Conceived on the one hand as a homage to Fluxus theatre music, it was also inspired by Aristophanes's theory as described in Plato's *Symposium*: lovers are divided beings striving to reunite with their other half. In the event, Alÿs entered Venice by train while Belgian artist Honoré d'O landed in Marco Polo Airport, each of them carrying half of a tuba helicon, and started drifting through the Venetian labyrinth until they eventually met three days later. *Duett* intertwines a number of Alÿs's obsessions, apart from his interest in the act of carrying as a certain impediment to walking. It involves a narrative with a classical structure that builds a situation, introduces characters, develops a drama of division or conflict, and carries a moral in terms of a reunification of objects, social bodies or territories. Above all, *Duett* is an instance of the Greek concept of the *symbolon*, an object broken into two parts that call for their complement, which is the etymology of the notion of 'symbol'.

## 28

### Zócalo

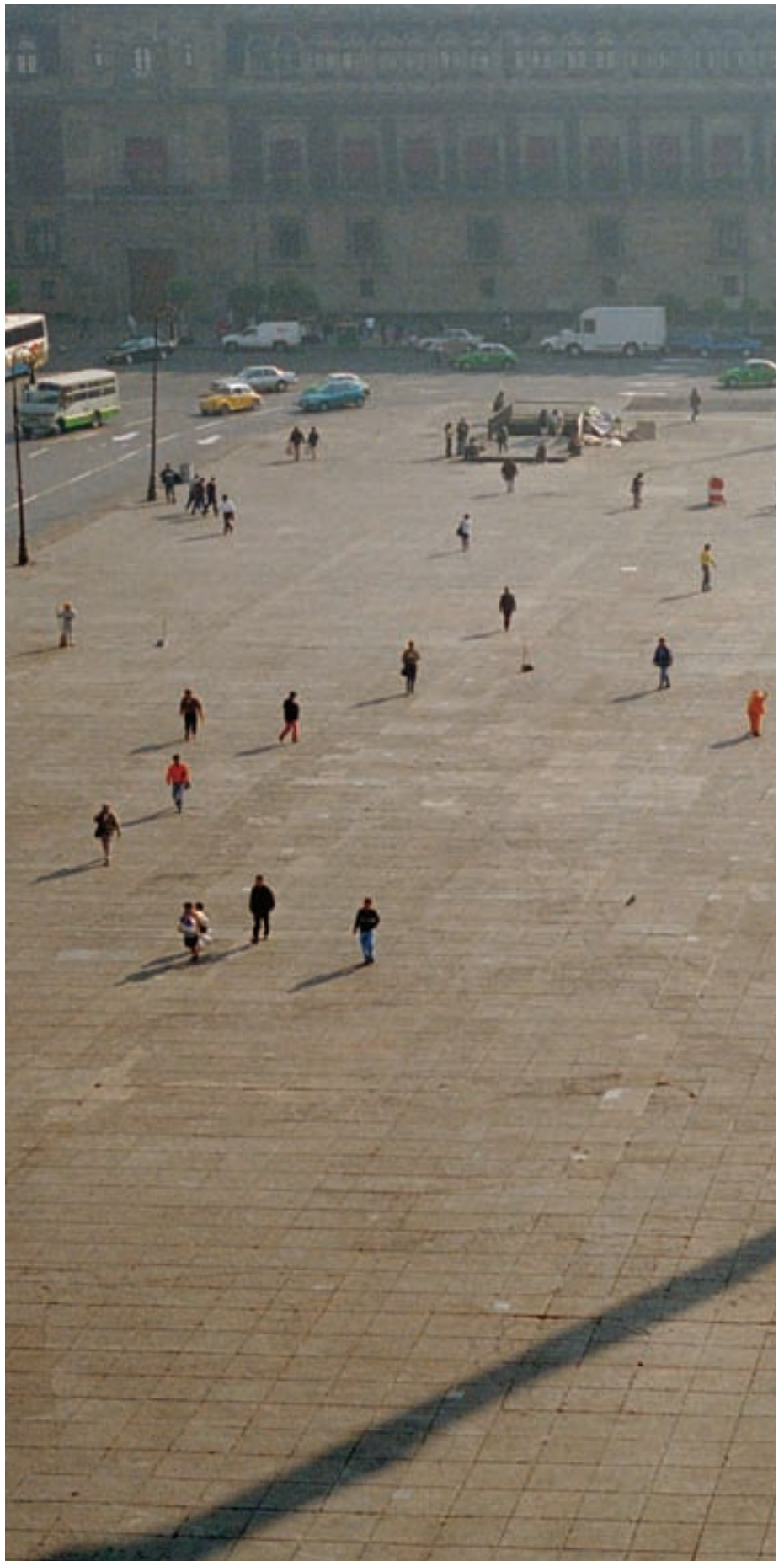
Mexico City 22 May 1999

In collaboration with Rafael Ortega

Video projection (12 hours)

*The filming begins at dawn with the flag-raising ceremony, and ends at dusk with the descending of the flag. The camera follows the progression of the shadow of the flagpole, and the subsequent displacement of the people following the shadow as they seek refuge from the sun on the open plaza. The camera lens describes a lateral movement of three degrees per hour during a total period of twelve hours.*

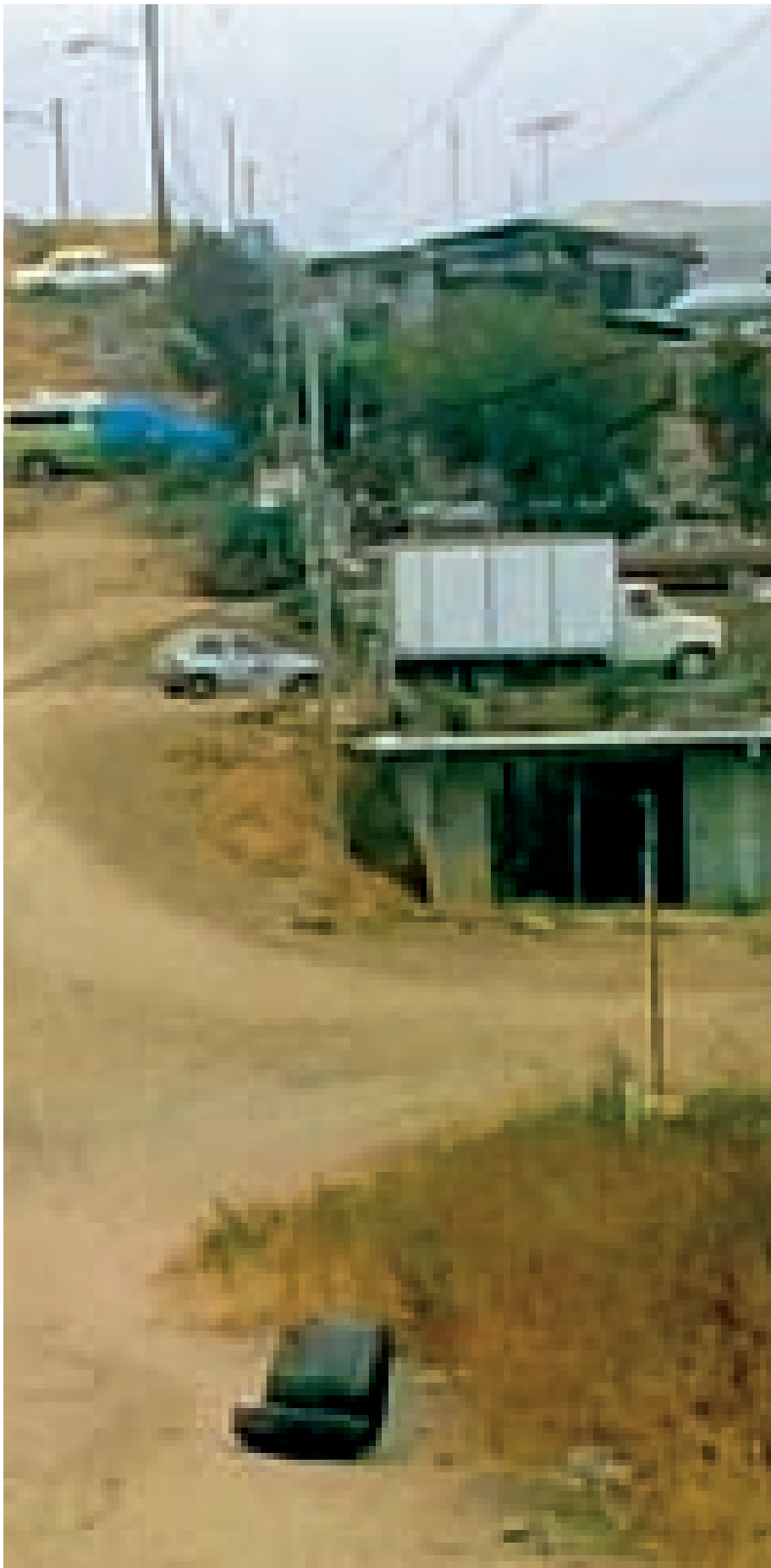
The Zócalo square in Mexico, along with Beijing's Tiananmen and Moscow's Red Square, is an example of the civic open spaces that were adapted in the twentieth century to stage the spectacle of mass politics. Despite the colossal and oppressive dimensions of the square, Alÿs understands its function as the 'Theatre of the City', the locus of collective desires and the machine where social pressure is released in the form of ritual experience. The twelve-hour video records in real time how the progression of the shadow of the flagpole in the middle of the esplanade creates a spontaneous choreography of people sheltering from the sun, and moves like a sundial all through the day. The film offers the clearest example of Alÿs's motto: 'When social encounters provoke sculptural situations'. It demonstrates how the poetic potential of the city goes well beyond any hegemonic structure, almost as if it were the expression of an unconscious cosmological ritual.











## 29

### Rehearsal I (El Ensayo)

Tijuana 1999–2001

In collaboration with Rafael Ortega

Video (29 minutes 25 seconds)

**Soundtrack:** the rehearsal of a *danzón* by a brass band in Juchitán, Mexico.

**Image:** a Volkswagen Beetle repeatedly tries to ascend a hill without ever succeeding.

**Mechanics:** the driver of the VW listens to a tape-recording of the rehearsal session.

- When the musicians are playing, the car goes uphill.
- When the musicians lose track and stop, the car stops.
- When the musicians are tuning their instruments and chatting, the car rolls downhill.

Like a pendulum falling back at the end of its swing, the stubborn efforts of a VW Beetle to climb a dusty slope on the outskirts of Tijuana – presumably trying to reach the US border – is an allegory of the struggle of Latin American societies to adjust to the social and economic expectations of their northern neighbours. Structured around the recording of a musical rehearsal, the film turns into a comic fable the shared experience of frustration and setback the nations of the South suffer every time they fall prey to the rhetoric of development only to mechanically regress, a few years later, into another economic crisis. The structure of inbuilt failure is however accompanied by a tentative epic of effort.





## 30

### Doppelgänger

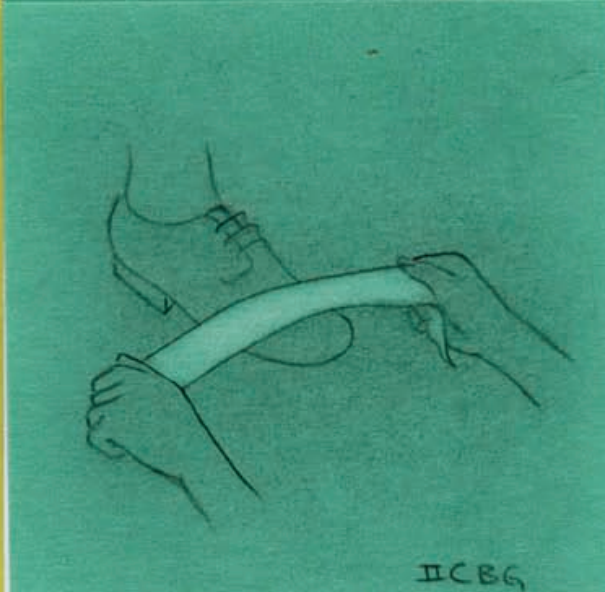
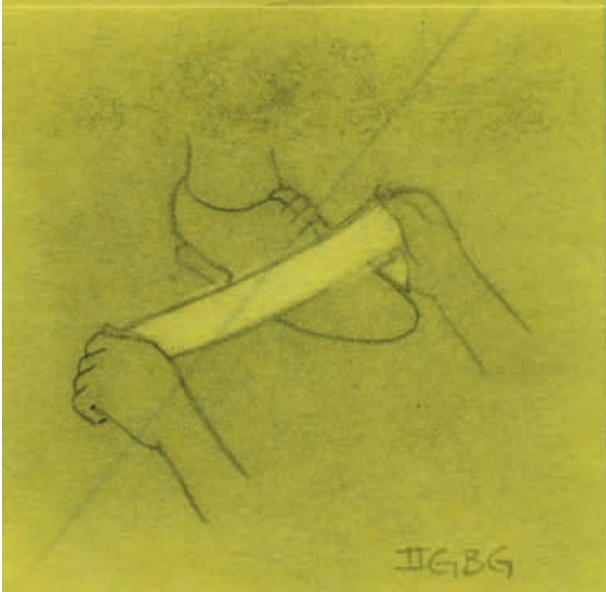
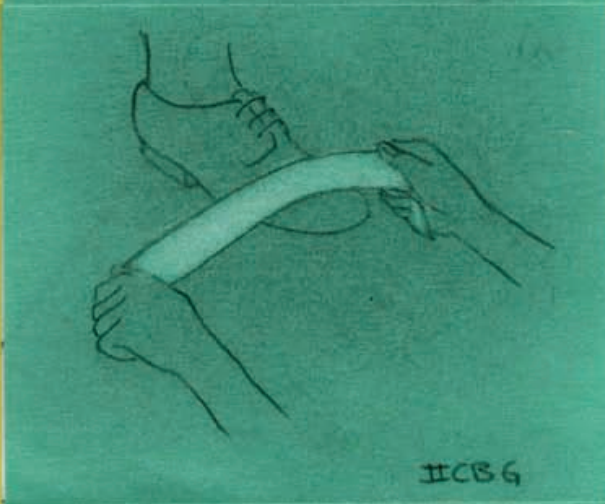
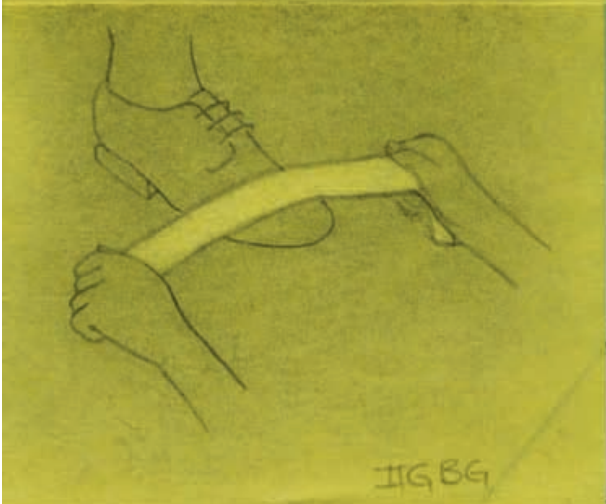
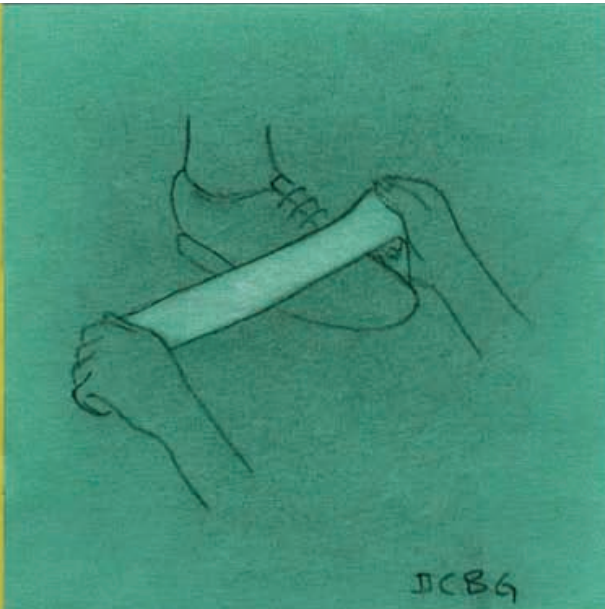
Istanbul 1999 – present

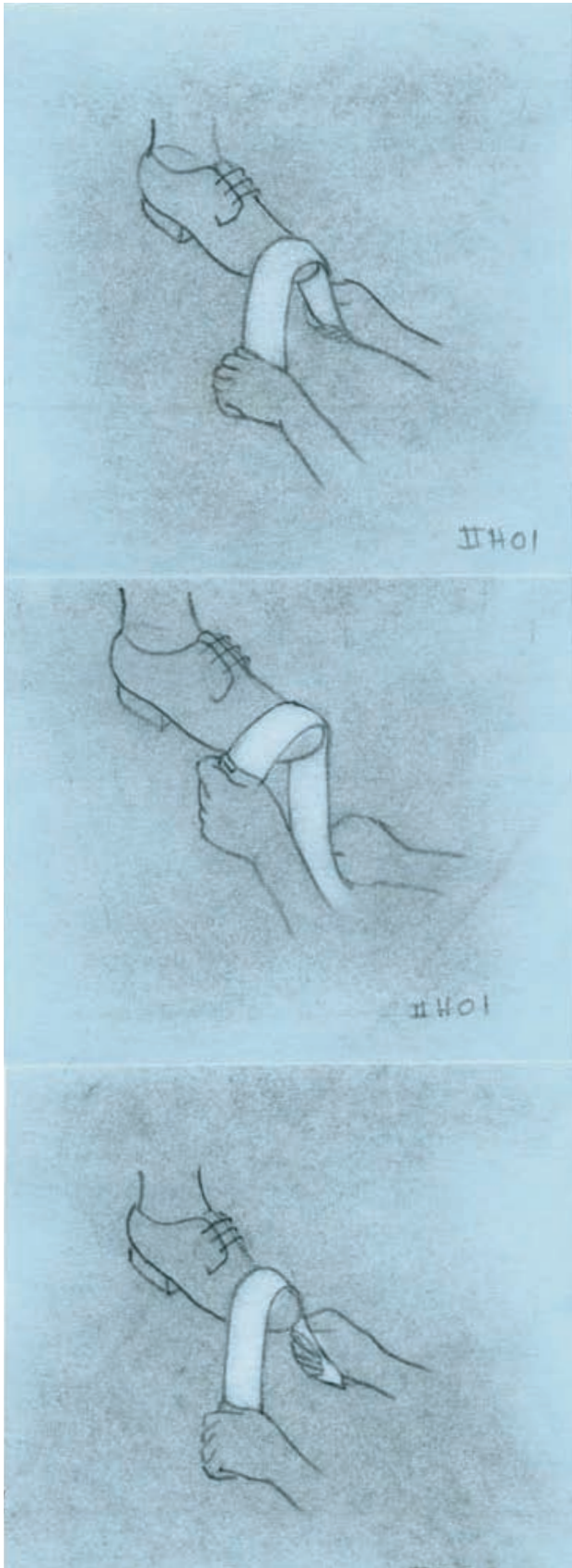
Slide projection

*When arriving in ... (new city), wander, looking for someone who could be you.*

*If the meeting happens, walk beside your doppelgänger until your pace adjusts to his/hers.*

Although the title of this work is borrowed from the tradition of gothic and fantastic literature, Alÿs's instructions question our attitudes toward travelling and art tourism. 'Because I don't ever really belong to the cities I am passing through,' Alÿs once said, 'I invent myself a role so as to slip into the newly found environment as another local character.' Therefore, despite the similarities with Vito Acconci's *Following Piece* 1969, where the conceptual artist defined his route in terms of a random tailing, Alÿs's work has more to do with animal mimetism than with the enactment of a chase. *Doppelgänger* operates as a comment on a time when the artist is expected to indulge in a form of serial site-specificity, with hardly any profound understanding of his or her destination. Certainly, 'looking for someone who could be you' is a paradoxical method for eluding the temptation to turn artistic practice into some sort of specialised tourism.





## 31

### **Bolero (Shoe shine)**

1999–2006

Animation

*Nothing we R*

*Nothing will B*

*I C U R*

*I tell U B*

*Nothing 2 C*

*I C U R I tell U C*

*Nothing 2 B*

*4 nothing we R*

*and nothing will B*

The apparent simplicity of this animation is deceptive. The tender interaction between a shoeshiner and a shoe is, in fact, an attempt to create a complex structure of what Eisenstein described as ‘vertical montage’: the syncopation of image, action and sound. In order to master the painstaking techniques of early two-dimensional cartoon animation, it took the artist and his associates more than eight years of laborious drawing to create eight minutes of animation. The piece is composed of nine musical phrases, to which correspond nine movements by the shoeshiner. As the musical score is in fact a rehearsal – with its constant back-and-forth through the script – the correlation of gestures and lyrics gets trapped in a free play of combinations, reminiscent of a Rubik’s cube. In other words, the animation behaves like a combination of visual and musical palindromes: phrases that can be read the same either forwards or backwards. This illusion of synchronisation, paired with the slowness of the work’s production, is deeply related to Alj’s attempts to explore a number of non-linear structures that delve into the experience of labour and time.





## 32

### Re-enactments

Mexico City 2000

In collaboration with Rafael Ortega  
Two-channel video documentation of an action (5 minutes 20 seconds)

#### 'Re-Enactment'

*On 4 November I bought a 9mm Beretta in a gun shop on Palma Street. At ten past one I left the shop holding the loaded gun in my right hand, and started wandering downtown waiting for something to happen ...*

Francis Alÿs

#### 'Real'

*On 4 November Francis asked me to meet him in a gun shop on Palma Street. I watched him buy a 9mm Beretta, load it and leave the shop holding the gun in his right hand. I trailed him with my Sony Handycam and filmed the following scenes.*

Rafael Ortega

The impulse behind Re-enactments was to question the deceptive transparency of the documentation of action art. By presenting the video documentation of a spectacular action next to that of the exact same event staged later the same day, Alÿs and filmmaker Rafael Ortega were hoping to make the spectator aware of the ambiguities within documentary and fiction. Quite self-consciously, Alÿs decided on the nature of the action to be performed following the classic Aristotelian requisites for drama: the choice of a location (the urban centre), the introduction of an actor, the creation of a conflict (the acquisition of the gun), the unfolding of the drama (his walk on the street), the anxiety of the spectator (at his

possible capture), and the climax that restored a semblance of order in the epilogue (his arrest by the police). However such concerns were overshadowed by the way the work explicitly provides evidence of the laxity of the Mexican police system, showing how easy it is to carry a gun in broad daylight and the impunity that allowed the artist to get away with an act characterised as a felony – not to mention the remarkable acting skills of the agents involved. Despite the remorse the artist has since voiced on how the work reinforced the cliché of Mexico as a city where criminality and judicial negligence are rampant, it is difficult to deny that the choice of this particular script anticipated the way public safety came to dominate the social and political debate within the country during the first decade of the twenty-first century.





### 33

#### **Rehearsal II**

Mexico City and New York 2001–6  
In collaboration with Rafael Ortega  
Video (14 minutes 30 seconds)

Soundtrack: Franz Schubert's *Lied der Mignon*

Performers: A striptease artist, a soprano and her pianistz

*The stripper listens to a rehearsal session of the soprano with the pianist.*

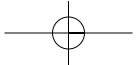
*While the pianist plays and the soprano sings, the stripper undresses.*


*When the soprano or the pianist loses track over a musical phrase and pauses, the stripper holds her act.*

*While the soprano and the pianist discuss the musical phrase in question, the stripper dresses up again.*

*The rehearsal session will go on until the stripper completes her act.*

Alÿs has explored ways to exploit the condition of music as a means to give visual form to temporality; as an instrument to translate the convoluted experience of non-linear structures





of economic behaviour and historical experience in the South. Yoking a striptease to the progress, regress and repetition of a rehearsal, Alj's created a humorous articulation of high and low arts of the erotic. However, the piece's true purpose was to parody the seduction that 'development' and the aspiration to mimic 'advanced' capitalist societies exert on Latin American governments and elites. The eternal oscillation between promises of economic growth and financial crisis brought by the neoliberal era is experienced in places like Mexico as an ebb and flow of infatuation, induced excitement and frustration. Yet Alj's's reading of this addiction to failure is not purely circular. The action advances at an irregular rate, sometimes moving two steps forward to recede three, to later move four steps ahead. Implicit in such motion is that the postponement of change does not necessarily mean stagnation. At the end of the event, the stripper stands bare in front of the spectator, but the eagerly awaited 'climax' has somehow lost much of its allure.





## 34

### The Ambassador

Venice 2001

Photographic documentation of an action

Aljys's reaction to being invited to take part in the Venice Biennale in 2001 was ambivalent, to say the least. Having successfully produced the performance *Duett* two years earlier, away from the official programme, the artist was reluctant to bow to the curatorial protocols and the bonfire of vanities of what many artists, audiences and professionals consider the *crème de la crème* of contemporary art shows. Rather than declining the invitation, he poked fun at the Biennale's diplomatic spectacle by dispatching as his personal ambassador a peacock that stalked through the Giardini.

## 35

### The Last Clown

2001

Animation (1 minute 30 seconds loop),  
paintings

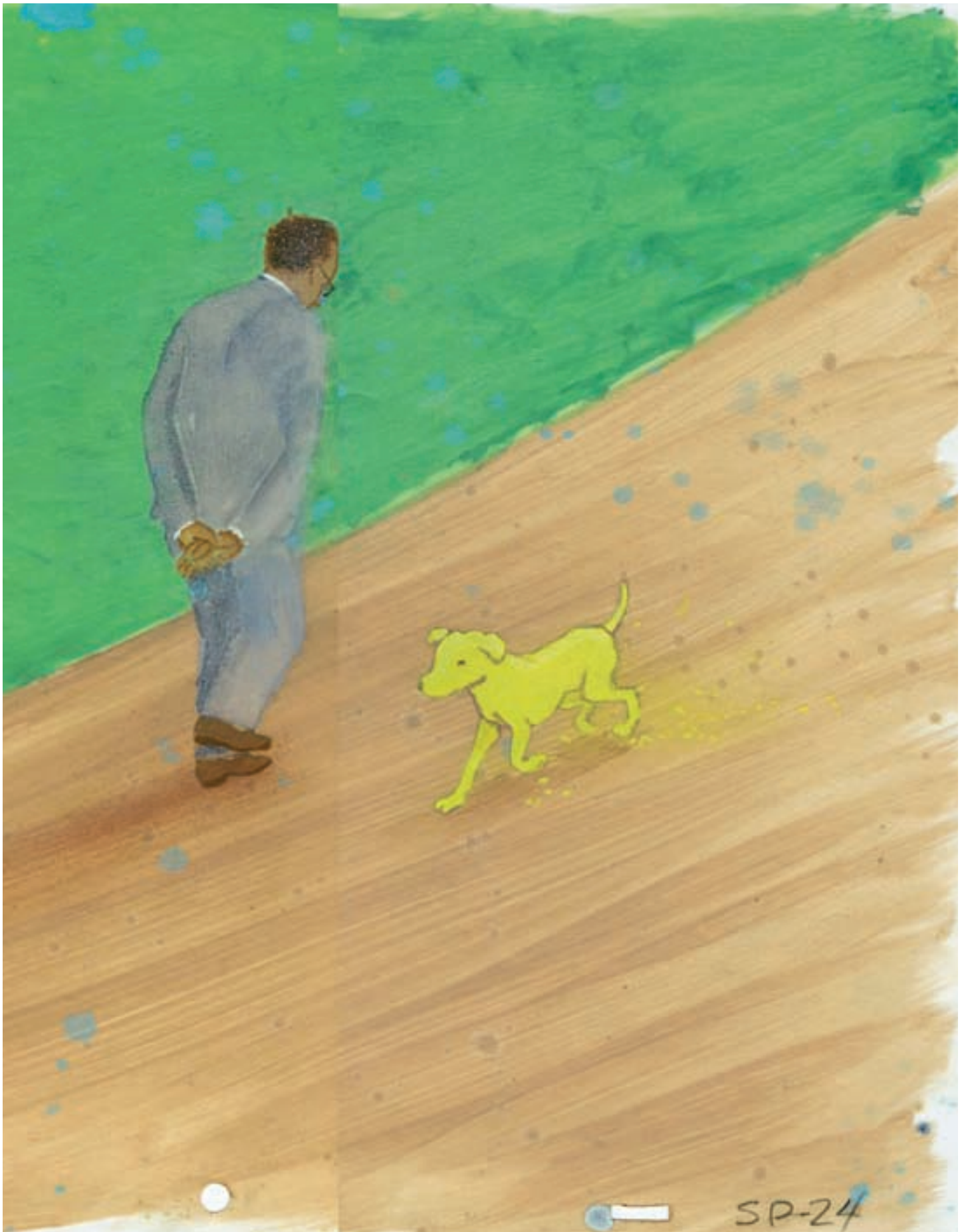
*[Manet's] Olympia is the first  
masterpiece which the masses  
laughed at uproariously ...*

*We cannot recall too often this  
shameful origin of modern art.*

Georges Bataille, draft conclusion  
to *L'Érotisme*, 1956.

An art critic strolling in a park is so absorbed in his own thoughts that he trips over a dog's tail and dramatically collapses on the tarmac. The farcical tone of the animation does not so much ruminate on this tragicomic anecdote as ponder on the relationship between ridicule and cultural production: art has become 'a dangerous form of enigmatic amusement', where artists, critics and curators operate as ultimate entertainers and intellectual acrobats, whose share of visibility relies in great part on the audience's expectation of their downfall. The tenuous border between innovation and derision, and the kinship of cutting-edge practitioners and esoteric jesters, is contained in the recourse to and an account of how the institution of art wings so comfortably between pomposity and populism.





SP-24

## 36

### The Mouse

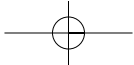
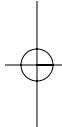
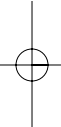
Mexico City 2001

Photographic documentation of an action

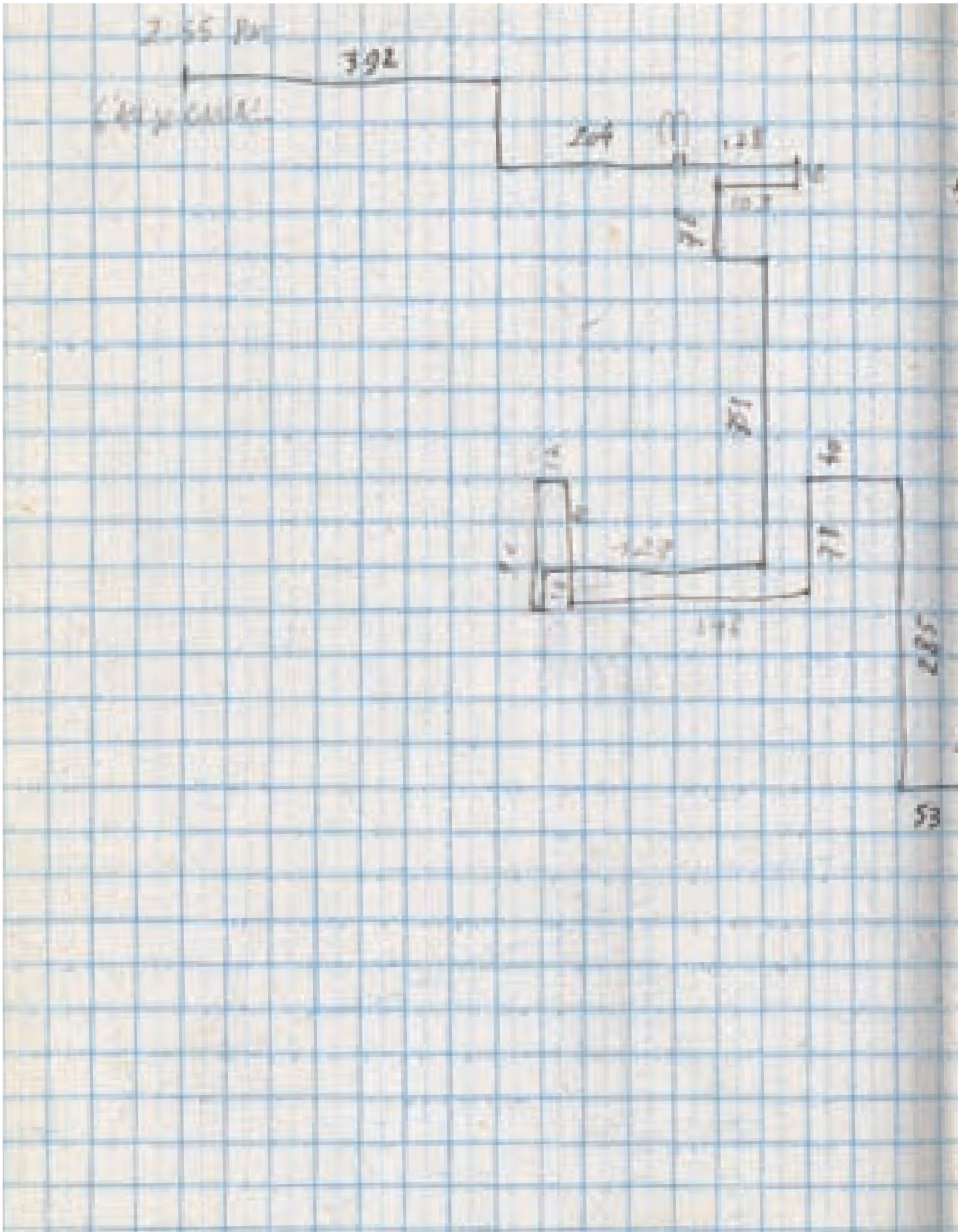
*On Saturday 3 March 2001 at ... pm,  
I entered the Jumex Collection with  
a mouse in my pocket. At ... pm  
I freed the mouse.*

Alÿs's version of 'institutional critique' might be more rightly described as an attempt to challenge the ideal of purity in the context of art. A recurrent *modus operandi* of his consists in inserting a story or miniature epic into a given situation. Drawing from the post-conceptual vocabulary of contemporary art, Alÿs enacts fables whose dissemination is more a matter of hearsay than of representation. As in Aesop or Perrault, many of Alÿs's actions involve as their main character an animal whose cunning and bravery stand for the resourcefulness of the underdog. When a private collector opened a public venue for his artistic treasures in a particularly dodgy sector of Mexico City, Alÿs could not resist retorting to the incursion of that citadel of luxury and refinement in the midst of factories and shantytowns, right under the nose of the custodians of the Jumex Collection. Sadly we cannot be certain whether the heroic rodent managed to survive the hygienic rules of the new gallery, or found time to subject any of the artworks to its sharp-toothed critique.









## 37

**Pacing**

New York, September – December 2001  
Diary of an action

*Every day I would go out and walk  
pacing the grid of Manhattan,  
there would be no destinations,  
just the walking and the counting,  
North to South and South to West,  
West to East and East to South,  
South to North and North to West,  
West to South and South to East,  
East to West and West to East.*

Originally, measurements had a concrete or bodily reference: words such as inch, foot, yard, stone refer to objects that were used as a standard to quantify distance or weight. To use one's steps as a measurement to establish a route in between two points is a sentimental mapping of sorts, an act that reminds us of the way in which we represent the world in relation to sensorial experience. In *Pacing*, the artist drew invisible figures through public space as a form of imaginary architecture. But since there is no goal in the act itself, this mode of 'walking by numbers' is one of the many ways in which Alÿs thematises the concreteness of walking by defining specific simple tasks, which nonetheless have a certain historical resonance. In the aftermath of 9/11, along the desolate streets of downtown Manhattan, his aimless deambulation brought him some consolation, for as he had pointed out in his notes of a decade before: 'As long as I'm walking, I'm not thinking'.

2660

757

71

3:59 PM  
BLAIDG

## 38

### Looking Up

Mexico City 2001

In collaboration with Rafael Ortega  
Video (4 minutes) and photographic  
documentation of an action

***Looking Up* is one of several attempts to create a pendant to *Paradox of Praxis 1* 1997, this time searching for a performance that would induce an action without effort, as if the artist had become a stationary motor. Trusting to the suggestibility of crowds, Alÿs stood in a square looking upwards into the void until other people gathered round, likewise scrutinising the sky. Once he felt surrounded by a sufficient number of onlookers, the artist discreetly slipped away, satisfied with the 'residue' left on the scene of his experiment. Placed in the greater context of Alÿs's research on the relation between labour and time, this action would suggest an economy of excess.**









## 39

### Walking a Painting

Los Angeles 2002

Video and photographic documentation of an action

*The painting is hung on the gallery wall.*

*As the gallery opens, the carrier takes the painting off the wall and walks it through the city.*

*As night approaches, the carrier brings it back to the gallery, he hangs it on the wall **and covers it with a veil.***

*The same action is repeated the next day.*

The theme of artworks passing through public space has been a recurrent one in Alÿs's work. It relates at once to his childhood memories of religious processions, to the poetics of the surrealist *objet trouvé* and to a desire to break with the gravity and stillness of museum culture. However, it also refers to the modern utopia of an art that might resuscitate a lost sense of community, abolishing class, race, gender and cultural divides. Interestingly enough, the first performance of this work took place in the ultimate car city: Los Angeles, California. On the back of the postcard that documented the work, Alÿs quoted a newspaper report on the rise of communitarian and ethnic violence that is likely to occur in a civic structure lacking in social spaces of conviviality:

**Across South L.A., blacks, whites, Latinos and Asians are meeting in violent confrontations. The popular myth that Los Angeles was transforming itself into an harmonious multiethnic model city seems to waft away in the smoke billowing over the city.**  
*L.A. Times*, 30 April 1992





## 40

### Beggars

Mexico City 2001 – present

Slide projection

Of all of Alÿs's photographic series, *Beggars* is the most cruel. These images of people asking for money at the entrance to the subway are consistently framed from above, a point of view that makes their presence still more physical when projected onto the floor. This top-down view is implicitly hierarchical, much like that of the passers-by who look down as they descend into the underground. In addition, the projection of these photographs as a slideshow adds a temporal element to the series. Advancing at two-second intervals, it gives us only a partial, furtive vision of each beggar, a shamefaced glance at poverty, translating into the gallery situation a fragile encounter between the mendicant and the observer.







## 41

### **When Faith Moves Mountains (Cuando la fe mueve montañas)**

Lima, Peru 2002

In collaboration with Cuauhtémoc Medina and Rafael Ortega

Video (36 minutes) and photographic documentation of an action, 'making of' video (15 minutes)

*500 volunteers were equipped with shovels and asked to form a single line in order to displace by 10cm a 500m-long sand dune from its original position.*

The motto of this action – 'Maximum effort, minimum result' – rhetorically inverts the principle of efficiency that lies at the heart of modern economic thought. However, Alÿs's contribution to the Lima Biennale of 2002 transposes such questioning to the field of social action. To be sure, the enormity of collective effort and expense that historical change imposes on one generation after another seems completely out of proportion with the paucity of the gains achieved.

However, rather than regarding political engagement as a mirage, Alÿs's work sets up an alternative standard to that underlying economy of social history. That a few hundred volunteers barely displaced a sand dune located on the outskirts of Lima, physically enacted the canonical parable of the powers of faith. The event was an attempt to cast a profane light on the significance that social movements and political transitions have on their own, once they are perceived beyond the mystique of 'the revolution'. At the very time Peru was undergoing a transition from Alberto Fujimori's dictatorship to its current squalid

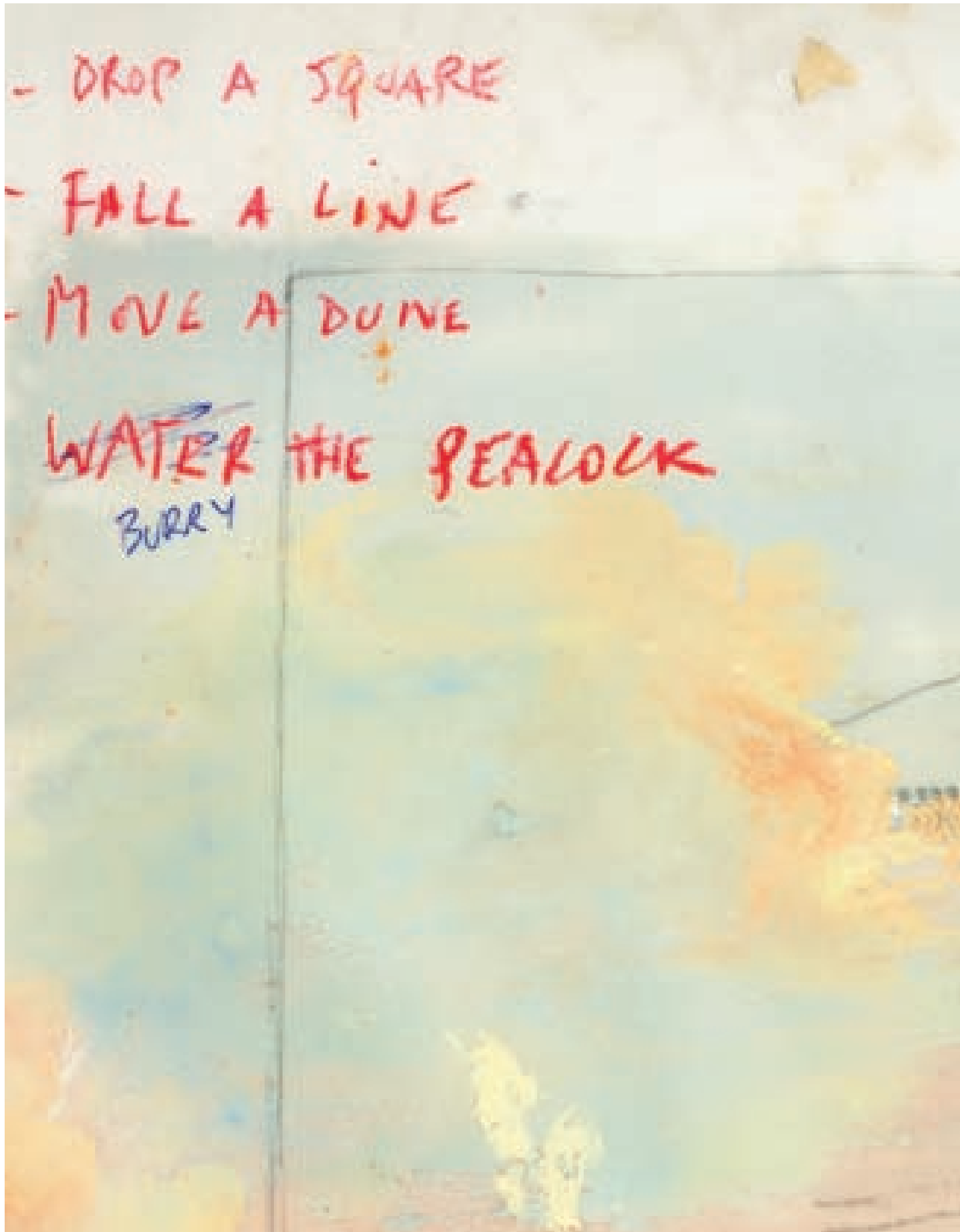
- DROP A SQUARE

- FALL A LINE

- MOVE A DUNE

WATER THE PEACOCK

BURRY

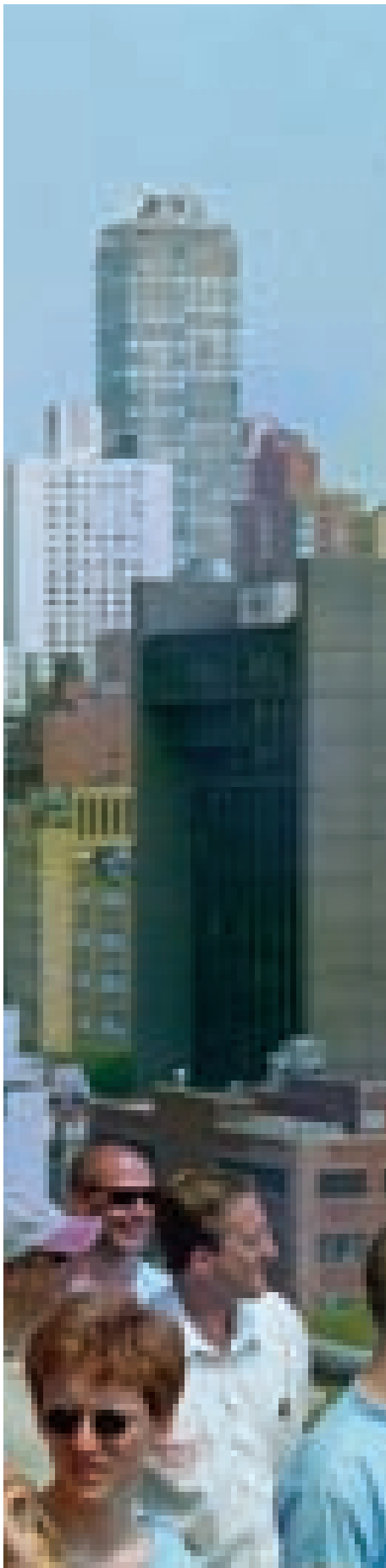


democracy, Alÿs found it necessary to rescue the value of social mobilisation as an ineluctably absurdist act, which ought to be understood as a miracle of sorts, valuable for its own sake, independently of the result. Producing the event in the sand slopes surrounding Lima, where millions of displaced rural people migrated during and after the civil war of the 1980s, suggested both a critique of the romanticism of Land Art and a call to rethink the role of informal settlements as a force of historical transformation. Certainly, the fact that most of the volunteers were university students distanced the work from the current presumptions of so-called 'collaborative works'. The organisers of the action were understandably reluctant to reduce

politics to the direct interaction with 'communities', on the presupposition of any lack of mediation between art and a specific society. The work questioned the iconography and concepts of mass politics, insofar as it addressed the significance of poetic motifs and affects in political formations. As Peruvian theorist Gustavo Buntinx argued, subverting one of the dogmas of the Shining Path guerrilla movement: 'illusion is also power'.







## 42

### The Modern Procession

New York 2002

In collaboration with Rafael Ortega and Public Art Fund

Video documentation of an action  
(7 minutes 22 seconds)

*On Sunday June 26, 2002, The Modern Procession will announce the temporary move of the Museum of Modern Art from Manhattan to Queens. In the form of a traditional ritual procession, a selection of MoMA's masterpieces will be carried on palanquins. A Peruvian brass band will set the pace of the journey, rose petals will be strewn along the way and fireworks will soar from street corners to celebrate the entry of MoMA's collection into the periphery.*

To intervene the temporary relocation of the Museum of Modern Art of New York with a procession of 'masterworks' through the streets involved a questioning of the 'consecrated' status of art in modernity. Inspired by the Catholic processions Alÿs watched in Tepoztlán, a town to the south of Mexico City, the action tested the concept of the Museum as a warehouse of treasures, in opposition to the social use of images that precedes and transcends the aesthetic paradigm of Western modernity. Prevented by MoMA's conservation and insurance rules from using its actual holdings, the *Modern Procession's* recourse to replicas echoed a long tradition in which the sacred originals, paintings or statues, are represented in processional practices by replicas sometimes described as 'hermanitos' (little siblings) or 'ambassadors'. The selection of artefacts responded to a broad reading of the

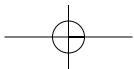
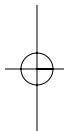
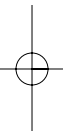
collection. If Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon* 1907 and Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* 1951 are notorious turning points in the narrative of 'the modern', Alÿs's choice of an elongated figure by Giacometti emphasised both the relation to the fetish value of the standing figure, and the pursuit of modern consolation. Finally, to parade NYC artist Kiki Smith as a 'contemporary icon' made a pointed link between the star system and the relatively small number of woman artists in MoMA's collection.



# 43

## Silencio

Mexico 2003–present











## 44

### Gringo

Mexico 2003

In collaboration with Rafael Ortega  
Video documentation of an action  
(5 minutes)

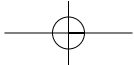
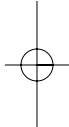
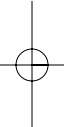
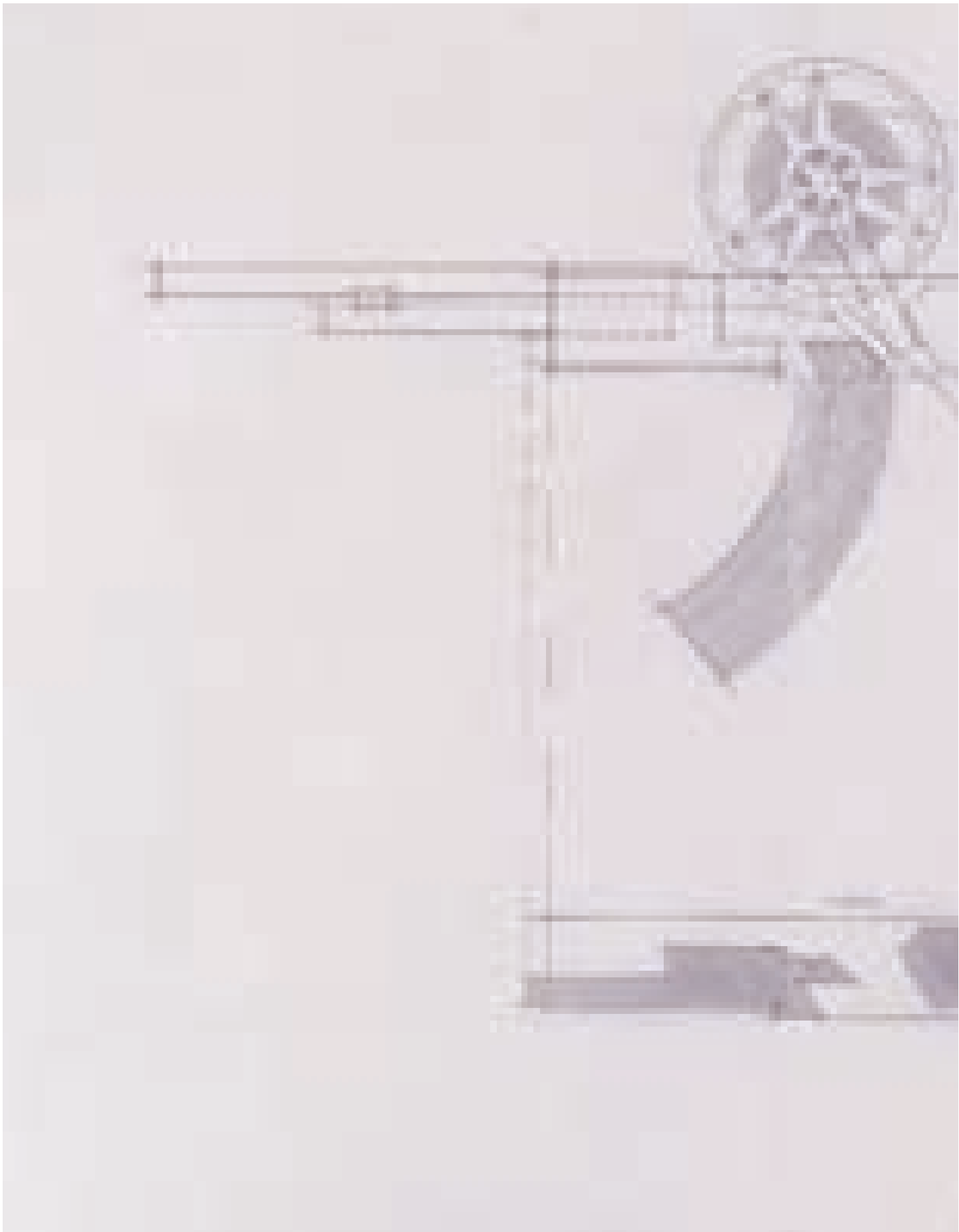
**Protagonist:** the camera

**Cause of the conflict:** the crossing  
of a road blocked by dogs at the  
entry of a village

**Agents of the conflict:** the dogs

**Plot:** the camera has to break its  
way through the pack of dogs in  
order to enter the village.

As is well known, 'gringo' is the derogatory term Mexicans use to refer to North American citizens. Shot in a central province of Mexico, Alÿs's video portrays the confrontation between a group of dogs protecting their master's home and an intruder (the cameraman, invisible to the work's spectators). In this fiction of sorts, the camera takes an active role in the unfolding of the narrative. By examining the way in which its oppressive gaze can be a form of weaponry as much as a shield, it draws attention to how videocameras have become an epitome of power. Acting 'like a dog among dogs', Alÿs deliberately set the camera against the animals knowing that dogs loathe direct eye contact. Throughout the film the camera manages to keep the dogs at bay, sometimes providing a physical armour, sometimes actively entering into the game of menace and recognition.



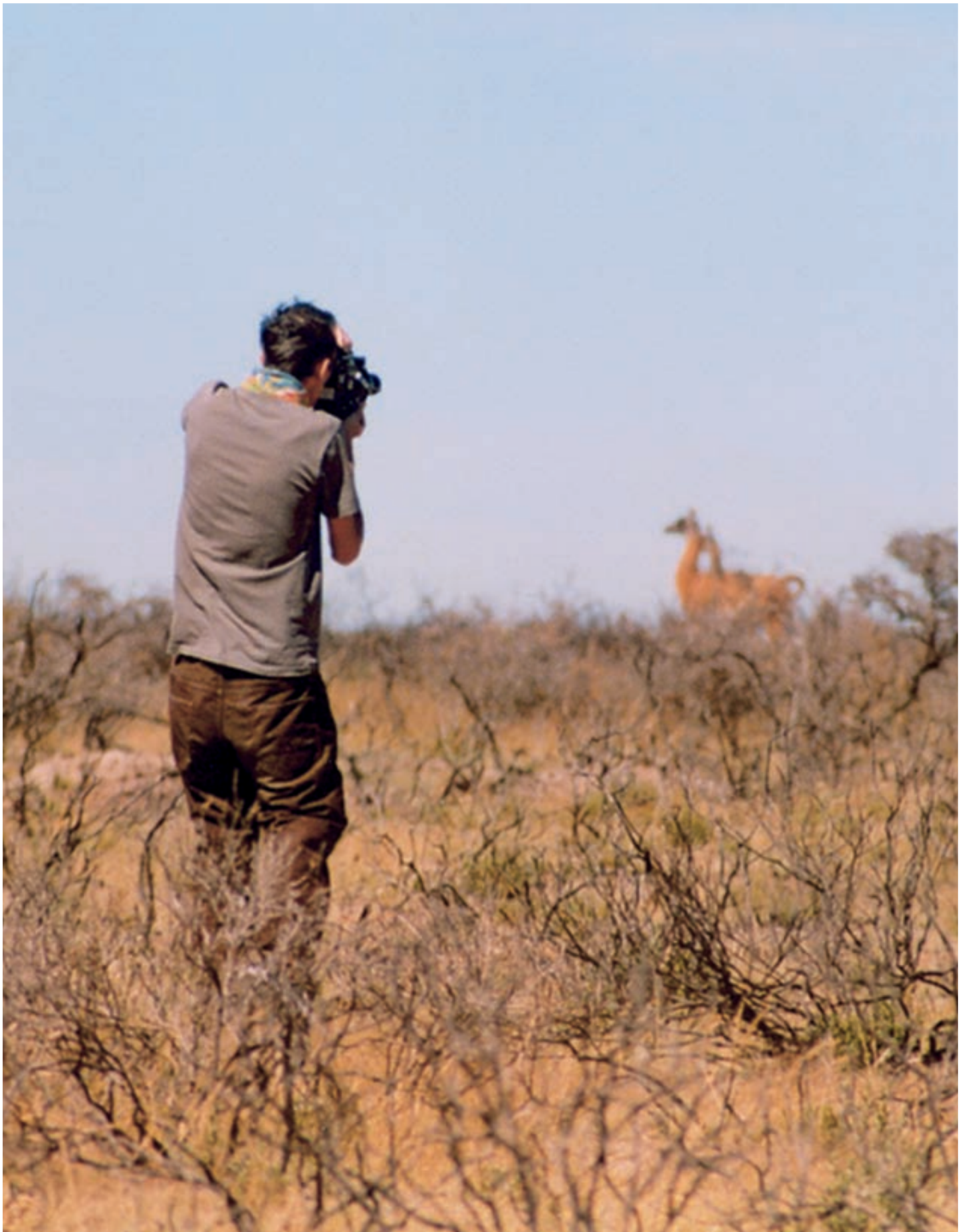


## 45

### Camguns

Mexico City 1994

Around the same time that Alijs was exploring the idea of the camera as a weapon in *Gringo* he was expanding the theme in *Camguns*, a series of assemblages of wooden rifles and found film rolls. Evoking the simulated weapons used by the Zapatista Army when they appeared on the Mexican scene in 1994, this work explicitly connects the 'shooting' of images to that of bullets.





## 46

### **A Story of Deception**

Patagonia 2006

In collaboration with Olivier Debroise and Rafael Ortega

16mm film (4 minutes 20 seconds loop),  
cut painting

*They say that the Tehuelches hunted the ñandu by physically exhausting the animal. The entire tribe would walk for weeks, chasing the flock until the ñandu would give up or die of exhaustion. We, of our time, must chase mirages.*

Moving from the hunting methods of extinct Patagonian Indians to the recent historical experience of Latin America, Alÿs's work in Argentina materialises the concept of a '*fuite en avant*', or forward flight, to describe the fraud of the project of modernisation: 'a historical goal that vanishes perpetually into thin air as soon as it looms on the horizon.' Every decade or so, so-called Third World countries tend to fasten onto a new miraculous economic policy that only succeeds in creating the conditions for a new social collapse. This fatal cycle was particularly poignant in Argentina after the '*corralito*' crisis of 2001. Yet the experience of how every ideology of progress routinely ends in fiasco has had little practical impact on the policies of the region. No matter how many times we walk in circles in the desert of capitalism's promises, we keep on falling for the allure of its mirage. The title of this project, *A Story of Deception*, is one of the main mottos of the artist's account of modernisation.





## 47

### Barrenderos

Mexico City 2004

In collaboration with Julien Devaux

Video documentation of an action

(6 minutes 36 seconds)

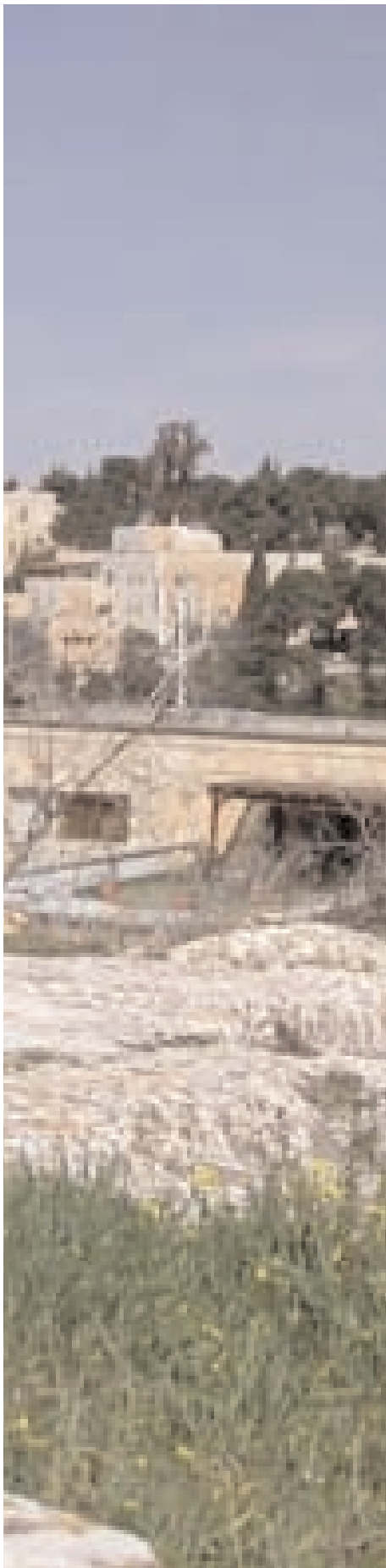
*A line of street sweepers pushing garbage through the streets of Mexico City until they are stopped by the mass of trash.*

The invasion of Mexico City's Historic Centre by street vendors leaves in its wake tons of garbage that is swept up every night. This daily tide of waste inspired the artist to conceive an action reflecting on the question of inertia in mass politics and in the life of urban conglomerations.

In the spirit of the social allegory of *When Faith Moves Mountains*, *Sweepers* shows municipal workers pushing garbage with their brooms until the mountain of rubbish becomes so heavy that it resists any further displacement. The mechanics of the action are the contrary of the ones ruling *Paradox of Praxis 1 1997*: here, in the act of pushing the matter does not dissipate but instead becomes an impediment to the sweepers' progress once it reaches a certain 'critical mass'. This, of course, is one of many instances in which Alÿs's research into the city's economy is based on an attempt to understand the way its refuse is, in fact, one of its most revealing social indices.







## 48

### The Green Line

Jerusalem 2004

Video documentation of an action

*Sometimes doing something poetic can become political, and sometimes doing something political can become poetic.*

*In the summer of 1995 I performed a walk with a leaking can of blue paint in the city of São Paulo. The walk was then read as a poetic gesture of sorts. In June 2004, I re-enacted that same performance by tracing a line following the portion of the 'Green Line' that runs through the municipality of Jerusalem. Shortly after, a filmed documentation of the walk was presented to a number of people whom I invited to react spontaneously to the action and the circumstances within which it was performed.*

*When Faith Moves Mountains, and its unexpected public resonance, led the artist to review his practice so as to explore the relationship between poetic acts and political intervention. This was the starting point for the Green Line project in Jerusalem.*

Alÿs wondered whether the 'poetic licence' of artists to produce loose statements on a particular situation can play a genuine role in opening new perspectives on the course of a given society. Operating in two phases, the artist first transposed into the 'holy city' a previous walk that involved a commentary on action painting, adapted to the task of resuscitating the memory of a historical partition. He then used the footage of his walk to collect a wide range of reactions from Palestinian, Israeli and international subjects, who reflected on the events of the Middle East conflict and the pertinence of artistic practice in such a context.

Alÿs's axiom for the *Green Line* describes the relationship between poetics and politics as contingent, contextual and historical, avoiding any dogmatic stance on its moral or aesthetic necessity. The key contribution of Alÿs's experience is to define the relation between art and politics as conditional: neither 'never' nor 'always', neither 'must' nor 'must not'. All such dichotomies are erased by the gentler concept of 'sometimes', and the potentiality of 'can'.

## 49

**Politics of Rehearsal**

New York 2004

In collaboration with Performa, Rafael Ortega and Cuauhtémoc Medina  
Video (30 minutes), soundtrack:  
Franz Schubert's *Lied der Mignon*

**After exploring for almost a decade the cyclical betrayals of progress, Alÿs decided to use the preparatory material for a live performance of *Rehearsal II* to develop an explicitly reflexive consideration of his overarching argument. The film is, tautologically, the rehearsal of a rehearsal: a disclosure of the balance between control and improvisation arrived at by the artist and filmmaker Rafael Ortega in order to produce the successful fiction of failure. The implications of using a stripper as a vehicle to study an 'ambiguous affair with Modernity, forever arousing, and yet always delaying, the moment it will happen' are fleshed out by an impromptu commentary about the ideologies of the modern in Latin America, in the voice of critic Cuauhtémoc Medina, another of Alÿs's co-conspirators (and author of this text). The document starts with an excerpt from Harry Truman's 1949 inaugural address, in which the American president coined the notion of 'underdevelopment'. One of the arguments of the work is that the notion of 'development' operates as a form of political pornography, transfixing us with a promise of fulfilment that provokes arousal precisely because it is forever denied.**





## 50

### Railings

London 2004

In collaboration with Rafael Ortega and Artangel

Video documentation of an action  
(6 minutes and 57 seconds)

*Upon arriving in ... (new city), pick up a stick, run it along the architecture and listen to the music of the city.*

Well trained in reading the urban fabric as a poetic machine, Alÿs chose to use the iron railings so characteristic of London as a means to extract a site-specific urban beat. Imitating a widespread child's game, but also inspired by postwar musicians such as John Cage, Györgi Ligeti and Steve Reich, Alÿs walked the streets of London exploring the rhythms of the railings with a drumstick. As the work progressed, Alÿs accumulated a wide repertoire of rhythms created by different types of barriers. This was arguably an attempt to activate the limits between the public and the private, and a way to tamper with the symbolic gates of property.









## 51

### The Nightwatch

London 2004

In collaboration with Rafael Ortega and Artangel

Single-channel or twenty-monitor video installation (16 minutes)

*On the night of 7 April 2004, a fox was freed in the National Portrait Gallery. Its wanderings through the rooms were recorded by the institution's CCTV system.*

One of seven works on London commissioned by ArtAngel, *The Nightwatch* developed from Alÿs's awareness of how the complex weaving of history shapes the life of modern megalopoli. At the same time as the omnipresence of CCTV cameras has made London the city with the most surveillance on the planet, the overall urbanisation of the British Isles has pushed wild foxes back into urban territory, turning them into a common pest. In Alÿs's view, the coincidence of these phenomena describes a situation where modern city life is torn apart by the interference of a double temporality: animals that were once expelled beyond the city walls in order to create the rational 'humanist' order of the Renaissance, now live under the constant gaze of a surveillance structure that threatens to subordinate any semblance of privacy – for all of us – to a rule based on the replacement of civil politics by the omniscience of the state. To be sure, the fox plays here the role of the trickster of myths and fables: the cunning underdog, able to neutralise the aura of the powers that be.







## 52

### Guards

London 2004–5

In collaboration with Rafael Ortega and Artangel

Video documentation of an action  
(30 minutes)

*Sixty-four Coldstream Guards enter the City of London by different streets, unaware of one another's route. The guards wander through the City looking for each other. Upon meeting, they fall into step and march together, looking for more guards to join up with. When a square measuring eight by eight guards has been built, the complete formation marches towards the closest bridge. As they step onto the bridge, the guards break step and disperse.*

Using a similar strategy to that of Duett in Venice in 1999, Alÿs restaged the performance a cast of stereotypes of the English monarchy: a regiment of sixty-four Coldstream Guards. The plot was to let the soldiers walk freely around the City of London until they ran into each other and started marching together. As the rejoined units grew in size, the martial sound of their coordinated steps grew loud enough to invite the missing elements to join them, as if responding to bird calls or the pull of a rumour. If Duett was a metaphor of erotic love, Guards stands as a social allegory on 'esprit de corps', the tendency of individuals to seek their identity in group formations. The work may be read as an echo of the parable of the prodigal son, with a hint of Hans Christian Andersen's tale of *The Brave Tin Soldier* (1838).

## 53

### Lynchings (Linchados)

2005

Paintings, oil and collage on canvas on wood, dimensions variable

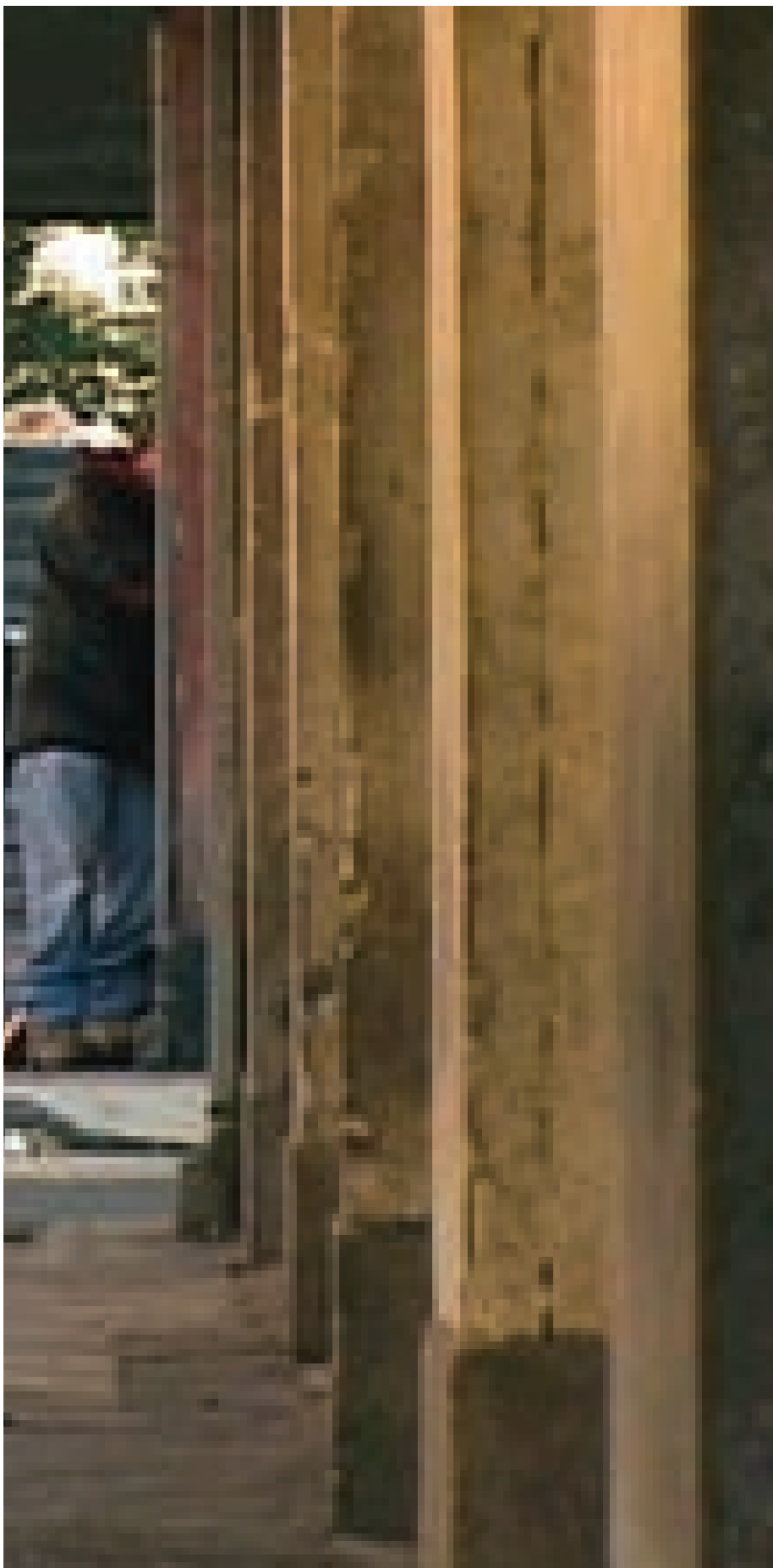
**Despite their seemingly historical aspect, these scenes are an allegori-**

**cal reference to the present and testify to Alÿs's intention of acting like a kind of subtle chronicler of the historical transitions of his host country. Since the last decade of the twentieth century, due to the growing rate of criminality and the lack of confidence in the justice system, Mexico witnessed a series**

**of lynchings where purported thieves and criminals were attacked by mobs convinced that this was the only way justice would be done. If these images are veiled references to Goya or Mexican engraver José Guadalupe Posada, it is to emphasise the power of historical analogies.**







## 54

### Choques

Mexico City 2005

9-channel video installation

*Nine hidden cameras record nine views of an accident on the corner of Calle del cincuenta y siete and Calle República de Cuba, in the Historic Centre of Mexico City.*

Alÿs offers here nine different readings taken from different lines of sight on an accident, in which the artist trips over a dog – a theme he had used with entirely different intentions in *The Last Clown* 2000. However, the viewer will see only one of those perspectives at a time: *Choques* is installed in a similar way as the *Déjà vu* painting series, with each monitor located in a different room of the exhibition space, so as to be encountered consecutively in the course of the tour. Unable to make a simultaneous comparison of any two angles, the spectator feels haunted by the scene, anxiously trapped between two unfortunate moments. The video installation is one among several works where Alÿs alludes to the way our surveillance-obsessed structures of governance mean that practically no event occurs without being recorded as both a form of control and a piece of entertainment.



## 55

### **Knots**

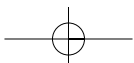
London 2005

Knotted rope and drawings

*Identify the knot with its corresponding act (to walk, to turn right, to turn left, to ...)*

*Knots provides its own code for registering the incidents of a walk: the stroller's small reactions and movements, the accidents that befall him. These notes are written with different knots accompanied by their translation on a sheet of paper, tying the knots to actions and situations. The result is a kind*

*of memory that, once the code is learned, can be read eyes closed by running the rope through one's fingers like a rosary, or an Inca quipu. But it also illustrates the way Alÿs once again establishes a certain commonality between his actions and the research into a vocabulary of sculpture.*











## 56

### Bridge/Puente

Key West/La Havana 2006

Video and photographic documentation of an action

*On 29 March 2006, the fishing communities of Havana and Key West were invited to line up their boats to send out a floating bridge between the United States and Cuba. The two lines headed from opposite shores towards the same horizon so as to create the illusion of a bridge.*

In the autumn of 2005, Alÿs came across an article on a dispute between Cuban migrants and US authorities that exposed the paradoxes of the law passed by Jimmy Carter's administration on the handling of Cuban boatpeople: should the balseros have 'dry feet', that is, if they are caught on dry land in the US, they are granted legal right to remain; but if they are intercepted at sea – with 'wet feet' – they are immediately sent back to Cuba. On this occasion the boatpeople had disembarked on one of the bridges that link the Florida Keys, so their migratory status was uncertain. For Alÿs's action, fishing communities on the two frontlines of one of the last battlegrounds of the Cold War era metaphorically bridged the two nations across the Gulf of Mexico. Given the unremitting tension between the America and Cuba, the action had to be executed in surreptitious fashion: the two teams working on either side never fully shared the project as such with the participants. As the film of the action suggests, the performance involved the conflicting points of view of those in the know, those who remained or wished to remain oblivious, and those who were able to draw the proper conclusions.

**57****Untitled (Bandera)**

Mexico City 2006

Photographic documentation of an action

Alj's walking at sunrise, parading a knotted flag along the streets of Mexico City, accompanied by dogs. This private hermetic action was an uncoded gesture prompted by the atmosphere of general disappointment following the contested presidential elections in 2006. Unbeknownst to the artist, certain glossaries of vexillology (the study of flags) indicate that historically 'waft or weft' was a 'term, now obsolete, [for a] flag tied in a knot and displayed at sea as the signal of some emergency'. As Giorgio Agamben wrote: 'terminology is the poetic moment of thought'. This 'flag of distress', refusing any precise symbolisation, nonetheless punctuates the experience of the misplaced hopes invested by a whole generation in the much-vaunted 'transition to democracy'.





## 58

**Retoque/Painting**

Ex-Panama Canal Zone 2008  
Video documentation of an  
action (8 minutes 28 seconds)

*Action consisting in repainting sixty median strips erased by the passage of time in the former Panama Canal Zone.*

Two conflicting moves are affected in this seemingly absurdist gesture. On the one hand, Alÿs's response to the request from curator Magali Arriola to reflect on the mobility of geographical borders and the rise, transformation and obliteration of territorial demarcations. On the other, a reflection on the predicament of painting: the difficulty of conveying the significance of history by means of the skills of a hand wielding a brush, and the persistent attempt to reconcile a studio activity with a public event. The action takes place across the US military bases of the Ex-Canal Zone of Panama on the 80 km-long road that joins the Pacific and the Atlantic and cuts the Latin American continent in two. Repainting the median strips does not imply restoration, but a metaphoric dialogue with the symbolic divides that have shaped the destiny of the Americas, and an attempt to interpellate, albeit in a mysterious and playful manner, the current inhabitants of the neighbourhood. The work further develops the method Alÿs employed in his retracing of the *Green Line* in Jerusalem, as much as his concern with the erosion of political engagement. For so often, to paraphrase Mayakovsky's last poem, love's ship founders on the rocks of life.





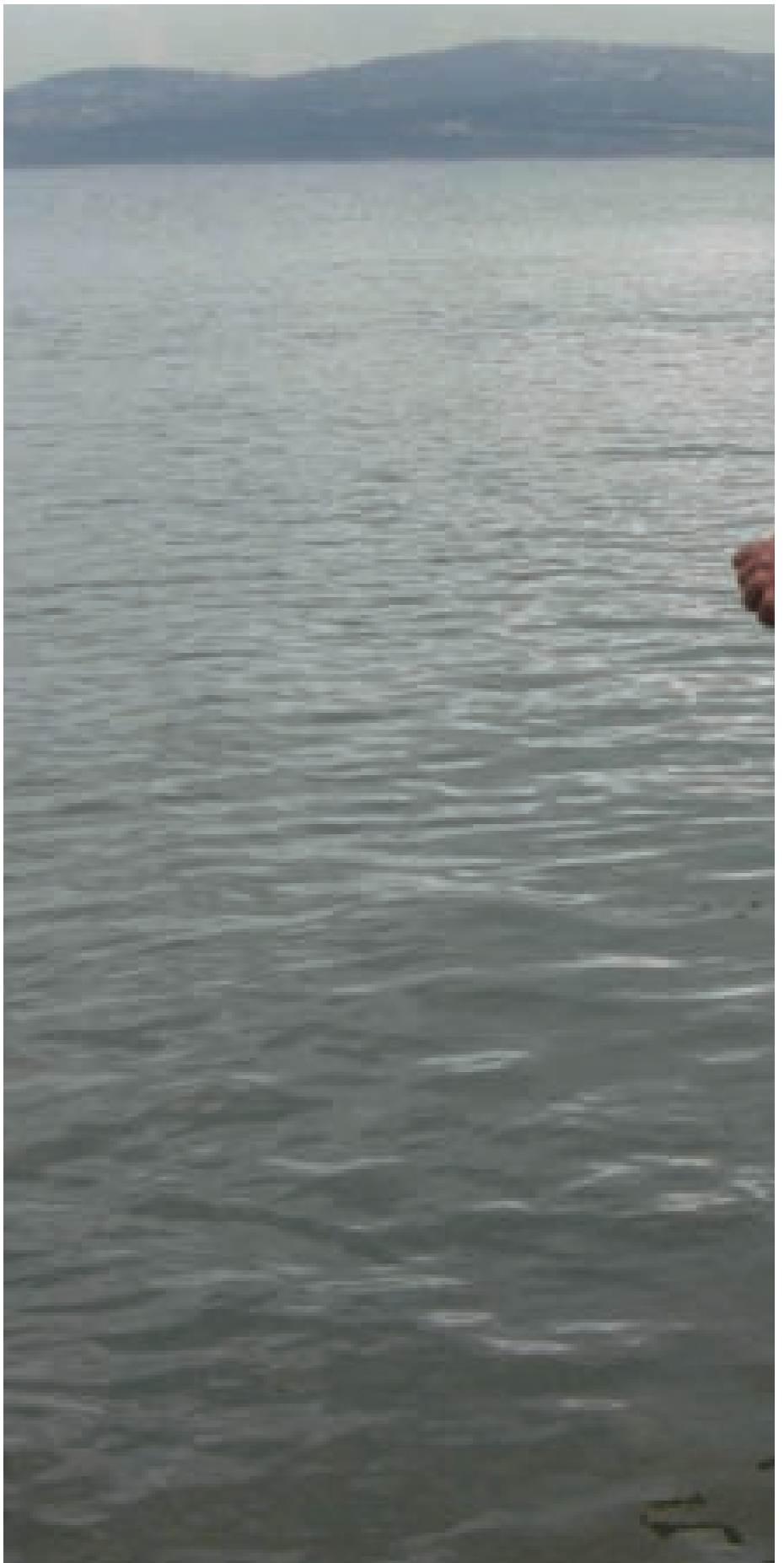
## 59

### Children's Games

Various locations, 2008

Videos (various durations)

**We all know the role of children's games in mirroring the symbols and structures of their era. They operate as surreptitious historical communicating vessels: a means whereby an atemporal vocabulary passes from one generation to the next, crossing continents and civilisations despite the violence of colonial and modern transformations. Ancient rituals survive, at times, within childish rules and rhymes that, if more closely looked at, contain whole bygone worldviews and poetic modes of thinking. Since 2008 Alÿs has started a compilation of such games, both as a homage to the source of inspiration of many of his own fables, and as another collection of social repertoires. Each of them appears, also, as a means to signify the passing of our own dreams and projects into the future.**







**60****Don't Cross the Bridge  
Before You Get to the River**

Strait of Gibraltar 2008–present  
Video and photo documentation of an  
action

*On 12 August 2008, a line of kids each carrying a boat made out of a shoe leaves Europe in the direction of Morocco, while a second line of kids with shoe-boats leaves Africa in the direction of Spain. The two lines will meet on the horizon.*

In *The Loop* 1996, by avoiding the political border between the States and Mexico, Alÿs's circumnavigation of the world involved a certain evasion of the then-current political agenda. Eight years later in Lima, the mechanics of displacement of a dune oscillated in between poetry and politics. The *Green Line* in Jerusalem (2005) openly questioned the role and relevance of poetics in a situation of political conflict. In August 2008, the *Gibraltar* project reflected a wish to fall back upon poetics, and marked a return to the way children's fantasies relate to contemporary history. Whereas an actual attempt to close the Strait of Gibraltar by means of, say, a bridge of cargo ships would have entailed a shift from artistic practice into engineering, the absence of a bridge in Alÿs's project permits a narrative in which shoes become vessels and children turn into mythical giants.



## 61

**Tornado (working title)**

Milpa Alta 2000–10

Video documentation of an action  
(55 minutes)

*'Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter.  
Try again. Fail again. Fail better.'*  
(Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho*,  
1983)

All through the first decade of the twenty-first century, Alÿs made recurrent trips to the highlands south of Mexico City to chase, video camera in hand, the dusty whirls whipped up by the wind in the burnt fields at the end of the dry season. Rumour has it that the genesis of this project was, in fact, a comic quid pro quo: Alÿs overheard a conversation where friends were talking about Don Quixote fighting windmills (in Spanish, *molinos de viento*), but he understood instead tornadoes (*remolinos de viento*). As in Cervantes's work, Alÿs's intent to penetrate the peaceful zone in the epicentre of the tornado illustrates a condition where 'the vanity of the action is paired with its absolute necessity'. Although there are analogies between this chase and the pursuit of mirages in Patagonia, *Tornado* is a convoluted reflection on the struggle for Utopia, which ought to take place in the eye of the tempest. The work is a celebration of the way one's endurance in the pursuit of meaning cannot be ruled by calculation, for then it would turn into a means to an end, rather than be an expression of desire.



