

Francis  
Allys

As Long as  
I'm Walking

15.10.2021–  
16.1.2022

Exhibition  
guide

ENNASSAL  
STRA-XNAEB SED  
LANONTNAC EÉSUNZ



# Introduction

A major contemporary artist, Francis Aljys (b. 1959 in 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, Aljys 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, Aljys 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, Aljys always works through allusions, with remarkable precision and economy of means, preferring a poetic multiplicity of meanings to straight-out political commentary.

The show titled *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 Aljys's practice, namely walking. Through his seemingly insignificant walks, Aljys 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 acces-

sory that stands in for a clue to reading the fable spun by the body in motion.

While Aljys 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, Aljys 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.

# 1<sup>st</sup> 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 children's game stands out as a small allegory of the world of adults.

- 1. *Children's Game #10 (Papalote)*, 2011
- 2. *Children's Game #11 (Wolf and Lamb)*, 2011

# 1<sup>st</sup> 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 entitled *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.

- 3. Afghan Project, 2010–2014 (paintings and drawings)
- 4. *Sometimes Doing Is Undoing and Sometimes Undoing Is Doing* (AK47–Sa80), 2013

# 1<sup>st</sup> floor Gallery 3

## *Reel-Unreel*

During his first trip in Afghanistan, Aliys watched the children play and observed the most popular local game, which involved rolling bicycle tires with a stick. Filmed in 2010 in Bamian, *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.

- 5. *Children's Game #7 (Hoop and Stick)*, 2010
- 6. *Reel-Unreel*, 2011

# List of works displayed on the 1<sup>st</sup> floor

1  
*Children's Game #10 (Papalote)*, 2011  
Video, color, sound, 4'13"  
Balkh, Afghanistan  
In collaboration with Julien Devaux  
and Félix Blume

2  
*Children's Game #11 (Wolf and Lamb)*, 2011  
Video, color, sound, 3'01"  
Yamgun, Afghanistan  
In collaboration with Julien Devaux  
and Félix Blume

3  
Afghan Project, 2010 – 2014  
Selection of paintings and drawings  
Mixed media, variable dimensions  
Courtesy Her Majesty the Queen

4  
*Sometimes Doing Is Undoing and  
Sometimes Undoing Is Doing  
(AK47–Sa80)*, 2013  
2-channel video, color, sound, 5'42"  
FOB Shawqat, Helmand Province  
and Herat Province, Afghanistan  
In collaboration with Ajmal Maiwandi and  
the UK Forces deployed in Afghanistan

5  
*Children's Game #7 (Hoop and Stick)*, 2010  
Video, color, sound, 5'22"  
Bamiyan, Afghanistan  
In collaboration with Natalia Almada

6  
*Reel-Unreel*, 2011  
Video, color, sound, 19'32"  
Kabul, Afghanistan  
In collaboration with Julien Devaux  
and Ajmal Maiwandi

Unless indicated otherwise, all works  
are courtesy of the artist and the  
galleries Peter Kilchmann (Zurich) and  
David Zwirner (New York, London,  
Paris, Hong Kong)

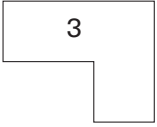
# 1<sup>st</sup> floor

## Gallery 1

## Gallery 2

2  
*Children's Game #11*  
*(Wolf and Lamb)*

3  
*Afghan Project*



3

→  
Entrance

*Children's Game #10*  
*(Papalote)*  
1

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4  
*Sometimes Doing Is*  
*Undoing and Sometimes*  
*Undoing Is Doing*  
*(AK47-Sa80)*

*Afghan Project*  
3

Blank space

Blank space



Gallery 3

5

*Children's Game #7  
(Hoop and Stick)*

*Reel-Unreel*

6

# 2<sup>nd</sup> floor

→  
Entrance

4  
*Perro Durmiendo*

11  
*Re-enactments*

1  
*As Long as  
I'm Walking*

5  
*Paradox of  
Praxis 1*

6  
*The  
Collector*

*Looking Up*  
7

8  
*Duett*

*Children's Game #1  
(Caracoles)*  
9

2  
*Patriotic  
Tales*

*Ambulantes*  
3

*Magnetic Shoes*  
10

15  
*Albert's Way*

*Railings*  
12

18  
*Prohibited Steps*

13  
*Retoque/Painting*

*Paradox of Praxis 5*  
16

*The Green Line*  
14

*Semáforos*  
17

## 2<sup>nd</sup> floor

# *As Long as I'm Walking*

This floor opens with a wall piece made up of phrases Francis Aljys 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, Aljys 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), Aljys 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 archaeologist 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. Aljys, 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 Aljys adopts an approach that is the exact opposite of 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, Aljys pushed a large rectangular block of ice ahead of him until almost nothing of it remained.

In other works, Aljys 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. Aljys 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.

# List and description of works displayed on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor

1

*As Long as I'm Walking*, 1992

Wall text

This list, which Alÿs added to over several years, enumerates all that the artist does not do when walking, i.e., weep, steal, smoke or paint. It raises walking to the level of a poetic discipline and act of resistance, for every instance and instant of wandering around a city is a digression from the social and economic demands that productivity imposes.

2

*Patriotic Tales (Cuentos Patrióticos)*, 1997

Video, color, sound, 25'36"

Documentation of an action, Mexico City, Mexico

In collaboration with Rafael Ortega

Referencing the 1968 student protests in Mexico City, during which thousands of civil servants began to make bleating sounds in a spontaneous gesture of protest, Alÿs imagines a story-action in which he drives a flock of sheep around the emblematic pole of the Zócalo. In this perfectly choreographed round dance, the leader eventually becomes the follower.

3

*Ambulantes*, 1992 – 2010

Carousel projection of 35mm slides

Mexico City, Mexico

*Ambulantes* features photographs collected over the years documenting the informal use of public space as an alternative site for commerce. They show merchants or delivery men carrying, pushing, and transporting their goods through the city, whose streets seem to elude the usual spatial or economic rules.

4

*Perro Durmiendo*, 1999 – 2006

Video, color, sound, 7'15"

Mexico City, Mexico

Alÿs takes ground-level portraits of stray dogs sleeping in public squares. According to the artist, they are figures symbolizing resistance to urban development, given that the domestication of animals and the banning of wild animals from city centers are historical indicators of modernity.

5

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

Video, color, sound, 9'54"

Documentation of an action, Mexico City, Mexico

For over nine hours, Alÿs pushed a block of ice along the streets of Mexico City until it was reduced to a small puddle. This action questions the disparity that arises between the effort made and the eventual result obtained, something that characterizes daily life in Latin America. Even if the work is considerable, the result is no less piddling.

6

*The Collector (Colector)*, 1990 – 1992

Video, color, sound, 8'56"

Documentation of an action, Mexico City, Mexico

In collaboration with Julien Devaux and Octavio Iturbe

Alÿs walks around the streets of Mexico City dragging along a toy magnet mounted on wheels. This magnetic “dog” attracts the metal rubbish strewn over the roadway, eventually decking it out in bits of waste that are traces of stories and fragments of life in the city.

7

*Looking Up*, 2001

Video, color, sound, 3'33"

Documentation of an action, Mexico City, Mexico

In collaboration with Rafael Ortega

Standing in a square in Mexico, motionless, Alÿs stares up, counting on the power of suggestion and the instinct to imitate others in the people walking by, some of whom indeed end up copying him. The artist then discreetly slips away, leaving behind a group of people looking up at the heavens, an event created from almost nothing.

8

*Duett*, 1999

Video, color, sound, 10'55"

Documentation of an action, Venice, Italy  
In collaboration with Honoré d'O

Alÿs and the Belgian artist Honoré d'O arrive separately in Venice and set off on foot, randomly wandering the city's maze of streets, each carrying one half of a helicon tuba. After three days of wandering they eventually cross paths at the end of a walk dictated by chance.

9

*Children's Game #1 (Caracoles)*, 1999

Video, color, sound, 4'34"

Mexico City, Mexico

In collaboration with Frédéric de Smedt, Constantin Felker, and Julien Devaux

*Caracoles* was filmed in Mexico City and is the first video in *Children's Games*, a series to which the artist is still adding works. Alÿs films a lone boy who kicks a half-empty plastic bottle in a steep street of the Mexican capital.

10

*Magnetic Shoes (Zapatos Magnéticos)*,

1994

Video, color, sound, 4'24"

Documentation of an action, Havana, Cuba

Alÿs walks the streets of Havana day after day sporting a pair of magnetic shoes which attract the metallic trash scattered on the asphalt. Thanks to his daily walks, Alÿs both accumulates and circulates bits of the city's rubbish, which become tokens of the places he covers on foot.

11

*Re-enactments*, 2000

2-channel video, color, sound, 5'23"

Documentation of an action, Mexico City, Mexico

In collaboration with Rafael Ortega

Alÿs purchases a gun in a Mexico City shop, then walks down the street in broad daylight with the weapon in hand. No little time passes before he is finally arrested by the police, whose lax approach to law enforcement is highlighted by this video. The video piece's two screens set two versions of this same scene side by side. The first features the recording of the artist's performance while the second shows a re-enactment of that action.

12

*Railings*, 2004

Video, color, sound (*Park Crescent*, 2'25",

*Sample 1*, 1'35", *Onslow Gardens*, 1'21"),

ed. 3/4

Documentation of an action, London, UK

In collaboration with Rafael Ortega and Artangel

Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts de

Lausanne. Acquisition, 2014

Alÿs walks around London dragging a drumstick over railings to generate an urban sound that is specific to the place. This score is heard over the ambient noise – barking dog, siren that goes off, the din and drone of traffic – producing music.

13

*Retoque/Painting*, 2008

Video, color, sound, 8'31"

Documentation of an action, Paraíso, Panama

In collaboration with Raúl Ortega and Magali Arriola

Alÿs freshens up the paint of the median stripes on the road that runs along the Panama Canal, connecting the Pacific and Atlantic since 1914. Alÿs's gesture underlines the difficulty artists face trying to depict and transmit through art the complexity of the historical issues surrounding a particular place.

14

*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

Holding a punctured can filled with green paint in one hand, Alÿs walks through Jerusalem along the portion of the "Green Line" that divides the city. Symbolically he draws on the ground once again the border that resulted from the 1949 armistice between Israel and the Arab States, a border that shifted in the aftermath of the Six Day War of 1967 and the occupation of Palestinian lands east of that demarcation.

15

*Albert's Way*, 2014

Video, color, sound, 3'48"

Documentation of an action, Mexico City, Mexico

In collaboration with Félix Blume and Julien Devaux

Over the course of seven days, in his studio from 9am to 7pm, Alÿs walks a distance of 118 kilometers, the same distance that pilgrims taking the English Way of the Camino de Santiago will cover from Ferrol to Santiago de Compostela. This action also refers to a legend around the Nazi war criminal and Hitler's chief architect Albert Speer, who during his time in prison supposedly walked in his cell the equivalent distance of once around the world.

16

*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

By night in Ciudad Juárez – a border city between Mexico and the United States that is sadly famous for its endemic violence – Alÿs advances down blighted streets kicking a flaming ball ahead of him. The fire briefly illuminates his surroundings while gradually tracing out the map of a ghost town.

17

*Semáforos*, 1995 – today

Video, color, silent, 9'57"

Worldwide

A collection of images shot during Alÿs's travels, *Semáforos* sketches out a global urban geography, taking as its common denominator the schematic walking-person silhouette of traffic crossing lights, the symbol of the urban pedestrian.

18

*Prohibited Steps*, 2020

Video, color, sound, 3'22"

Documentation of an action, Lamma Island, Hong Kong

Blindfolded, Alÿs takes hesitant steps on the flat roof of a bungalow. Shot in Hong Kong in October 2020 on the eleventh day of the quarantine imposed on the artist, this video shows the spatial confinement and its corollary of solitude during a pandemic. It addresses more broadly the question of the spaces of freedom.



# 2<sup>nd</sup> floor

## The Collection

*Choques*, 2005

9-channel video installation, color, sound (*Camera Lateral*, 1'50"; *Frontal Semi Close*, 1'44"; *Diagonal Piso*, 2'53"; *Frontal*, 1'47"; *Diagonal Ventana*, 1'35"; *CCTV*, 3'39"; *Frontal Piso*, 0'27"; *Lateral+Back*, 3'08"; *POV Perro*, 3'01"), ed. of 4, A. P. 1/2

Mexico City, Mexico

Collection du Fonds d'art contemporain de la Ville de Genève

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.

# Organisation and Publication

## Exhibition curator

Nicole Schweizer, curator of contemporary art, assisted by Elisabeth Jobin, assistant curator

## 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 → [shop.mcba@vd.ch](mailto:shop.mcba@vd.ch)

# Events

Reservations required  
for all events  
→ [mcba.ch/agenda](http://mcba.ch/agenda)

Guided tour (in French):  
Thursdays at 6:30pm,  
Sundays at 11am (except  
26 December)

Guided tour (in English):  
First Sunday of the month  
at 2pm

Guided tour for the Amis du  
Musée (in French):  
Thursday 11 November at 6pm  
With Nicole Schweizer

Guided tour by the exhibition  
curator (in French):  
Thursday 2 December at  
6:30pm and Sunday 16 January  
at 3pm

Lecture:  
Thursday 18 November  
at 6:30pm  
“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,  
3–4:30pm  
Explore the *Children’s Games*  
video series and experience as  
a family the games featured in  
these works.

Kids workshop (in French):  
“Bouger dans la ville”  
Saturday 13 November,  
2–4pm  
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.–

Adult workshop (in French):  
Saturday 20 November,  
2–5pm  
Explore different drawing  
techniques while walking.  
With Stéphanie 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  
→ [mcba.ch](http://mcba.ch)

# Information

Bookshop:  
shop.mcba@vd.ch

Café-Restaurant Le Nabi:  
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Other shows on view this  
fall at MCBA:

Espace Projet  
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Recent acquisitions from  
the BCV art collection  
24.9.2021–9.1.2022  
Free admission

Espace Focus  
Aloïse Corbaz. Mad on Paper  
22.10.2021–23.1.2022  
Free admission

The Collection  
Free admission

Exhibition partners



DR. GEORG  
UND JOSI  
GUGGEN  
HEIMSTIF  
TUNG 

Main partners –  
MCBA construction



AUDEMARS PIGUET  
*Le Brassus*

