

Francis Alÿs: Walking distance from the Studio

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Touring to Musée des beaux-Arts, Nantes, and Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona

Francis Alÿs (b.1959) is Belgian, but he has been based in Mexico City for almost twenty years. Initially trained as an architect, he now works in a number of media and the exhibition *Walking Distance from the Studio* included examples of his videos, slide shows, paintings and objects, as well as preparatory material for many of the finished works on display. For the exhibition, the artist had the white-cube galleries of the Kunstmuseum divided up, both horizontally and vertically, by a series of wooden structures. The untreated timber that was used gave these structures a ramshackle, temporary feel, in stark contrast to the pristine gallery spaces. Some works were installed on high platforms, only visible if one climbed the wooden stairs; underneath the steps, one found other work secreted away.

The method of installation points to Alÿs' background in architecture and his interest in creating public spaces, but it seemed to owe something to the atmosphere of his adopted city as well. In the Kunstmuseum, he created an environment that gave the viewer a number of possible journeys round the show and a variety of ways in which to view and experience the works – as if one were meandering through streets in an unfamiliar urban landscape. Alÿs himself is an avid wanderer and the initial concept for a project often emerges during one of his walks. For inspiration, Alÿs often looks no further than the streets around him and the Zócalo (Plaza Major) at the heart of the Mexico City. Rather matter of factly, *Walking distance from the Studio*, brought together works that were made within Alÿs' immediate locale – typically no more than ten blocks around his studio.

Appropriately, a series of drawings made over a number of years and entitled *City Maps* were included in the exhibition. These showed the different routes through Mexico City that Alÿs has taken in the process of making certain works like *The Collector* of 1991, in which he took small toy dogs, magnetised and on wheels, for daily walks, attracting metal detritus as they went. Some of the toy dogs were also on display in Wolfsburg with the debris they had collected. Whilst the works in the show were inspired by Alÿs' local terrain, they have a global resonance. Many of the issues he finds in Mexico City – such as extreme poverty - are universal.

In an exhibition that basically constituted a mid-career survey, the video pieces were perhaps the most compelling. They illustrate Alÿs' talent for observation, often capturing the absurd in the most ordinary and everyday actions, with a very distinct wit and humour. Whilst his videos might be funny, there is no doubt that he is a serious artist. Certainly, one can tell from the preparatory drawings, photographs and plans included in the exhibition the extent to which each piece is carefully thought through. Humour is complex and subjective. 'It may permit a certain distance...' as Alÿs mentions in



the exhibition catalogue, 'but laughter is a symptom of incomprehension... a simple manifestation of the defeat of intelligence'.¹ Laughter may indeed be a nervous reaction to our failure to know how else to respond; it is indeed possible to hear an audience laugh at end of Alÿs' 1997 video *If you are a spectator what you are really doing is waiting for the accident to happen (Bottle)*. In this work a plastic bottle is carried along by the wind hither and thither; it gradually makes a journey across Zócalo duly followed by Alÿs with his camera. For nearly fifteen minutes, this is a delightful, almost whimsical, work to watch, but when the bottle is blown into the road (pursued by Alÿs), there is the sound of screeching brakes, a thud, and then the camera drops to the ground. The end is sudden, unexpected, shocking and funny. Alÿs was hypnotised by a bottle, as are we; but then both artist and viewer are brought back to reality with a jolt. Unsure of what has actually happened to the unfortunate artist, we can do little more than laugh. It is possibly an inappropriate response, but it is an instinctive one.

Humour is a useful tool. Used judiciously by an artist like Alÿs, it can draw the viewer in and encourage them to spend time with the work. Whilst Alÿs may make us laugh, equally, he makes us think, and at the core of his work we often find the more brutal implications of city life to ponder on. In the 1997 video *Cuentas Patrióticos (Patriotic Tales)*, Alÿs walks round the Madre Patria – the flag on a huge pole in the centre of Zócalo – followed by a sheep. After one circuit, another sheep enters stage right and joins them on this journey, blindly following the leader. Another sheep appears, then another and so on, until Alÿs and the sheep form a complete loop, pointlessly circling the flagpole. The making of the work owed more to digital technology than to Alÿs' ability to charm sheep. Nonetheless, when one first sees the film it seems as if Alÿs has the magical powers of the Pied Piper. What he seems to be suggesting with this work, is that we are all like sheep, too afraid to stray from the flock and unable to question our leaders no matter what kind of journey they takes us on. The use of sheep, blindly following a leader, is perhaps a clichéd conceit, but Alÿs uses it well and elicits a wry smile. In fact, as the catalogue points out, Alÿs is referencing a positive occasion of group action, when, in 1968, civil servants were forced to congregate in the square to welcome the newly appointed government and they chose to bleat like sheep instead.

Zócalo square was the centre of Tenochtitlán, the pre-Hispanic city of the Aztecs. Today, it remains a vital focal point in an otherwise sprawling Mexico City - a vast public space that is used for all aspects of urban life: for orientation, to meet, to buy, to sell, to exchange, to play, to protest. It is at once local and global, a microcosmic mash of human existence. Important to Mexico City, Zócalo is therefore important to Alÿs and the square features in many of his works. The 1999 *Zócalo, May 22, 1999*, for instance, is a twelve-hour film of life in the square accompanied by a bustling soundtrack emanating from large megaphones. In the film we see the comings and goings of everyday social encounters from some height and at a distance, and at the centre the shadow of the flagpole progresses like a great sundial. The flagpole is so big that even within the vastness of Zócalo, it has an ominous presence - which seems appropriate, as the Madre Patria is a representation of the presence of the state. Incidentally, however, the flagpole also offers a slim, shady retreat from the sun on oppressively hot days. Unaware of Alÿs and his camera, people come and go, but there is always a considerable



crowd. Clustered together, they move slowly round with the shadow in order to stay in the shade. Filmed for such a long time and from a high vantage point, the simple act of finding some shade looks comical.

As an artist in Mexico City, Alÿs occupies an interesting position as a foreigner and an immigrant. From this stance as an outsider, he presents his version of reality by taking the mundane and shifting it slightly into the absurd or the poetic. The fact that ordinary people figure in his work is potentially problematic as he is an artist in a city where the majority are very poor. For example, the subjects of a work like the 1992-2002 slide show *Ambulantes* are scratching together an existence by selling all manner of low-level goods from little wheeled trolleys. When they are photographed, in isolation and out of context, the trolleys look funny because they are piled way too high with all manner of bits and pieces, but it is only by selling such stuff that these people survive. In the 1997-2002 *Sleepers* (1997-2002), slides showing homeless people are interspersed with shots of sleeping dogs. For the homeless, deprived of any form of privacy on the streets, even the act of sleeping becomes public. The juxtaposition of images is suitably unsettling and even begins to strike an unsavoury note, as there is little enough dignity in the life of a homeless person without being compared to a dog.



Francis Alÿs, *Sleepers I* (1), 1997-1999, colour slide. (Photograph: Herbert Nelius, Hanover).

In the 2000 *Re-enactments* two videos are projected side by side. In both, Alÿs is seen buying a 9-mm Berretta, which he holds in his hand as he proceeds to walk through the streets. The gun is clearly visible, onlookers look shocked and the tension starts to mount; watching the work, we begin to wonder how long Alÿs' journey will last and what grim event will be the culmination of his 'performance'. A timer in the corner of the projection counts the passing seconds, and after twelve minutes Alÿs is duly arrested and disappears in a police car and we are left musing on his foolish, brave act. One discovers from reading the catalogue that after the initial filming and his actual arrest, Alÿs was able to convince the police that he was an artist and not a deranged killer. He then persuaded them to let him re-enact the scene for his video camera, complete with a fake arrest at the end. When first watching the two films (without the benefit of Alÿs' explanation) the eye constantly flits



from one to the other, and we are never quite sure of what is real and what is staged. Whilst this is an undeniably gripping experience, the potential violence in the work stems from Western expectations of gun crime in Latin America - by his own admission the scenario was a mistake and Alÿs feels he should have chosen something more banal: 'like someone tripping on a banana peel'.²

Momentarily, *Ambulantes*, *Sleepers* and *Re-enactments* made me wonder if Alÿs would ever occupy any other position than that of a privileged Westerner. He is from the developed world after all, looking at the impoverished and using their lives for art. Moreover, the humour he finds in difficult or distressing situations could be deemed completely inappropriate. Is he merely making fun of Mexicans, focusing in his own quirky way on their idiosyncratic and amusing behaviour for our enjoyment? And in the process is he infantilising them and demeaning the grim reality of their plight?



Francis Alÿs, *Sleepers I (2)*, 1997-1999, colour slide. (Photograph: Herbert Nelius, Hanover).

However, this would be the wrong conclusion to make. Alÿs might focus on peoples' funny ways and make them look silly, but he does not exactly hide his own eccentricities. This is the man who in 1997 pushed a block of ice round Mexico City until nothing but a puddle remained in *Sometimes making something leads to nothing (ice), part I*. In 1999 he made *The Rehearsal* in which he repeatedly drove a VW Beetle to the top of a hill, switched off the engine and allowed it to roll back down again (on one occasion just missing another passing car), and in 2002 he had 500 volunteers move a hill using only shovels in *When Faith Moves Mountains*. When witnessing such events, what must Mexicans make of him?

Ultimately, I feel Alÿs does engage with the political and social aspects of Mexico City. He cares about the position of the people who live there, their spirit and their ability to survive. In 1987 Alÿs first went to Mexico City as an architect to help with the rebuilding programme after an earthquake. He further demonstrated the extent of his compassion in 2004 by giving his €70,000 award (as the first recipient of the 'Blue Orange' prize) to an aid organisation for homeless children. The empathy with his



subjects and ideas lends sensitivity to his work – he is not patronising or detached, but personally involved. He sees the manifest faults around him and his work often reveals the raw and inhumane aspects of life in the city. Having lived there for so long, he is certainly no interloper and he appears to feel at home there. And yet conversely, many of his works retain a sense of him being a little lost, a bit like a tourist. After all, could he ever be totally absorbed? Presumably not, since it might skew his vision from the periphery - and it is his view from the edge that is crucial to his role as an observer and therefore his work as an artist. At once involved and detached, it is a very fine line that Alÿs is treading as he walks round his adopted city.

The exhibition travels to Barcelona and Nantes, but there is no venue in Britain. Someone here should organise a solo show here, soon.

Stephen Feeke
Henry Moore Institute, Leeds

¹ 'La Cour des Miracles: Francis Alÿs in conversation with Corinne Diserens – Mexico City, 25 May 2004', in *Francis Alÿs: Walking Distance from the Studio* (2004), ex. cat., Wolfsburg: Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, p. 113.

² Ibid, p. 95.

