

MUSÉE CANTONAL DES BEAUX-ARTS LAUSANNE

Francis Alÿs. As Long as I'm Walking

15.10.2021 – 16.1.2022

Press kit



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1. Press release

This autumn, the MCBA is presenting a major exhibition by Francis Alÿs, an internationally renowned artist who will represent Belgium at the 59th Venice Biennale in 2022.

Produced in close collaboration with the artist, the Lausanne show *Francis Alÿs. As Long as I'm Walking* presents an overview of the artist's video work of the last thirty years, with an emphasis on one of the central themes in Alÿs's practice, namely walking. Through his seemingly insignificant walks, Alÿs not only reimagines the city, he also creates narratives, spreads rumors, maps the social fabric of the place through actions that are sometimes short, sometimes carried out over long distances or many hours, by turns dragging, pushing or carrying an accessory that stands in for a clue to reading the fable spun by the body in motion.

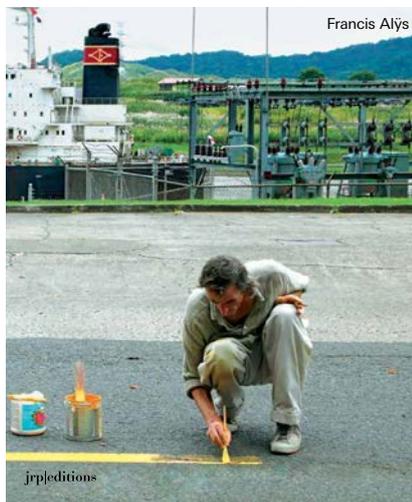
While Alÿs figures as a protagonist in most of his early videos, he moves behind the camera in a series of works begun in 1999, the *Children's Games*. In these videos, shot in a number of countries, the imaginary spaces of childhood blend with the fictional spaces of the artist, offering him an entry point when dealing with unknown situations or contexts. During his first trip to Kabul in 2010, for instance, Alÿs observed children playing and filmed one of their favorite games, which became the inspiration for *Reel-Unreel* (2011), one of the core works to come out of his explorations in Afghanistan. It is featured in the Lausanne show along with paintings and works on paper. In this project, as in his city wanderings, the artist reveals the deeply subversive potential of play and fiction, while making it possible, short of refashioning reality, to imagine and see it differently.

Francis Alÿs (*1959, Antwerp) turned to the visual arts after training as an architect, while living in Mexico City where he settled in 1986. During his numerous walks throughout the megalopolis, Alÿs studied and documented daily life in and around the capital in a series of performative actions. The city became the material of his art; his moving body and the rules of the game he set himself were his tools, while the film captured the traces of his actions. Over the years, Alÿs would extend his walks to other urban spaces, from Havana to London, Venice or Jerusalem, reimagining each city through his itineraries. While his output questions the link between artistic happening and political intervention, Alÿs always works through allusions, with remarkable precision and economy of means, preferring a poetic multiplicity of meanings to straight-out political commentary.

Exhibition curator:

Nicole Schweizer, curator of contemporary art,
with the assistance of Elisabeth Jobin, assistant curator.

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Publication

Nicole Schweizer (ed.), *Francis Alÿs. As Long as I'm Walking*, with texts by Julia Bryan-Wilson, Luis Pérez-Oramas, and Judith Rodenbeck, and an introduction by Nicole Schweizer, co-ed. Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts de Lausanne and JRP Editions, Geneva, 2021 (2 editions FR. and EN.), 160 p., 277 ill.

CHF 50.– in bookstores

CHF 45.– at the MCBA bookshop during the exhibition

Orders: shop.mcba@vd.ch

Hours

Tuesday–Sunday: 10am–6pm

Thursday: 10am–8pm

Monday: closed

25 December 2021: closed

1st January 2022: closed

Admission

Adults: CHF 20.– / 15.–

Up to 25 years old: free

1st Saturday of the month: free

Exhibition partners



Hans-Eugen und Margrit Stucki-Liechti Stiftung



Dr. Georg und Josi Guggenheim Stiftung

2. The exhibition

1st floor | Gallery 1

Children's Games

Since 1999, Alÿs has been filming the games of children on his journeys to cities, towns, and war zones, and has entitled this ongoing series *Children's Games*. While the games he has recorded reflect certain mores, customs, or rituals of a given region, as a whole they surprise us with the universality of the gestures and rules that are repeated from one country to another, e.g., musical chairs, kites, marbles, sand castles, paper-scissors-glue, and so on. In this series Alÿs presents games as an activity that is played on the fringe of society, infinitely poetic and unproductive, enabling participants to tell stories, make connections with others, and experience space.

The two *Children's Games* shown in this room were recorded in Afghanistan in 2011 when the artist was traveling in the country at the invitation of DOCUMENTA (13), the major contemporary art exhibition that takes place every five years in Kassel, Germany. In *Children's Game #10 (Papalote)*, a boy holds the almost invisible string of a kite, which he manipulates with quick and precise gestures. This game takes on a subversive aspect given the context in which it was shot, since the Taliban had forbidden the use of kites. The world of childhood and the world of violence likewise come together when the boy hears the noise of a military helicopter and stops playing. The image of his kite is replaced by that of a machine for waging war. Screening opposite that video is *Children's Game #11 (Wolf and Lamb)*, in which a group of boys tries to protect an initial player, the "lamb," from a second one, the "wolf," stopping the latter from entering the circle they form by holding hands and offering the "prey" a refuge. Between provocation and threat, group dynamics and trickery, this game points up the codes of inclusion and exclusion at work within society in the broad sense of the term. In this case, a small allegory of the world of adults.

1st floor | Gallery 2

Afghan Project, 2010–2014

Between 2010 and 2014, Alÿs made several trips to Afghanistan, including one in 2013 as an embedded “war artist” assigned to the British Army Task Force in Helmand Province. In this context, drawing became for him not only a way of connecting with the soldiers he saw every day – who were curious about what he was doing – but also his way of metabolizing his experience of the place and war context. The drawings he produced then are a means of communication, notes, observations, a cathartic strategy, and preparatory sketches for future paintings. In them Alÿs juxtaposes collages and abstract forms like successive layers in order to capture impressions that elude depiction in the context of a war.

Back in his studio, Alÿs also turned out paintings featuring color squares and diamond shapes, in reference to the insignia called Tactical Recognition Flashes (TRF) worn by the soldiers. In 2011–2012, in a series called *Color Bars*, he had already done abstract compositions made up of series of vertical color stripes that suggested television test patterns, those images that would pop up on the screen announcing the end of programming, long before analog gave way to digital. The flood of TV news was turned off during the night, offering viewers a brief respite from the images of war. While all those paintings look deceptively like geometric abstraction, they are nevertheless also that, a way of taking stock of a reality that eludes representation.

At the center of the room are two back-to-back screens showing *Sometimes Doing Is Undoing and Sometimes Undoing Is Doing* (2013) which features images of two men who were filmed separately disassembling and reassembling their weapon. On the one screen, the action is carried out by a British soldier posted to Afghanistan, and on the other by a Taliban combatant. Although both men complete the task making the same gestures, their motivations and the context in which they are filmed are diametrically opposed. The piece underscores how much this paradox is part of the contrary movements underlying wars, i.e., acts of making and unmaking, working out then dismantling, threatening then slipping away, destroying then rebuilding.

1st floor | Gallery 3

Reel-Unreel, 2011

During his first trip in Afghanistan, Alÿs watched the children play and observed the most popular local game, which involved rolling bicycle tires with a stick. Filmed in 2010 in Bamiyan, *Children's Game #7 (Hoop and Stick)* shows young boys playing this game, then comparing their performances. A few details – the players' clothes, the earthen-wall architecture, certain background noises – help place the scene while the simplicity of the game, the obvious joy of the children, and the way they give themselves wholly to this activity, both essential and gratuitous, offer a striking contrast with a country at war.

It is this game that was to inspire one of the main artworks to emerge from the research and work the artist carried out in Afghanistan, the film *Reel-Unreel* (2011). Shot in Kabul, it opens on the same game featured in *Hoop and Stick* and shows two young boys running down the steep dusty streets of the capital, one pushing a red reel whose film unwinds as he races along; the other rewinding the film on an initially empty reel which he pushes by hand. At times the reel rolls away beyond his reach and rushes down the sloping road before the child catches up with it in an alley. Scratched by all the bumps and rough parts of the roadway, the film also picks up a lot of the city's dust, and the camera following it as it moves along creates, most often at the eyelevel of a child, an indirect portrait of Kabul and its inhabitants. Inspired by the true story of the destruction of thousands of reels of film from the Afghan cinema archives, which were burned by the Taliban in September 2001, *Reel-Unreel* is thus much more than a staged film record of a game. Rather the film brings out the deeply subversive potential of games, fiction, and here cinema, as the playful echo of the title underscores, *reel* / real and *unreel* / unreal. The title also points to the image the West has of Afghanistan: a fiction made up of the flood of images coming from the media.

2nd floor

As Long as I'm Walking

This floor opens with a wall piece made up of phrases Francis Alÿs has written over the years, and which gives the Lausanne show its title: *As Long as I'm Walking* (1992). And indeed, for over thirty years, Alÿs has been walking. His walks began in Mexico City, his chosen home since 1986 and the city where he has filmed the majority of his walks before extending them to other urban areas.

In one of his first pieces, called *The Collector* (1990–1992), Alÿs walks around Mexico City pulling behind him on a leash a magnet on wheels that is gradually covered by the metallic rubbish in its path. The artist works here like an archeologist or a detective accumulating clues. Elsewhere, we see how just walking around aimlessly in an urban space imperceptibly transforms the social dynamics playing out there. Alÿs, for example, stands in a public square with his eyes simply raised upwards as if observing something and gradually draws a crowd of people who peer into the heavens along with him, until eventually he discreetly slips away (*Looking Up*, 2001). Doing so, the artist creates an event from practically nothing. In that piece Alÿs adopts an approach that is the exact opposite of

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the idea driving one of his most emblematic actions, *Paradox of Praxis 1* (1997), which he also did in the heart of Mexico City. This earlier piece was an allegory of the disparity that arises between the effort made and the eventual result obtained. For over nine hours, Alÿs pushed a large rectangular block of ice ahead of him until almost nothing of it remained.

In other works, Alÿs questions more explicitly the link between artistic happening and political intervention. *The Green Line* (2004), for instance, shows the artist holding in one hand a punctured can of green paint while he walks the border that took shape with the 1949 armistice between Israel and the Arab States, the “Green Line” that shifted after the Six Day War in 1967 and the occupation of Palestinian lands east of the demarcation. Alÿs reactivates here the original border by embodying it through his walk while creating on the ground an irregular splash of green paint, a stubborn, though real, trace for the time it took him to complete his action.

2nd floor | The Collection
Choques, 2005

The exhibition extends into the permanent collection of the Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts with *Choques*, a video piece that is divided between nine screens scattered throughout the galleries. These nine channels all show the same scene but from a slightly different viewpoint in each case. We see the artist trip over a stray dog on a street corner in Mexico City. Set up on high, the nine screens are installed so that visitors see only one scene at a time as they move through the galleries. *Choques* thus plays with the feeling of “déjà vu,” the same incident playing out in succeeding galleries. By both its construction and the way it is shown, the piece suggests the way closed-circuit security cameras record our every gesture in public.

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3. Press images

Installation views of the exhibition are available at www.mcba.ch/presse

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Views of the exhibition to download: 14 October 2021, 12am



Poster of the exhibition
Francis Alÿs. As Long as I'm Walking



1. Francis Alÿs,
*Paradox of Praxis 1 (Sometimes Making
Something Leads to Nothing)*, 1997
Video, color, sound, 9'54"
Documentation of an action,
Mexico City, Mexico
Courtesy the artist, Peter Kilchmann
(Zurich) and David Zwirner (New York,
London, Paris, Hong Kong)
Video-still © Francis Alÿs Studio



2. Francis Alÿs,
Retoque / Painting, 2008
Video, color, sound, 8'31"
Documentation of an action,
Paraiso, Panama; in collaboration with
Raúl Ortega and Magali Arriola
Courtesy the artist, Peter Kilchmann
(Zurich) and David Zwirner (New York,
London, Paris, Hong Kong)
Photo credit © Raúl Ortega

ENNSAAL STA-XUAEB SED LANONTAV EÉSUNZ

3. Francis Aljys, *The Green Line*
(*Sometimes Doing Something Poetic
Can Become Political, and Sometimes
Doing Something Political Can Become
Poetic*), 2004

Video, color, sound, 17'41"

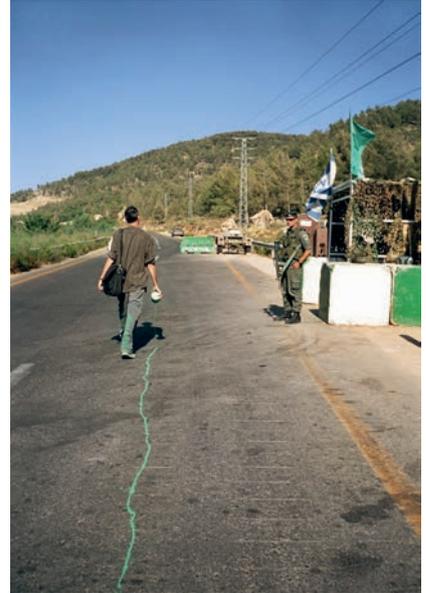
Documentation of an action,
Jerusalem, Israel; in collaboration with
Philippe Bellaïche, Rachel Leah Jones
and Julien Devaux

Courtesy the artist, Peter Kilchmann
(Zurich) and David Zwirner (New York,
London, Paris, Hong Kong)

Video-still © Francis Aljys Studio



a.



b.

4. Francis Aljys, *Paradox of Praxis 5*
(*Sometimes We Dream as We Live and
Sometimes We Live as We Dream*), 2013

Video, color, sound, 7'49"

Documentation of an action, Ciudad
Juárez, Mexico; in collaboration with
Rafael Ortega, Julien Devaux,
Alejandro Morales and Félix Blume

Courtesy the artist, Peter Kilchmann
(Zurich) and David Zwirner (New York,
London, Paris, Hong Kong)

4a. Video-still © Atelier

für Videokonservierung, Bern

4b. Video-still © Francis Aljys Studio



a.



b.



5. Francis Alÿs, *Prohibited Steps*, 2020
Video, color, sound, 3'22"
Documentation of an action,
Lamma Island, Hong Kong
Courtesy the artist, Peter Kilchmann
(Zurich) and David Zwirner (New York,
London, Paris, Hong Kong)
Video-still © Atelier
für Videokonservierung, Bern



6. Francis Alÿs, *Children's Game #10
(Papalote)*, 2011
Video, color, sound, 4'13"
Balkh, Afghanistan
In collaboration with Julien Devaux
and Félix Blume
Courtesy the artist, Peter Kilchmann
(Zurich) and David Zwirner (New York,
London, Paris, Hong Kong)
Video-still © Eye Filmmuseum,
Amsterdam



7. Francis Alÿs, *Children's Game #7
(Hoop and Stick)*, 2010
Video, color, sound, 5'22"
Bamiyan, Afghanistan
In collaboration with Natalia Almada
Courtesy the artist, Peter Kilchmann
(Zurich) and David Zwirner (New York,
London, Paris, Hong Kong)
Video-still © Eye Filmmuseum,
Amsterdam



8. Francis Alÿs, *Untitled (Color Bar)*,
2011–2012
Oil and collage on canvas on wood,
13,5 x 17,7 cm
Courtesy the artist, Peter Kilchmann
(Zurich) and David Zwirner (New York,
London, Paris, Hong Kong)
Photo © David Zwirner, New York



9. Francis Alÿs, *Untitled (2nd Battalion
Parachute Regiment)*, 2013
Encaustic and oil on canvas on wood,
12,7 x 17,5 cm
Courtesy the artist, Peter Kilchmann
(Zurich), David Zwirner (New York,
London, Paris, Hong Kong),
and Her Majesty the Queen
Photo © David Zwirner, New York



10. Francis Alÿs, *Reel-Unreel*, 2011
Video, color, sound, 19'32"
Kabul, Afghanistan; in collaboration
with Julien Devaux and Ajmal Maiwandi
Courtesy the artist, Peter Kilchmann
(Zurich) and David Zwirner (New York,
London, Paris, Hong Kong)
Video-still © Francis Alÿs Studio

4. Biography

Born 1959 in Antwerp, Belgium, Francis Alÿs has been living and working in Mexico City since 1986. He trained as an architect at the Institut d'Architecture de Tournai, Belgium (1978–1983) and the Università luav di Venezia, Italy (1983–1986) before turning to the visual arts.

Alÿs has had major solo shows, among others at Espacio de Arte y Memoria, Bogota (2020); Tai Kwun Center for Heritage & Art, Hong Kong (2020); Rockbund Art Museum, Shanghai (2018); Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto (2017); Museo Tamayo Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico City (2015); Museo de Arte Latinoamericano, Buenos Aires (2015); Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo (2013); The Museum of Modern Art, New York (2011); Tate Modern, London (2010). His work has been included in major international group exhibitions, among which the Shanghai Biennial (2018), the Iraqi Pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale (2017), and dOCUMENTA(13), Kassel and Kabul (2012). He will represent Belgium at the 59th Venice Biennale (2022). In 2020 Alÿs premiered the feature film *Sandlines* shot in Iraq at Sundance Film Festival, the International Film Festival Rotterdam, and the Festival International de Cinéma, Marseille, among others.

Francis Alÿs is represented by Peter Kilchmann (Zurich), David Zwirner (New York, London, Paris, Hong Kong), and Jan Mot (Brussels).

<https://francisalys.com/>

5. Comments on 6 works on display in the exhibition

NB: for illustrations and full captions of the commented works, please refer to the press images

Paradox of Praxis 1 (Sometimes Doing Something Leads to Nothing), 1997

Paradox of Praxis 1 heralds a new stage in the artist's exploration of informal economies. The action studies the lack of proportion between effort and result typical of daily life in Latin America. Francis Alÿs spends more than nine hours pushing a block of ice through the historic center of Mexico City, until all that is left of it is a small puddle. The effort is considerable, but the labor itself is fruitless and the results derisory. All that remains of the artist's path through the city streets are a few damp traces left by the fleeting minimalist sculpture and its impression on the minds of the passers-by.

Retoque/Painting, 2008

Brush in hand, Francis Alÿs repaints the sixty median stripes along the central reservation of the road running alongside the Panama Canal – the canal which connects the Pacific to the Atlantic since 1914 and cuts Latin America in two. More than a mere attempt to restore the fading paint, the artist's undertaking aims to draw attention to the difficulty of representing and transmitting the complex historical issues of any given site artistically. The action plays into Alÿs' study of the mobility of geopolitical borders, building on his work *The Green Line* (2004).

Children's Game #10 (Papalote), 2011

As in the other videos in the *Children's Games* series, Francis Alÿs presents play as an activity that takes place in the margins, infinitely poetic and unproductive. The game sometimes acquires a subversive value when it takes place against a backdrop of war, as in the case of this video filmed in Afghanistan. A boy is holding the almost invisible string of a kite, piloting it with sharp, precise hand movements. The worlds of childhood and violence collide for an instant when, hearing a military helicopter, the boy stops playing for a moment: the silhouette of the kite gives way to the silhouette of the military aircraft.

Untitled (Color Bar), 2011–2012

In this painting, Afghan women turn their gaze towards a grid of colors punctuated by vertical bars. This geometric composition, which can be found in several paintings and sometimes covers the entire pictorial surface, thus tipping over into abstraction, seem to point to images encrypted, censored, or scrambled due to overweening concerns of power or morality. It also nods to the test cards that used to come up on television screens at the end of the schedule, before the analogue signal gave way to digital TV. The flood of news footage was temporarily halted overnight, giving viewers a brief respite from images of conflict.

Paradox of Praxis 5: Sometimes We Dream as We Live and Sometimes We Live as We Dream, 2013

The *Paradox of Praxis* series of works are structured around seemingly futile actions that explore the artistic intervention as a tool for social analysis. The aphorism in the video's subtitle points to the proximity of dream and reality in a context of extreme tension. The action took place in Ciudad Juárez, on the border between Mexico and the United States, notorious for its drug cartels wars and femicides. Francis Alÿs walked the city's ruined streets by night, kicking along a ball of fire. The flames briefly light up the road surface, gradually tracing the map of a ghost city.

Prohibited Steps, 2020

Prohibited Steps builds on the idea of the suggestive power of walking: while the movement may be in the legs, the site of the walk is where the mind wanders. The work shows the artist switching on his video camera and cautiously walking around the flat roof of a bungalow. As the image gradually sharpens, it becomes clear that Francis Alÿs is wearing a blindfold and cannot see where he is putting his feet. The work, filmed in Hong Kong in October 2020 on the eleventh day of obligatory quarantine after his arrival, reflects the spatial isolation and its corollary solitude during the pandemic. In the context of repression then weighing on Hong Kong, it gestures towards the broader question of spaces of liberty.

6. Public engagement – Public outreach services

Reservations required for all events

→ mcba.ch/agenda

Guided tour (in French):

Thursdays at 6:30 pm

Sundays at 11 am (except 26 December)

Guided tour (in English):

First Sunday of the month at 2 pm

Guided tour for the Amis du Musée (in French):

Thursday 11 November at 6 pm

With Nicole Schweizer

Guided tour by the exhibition curator (in French):

Thursday 2 December at 6:30 pm

and Sunday 16 January at 3 pm

Lecture:

Thursday 18 November at 6:30 pm

“Francis Alÿs: il n’y a pas de pas perdus”

By Thierry Davila, philosopher and art historian

Free admission

Family tour (in French):

“Jeux de rues d’ici et d’ailleurs”

Sunday 14 November,

12 December and 9 January, 3–4:30 pm

Explore the video series

Children’s Games and experience

as a family the games featured in these works.

Kids workshop (in French):

“Bouger dans la ville”

Saturday 13 November,

11 December and 8 January, 2–4 pm

After touring the show, the children will explore the city while imagining the traces and clues of their movements in the urban space.

For children from 6 to 12 years old

CHF 15.–

ENNAŠNĀ STĀ-XĀĀEB ŠED LĀNONTNĀC ĒŠNŠ

Adult workshop (in French):

Saturday 20 November, 2–5pm

Explore different drawing techniques while walking.

With Stephanie Pfister, artist

CHF 70.– / 50.– (reduced admission)

Kids activity booklet (in French):

For 7-year-olds and up

Free, available at the reception desk

Program for schools and private tours

→ mcb.ch

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7. Bookshop – *Le Nabi* Café-Restaurant

Bookshop

In the MCBA Bookshop you can find books on all of the shows currently on view, and a selection of publications on artists in the collection, the history of art and techniques and mediums, books for children, along with a range of items (notebooks, jewelry, scarves, pencils, etc.).



© Simon Menges

Hours:

Tues., Fri., Sat., Sun.: 10am–6pm

Thurs.: 10am–8pm / Mon. closed

Orders: shop.mcba@vd.ch

Café-restaurant *Le Nabi*

Before or after your visit, *Le Nabi* invites you to take a break. The menu, reflecting the open, welcoming spirit of our museum, is both family oriented and refined. Drinks are all artisanal and the menu emphasizes local products that change with the seasons.



© Simon Menges

Hours:

Tues., Fri., Sat., Sun.: 10am–6pm

Thurs.: 10am–8pm / Mon. closed

Reservations:

T + 41 21 311 02 90 / info@lenabi.ch

8. MCBA partners and sponsors

The MCBA building was inaugurated on 5 April 2019. The museum's new premises were built by the canton of Vaud with the generous support of the City of Lausanne and the following private partnerships:

Fondation
Les Mûrons

Fondation
Gandur pour l'Art



Nestlé



Abakanowicz art
and culture charitable
foundation

Loterie Romande



Audemars Piguet

AUDEMARS PIGUET
Le Brassus

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Fondation Payot



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