

FRANCIS ALÿS

Walking Distance from the Studio

This exhibition brings together a selection of artworks created over the past ten years by Francis Alÿs (Belgium, 1959) that focus on the historical centre of Mexico City. All of them refer to places located within a radius of ten blocks from the artist's studio, such as the emblematic Zócalo (Central Square). Strolls through these areas, overheard conversations and stories relating to these trajectories constitute the principal source of Francis Alÿs' work, and the act of walking is a fundamental part of his creative process. His projects, which are frequently of an ephemeral nature, explore the anthropological space and the social and political reality of the neighbourhood and construe a human map through narrations of fables, anecdotes and random situations seen or experienced during one of his numerous walks.

Walking Distance from the Studio includes video installations, paintings, sculptures, drawings, photographs, slide shows, installations and documentation. The catalogue contains an essay by the Mexican writer, Carlos Monsiváis, as well as numerous photographs of works by Alÿs. Before reaching Barcelona, this exhibition was shown at the Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg in Germany, and at the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Nantes in France, and it will subsequently travel to the Museo de San Ildefonso in Mexico City in early 2006.

Exhibition dates: 27 May to 29 August 2005

Curators: Gijs van Tuijl/Annelie Lütgens (Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg); Bartomeu Marí (MACBA)

Production: Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, in association with MACBA

Museum hours: Weekdays, 11-19.30h (from 25/6 to 24/9, 11-20h) / Saturdays, 10-20h./ Sundays and holidays, 10-15h / Closed Tuesday (except holidays). Entrance to this exhibiton: 4€.

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Collaborator at MACBA: Consulate of Mèxico

The passer-by, from Baudelaire's flâneur to the Situationist *dérive*, is a figure widely present in literature. In the words of Paul Auster, "...what we are really doing when we walk through the city is thinking, and thinking in such a way that our thoughts compose a journey, and this journey is not more or less that the steps we have taken" (1). By the same token, since the second half of the 20th century, walking has clearly appeared in the sphere of the arts of our times, nearly as a founding image, as substance and as action. Through his works, Alÿs modernises experiments carried out in the sixties and seventies by such artists as Joseph Beuys, Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci and **Stanley Brouwn** (the latter's work will be exhibited at the MACBA simultaneously with that of Alÿs). For Alÿs, walking is a way of creating a type of thought equivalent to revealing, observing and catalysing the tension, the minimal resistance between the urban setting and its inhabitants produced as a reaction to modern structures of control and uniformization. These are actions that may or may not leave traces, which the artist collects or documents as samples of the visibility of the complex environment around him.

Francis Alÿs, an architect by profession, has been living since the eighties in Mexico City, where he arrived at a time of severe economic crisis and where he has carried out the majority of his works. He simultaneously uses various media, including painting, drawing, diagrams, installations and video. The selection exhibited at the MACBA pays particular attention to actions "infiltrating" urban space and carried out by either the artist himself or other individuals. In these actions, fugitive, transitory and absurd elements intrinsic to everyday life are rendered. Regarding the manner in which he produces his work, Alÿs stated: "When I can sum up an idea in an anecdote that can be easily transferred, it means that it belongs to no-one; it becomes socialised and can be infinitely reproduced."

The exhibition starts with an installation, **45 Ghetto Collectors** (2004), a series of works from the early nineties in which Alÿs focussed on the idea of collecting. It is a series of "collectors", small, pressed and magnetised constructions designed to be dragged along the ground, collecting metallic rubbish as they move in the fashion of 'rag-and-bone men'. For Alÿs, the act of dragging the collectors behind him, which are gradually covered in a second skin as he wanders through the streets, creates a narrative structure on an intermediate ground between reality and fiction. Alÿs uses this narration metaphorically to integrate into a territory in which he is, by definition, a foreigner. At the same time, mobile works replace the conventional concept of sculpture with an element that interacts with the urban space. In many of his works, the creation of alternative narrations on the basis of small or everyday aspects follows a conception of the city as a meeting point for community space and social conflict. In his own words, "My work is a series of notes and orientations. The invention of the language goes on a par with the invention of the city."

In this sense, there are series of works in which marginalised groups appear, such as the slides in the series **Sleepers** (1997-2002) or **Ambulantes** (Street Vendors, 1992-2002). The former consists of three sets of eighty slides each, which the artist updates with new images every year, in which he portrays people and dogs sleeping in the street on the same level, alluding to the conditions of life in large cities. The latter displays street vendors pulling their carts, representatives of the underground economy. These works attempt to dialogue with precariousness, improvisation and parasitism in urban life.

Alÿs' actions can also be interpreted as a discrete occupation of public space, as occurs in **If You Are a Real Spectator, What You Are Really**

Doing Is Waiting for the Accident to Happen (1997), or in *Paradox of Praxis, Part 1: Sometimes Making Something Leads to Nothing* (1997), in which experiencing what is ephemeral and random brings us back to the Fluxus experiments by George Brecht and Nam June Paik. These are works in which time is dilated, nothing particular occurs or the action carried out is useless and verges on the absurd. They are a way of inciting friction between the demands of efficiency of cultural and economic globalisation and the latent forms of resistance that accompany it, as is also the case with *Cuando la fe mueve montañas* (When Faith Moves Mountains), shown in conjunction with the exhibition.

Some of his works are explicit allusions to the Mexican political climate, such as *Re-Enactments* (2000), one of his most subversive and disturbing works, which has some aspects in common with certain works by Bruce Naumann. In this piece, Alÿs goes into the street with a gun in his hand, waiting for chance to take its course. A double projection shows a recording of the original action until the police arrest him, and next to it, a repetition of the same action: a reconstruction of the event recorded with the help of the Police. *Vivienda para todos* (Housing for All, 1994) is a work that refers to the campaign slogan used in the Mexican elections of 1994. The video, *Cuentos patrióticos* (Patriotic Stories, 1997) shows a man walking in circles around the central flag at the Zócalo (central square), first leading a single sheep, to which others are gradually added until they form a circle. The apparent lack of meaning is not the only aspect of this action, taken to the absurd by this video loop projected indefinitely, but it also alludes to the renowned student protest of 1968 in Mexico City, which was brutally repressed; afterwards, thousands of civil servants were called to the square to acclaim the new government, and in a gesture of rebellion, some of them bleated like sheep in protest against the servile spirit of the population. In *Zócalo, May 22, 1999*, an installation created jointly with Rafael Ortega, a camera located at the top

of a building records the activities of the central square for twelve hours. The passage of time is indicated, like a giant sundial, by the enormous shadow – in which numerous passers-by take refuge – shed by the flagpole located in the middle of the square, which is a national symbol of Mexican history and its public spaces.

The video, ***Cantos patrióticos*** (Patriotic Songs, 1998-1999), has sentimental connotations referring to the lyrics, often critical, of Mexican 'corridos' sung by a mariachi band in Plaza Garibaldi. The lyrics tell the story of a boatman who suddenly, in the middle of the river, loses his sense of direction and no longer knows whether he's moving forward or backward, going in circles "between two currents". The cyclical montage of the video alludes to the slow progress of a society 'moving in circles', while reflecting the process involved in creating the work.

(1) Paul Auster. *The Invention of Solitude*. New York: Sun, 1982

(Some of the works in the exhibition / MACBA)

In ***Cuentos Patrióticos*** (Patriotic Tales; 1997) the Zócalo square in the centre of Mexico City is, as in many of his works, the venue for a richly metaphoric enactment: At first one sees two sheep standing in the square in front of the cathedral's baroque facade. Following a long shot of the square, a man enters the scene leading a whether around the flagpole at its centre. After each round a sheep joins the ram until they make up a full circle. Besides taking the manifest meaninglessness of this activity to absurd lengths, the video's loop is also making a historical reference to the civil unrest in 1968 in which this square played a crucial role. Thousands of state employees were instructed to assemble here to acclaim the new government. As a gesture of rebellion the civil servants collectively turned their backs on the official state tribune and began bleating like sheep.

His ***Cantos Patrióticos*** (Patriotic Songs; 1999) were inspired by a traditional form of Spanish ballad and are performed by a Mariachi group. The songs relate the story of a ferryman who suddenly loses all sense of direction in the middle of a river and no longer knows whether he is moving forwards or backwards, in other words, whether his boat is heading back to the shore where he came from or is crossing to the other side. So he turns round and round in circles "entre dos aguas", between two waters. But Alÿs depicts this rotation as a kind of forward progression, thereby also echoing the inception and development of this work.

In ***Sometimes making something leads to nothing (ice), part 1*** (1997) Francis Alÿs pushed a block of ice a whole day long through the streets of Mexico City. Whereas in the morning the block of ice had still been large enough to touch by barely bending over, several hours later it has shrunk so much that it can be kicked along the street, and shortly before seven in the evening all that reminds us of its existence is a small puddle.

His fascination for the vast open space of the Zócalo, the historical square in the midst of this overpopulated city, inspired him to create an eponymous piece in 1999. Beyond its function as a national symbol, Alÿs sees the flagpole at the very centre of the square also as a sundial, whose shadow gradually shifts around the square and offers passers-by a slender strip of shadow.

Re-enactments is one of the artist's most subversive and overtly political works: in November 2000 Alÿs wandered through the streets of Mexico City holding a 9-mm Beretta. Easily identifiable as a foreigner by his height, the weapon in his hand clearly made passers-by think he was mentally deranged or a criminal. Only twelve minutes passed before he was arrested by a

policeman; but after he had explained himself he persuaded the policeman to re-enact the scene with him and recorded it on video.

Sleepers (1997–2002) is an on-going work that already consists of three sets of eighty slides. The artist began the series in 1997 and has progressively updated it each year. The pictures show people and dogs he encountered sleeping outdoors in Mexico City's historical centre, homeless people deprived of any form of privacy. Even the intimate moment of sleep becomes a public display, while the analogy between sleeping people and dogs highlights a problem that occurs in all cities, the partially inhumane and brutal conditions of life they engender.

Ambulantes is a series of slides taken between 1992 and 2002 showing people conveying goods, as well as the so-called hawkers and peddlers who inhabit the streets of this megalopolis. People are seen staggering under perilously high piles of all manner of products, shouldering impossibly large objects or trundling the paraphernalia of their trade before them. The city as a place of trade and exchange is inventively and playfully presented by these 'jugglers'. The way the protagonists improvise solutions for their transport problems imbues the streets almost with a sense of folkloristic theatre.

For over ten years the artist has also been preoccupied with the phenomenon of collecting, as is shown in his piece ***Collector*** (2004). In 1991, for instance, he constructed a small magnetic metal dog which he then dragged through the streets. The dog picked up everything made of metal until it was utterly coated in small metal objects.