

RUSSELL FERGUSON: *When did you first come to Mexico?*

FRANCIS ALÿS: In February 1986, in the aftermath of the earthquake. Before that I had been studying and working as an architect in Venice. I was drafted by the Belgian army, and to fulfill that commitment I went to the south of Mexico to work as an architect for non-governmental organizations. In the summer of 1989, because of a number of personal and legal matters, I found myself stuck in Mexico City. My contract had ended and I couldn't go back to Europe. Nor did I really want to. In front of me I suddenly had this enormous amount of free time, like an imposed sabbatical, and I decided to give a chance to something that had always interested me from an outsider's point of view: art practice. Although by then I had been in Mexico for over three years, I had never really considered living here, and I found it quite difficult to accept the move. The first works – I wouldn't call them works – my first images or interventions were very much a reaction to Mexico City itself, a means to situate myself in this colossal urban entity.

FERGUSON: *What was it about the city that was difficult for you compared to other cities?*

ALÿS: The immensity of it, also the culture shock, I suppose, and how dysfunctional the whole thing seemed. I could not decipher the city's codes. I had no entry point. In short, I could not understand how the whole society functioned. I had never lived in a megalopolis. Mexico City was also going through a series of major changes after the earthquake – in its urban shape, obviously, but also in its perception of itself.

Mexico City has a very crude and raw side, very much in your face, and it can easily beat you. When you are confronted with the dizzying complexity of a city whose nature is to overwhelm you, you have to react to that complexity somehow. I think the first stage was a period of observation, to see how other people managed to function within this urban chaos. I was living in the old Centro Histórico, where there were all these characters, for lack of a better word. I saw how they felt the need to make up an identity, to invent a role for themselves, a ritual that would justify their presence on the urban chessboard – like this guy in his mid-forties I would see every morning walking up and down the Zócalo with a metal wire bent into a hook with a circle at the end of it, kind of like a bicycle wheel without spokes. Starting from the top left corner of the plaza he would follow all the little cracks between the stones of the pavement, methodically pacing the entire plaza. That was the role he had invented for himself. That was his way of being there, of being part of the life of the city. Encountering such people has often been the entry point to my walks or interventions, the crude and poetic entry point.

FERGUSON: *What did Mexico offer you that Europe didn't?*

ALÿS: Retrospectively, I think I was very lucky in my timing with Mexico. They say that certain people can only find their place within a specific historical or geopolitical context. There was something in the chemistry between my Belgo-European upbringing and the Mexican culture that triggered a whole field of investigation. I think also that my status as an immigrant freed me from my own cultural heritage – or my debt to it, if you like. It provided me with a kind of permanent disjunction, a filter between myself and my being. Maybe what I have been looking for since then is this moment of coincidence between the experience

of living and the consciousness of existence. The city turned into an open laboratory for testing and playing and experimenting in all kinds of contradictory directions. I was new in town. Nobody cared. I had nothing to prove to anyone but myself. It gave me an enormous sense of freedom and an open-ended time frame to build a language, an attitude, away from a world and culture that I saw as saturated with information. I think Europe has an extraordinarily rich culture, but I see it more as a place of consumption – of arts, food, architecture and so on. Here there were things to do, things to say, and urgently. Eventually I lost the distance, but at first it was what helped me make the jump.

FERGUSON: *At what point did you realize that you were not going back to being an architect?*

ALÿS: I worked in parallel as an architect and artist for a couple of years, but I dropped architecture altogether around 1993. I got hooked very quickly by the new game, the art game, and early on I met people like Ruben Bautista, Guillermo Santamarina, Cuauhtémoc Medina, Gabriel Orozco, Abraham Cruzvillegas, Melanie Smith and many others. The contemporary art scene was very open at the time. There was a lot of collaboration and discussion going on. But then again, I was younger. Now I think the rules are different.

FERGUSON: *Do you think that individuals work in more isolation from each other now?*

ALÿS: Well, there was no real market at the time. Artists were making art to show to their artist friends, and things were moving faster. You would not wait for a curator to come. You had to show it immediately.

FERGUSON: *There is a lot more infrastructure now.*

ALÿS: The infrastructure is better, yes, and there is much more curiosity from abroad about the emerging scene, the younger generation, which is good. But it can also lead to some generational gaps, to the point that sometimes production can be aimed towards export rather than trying to function first in its context of fabrication, whether its local or national context. The link with the older generations is somewhat broken.

FERGUSON: *So now, after almost twenty years, to what extent are you a Mexican artist?*

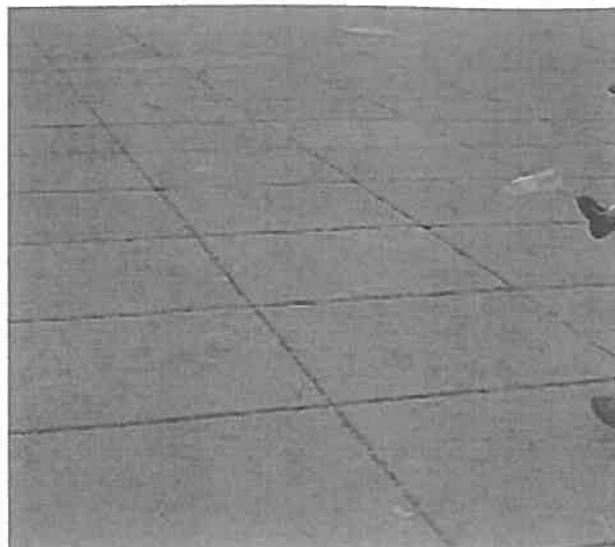
ALÿS: It's clear that the place has imprinted itself on the making of my work and probably on the perception of my work abroad. Retrospectively I can see that there have been different steps in my relationship to Mexico.

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.

FERGUSON: *People do think of you as an artist from Mexico. How do you feel about representing the country?*



IF YOU ARE A TYPICAL SPECTATOR, WHAT YOU ARE REALLY
DOING IS WAITING FOR THE ACCIDENT TO HAPPEN, 1996
ZÓCALO, MEXICO CITY
VIDEO
10 MIN



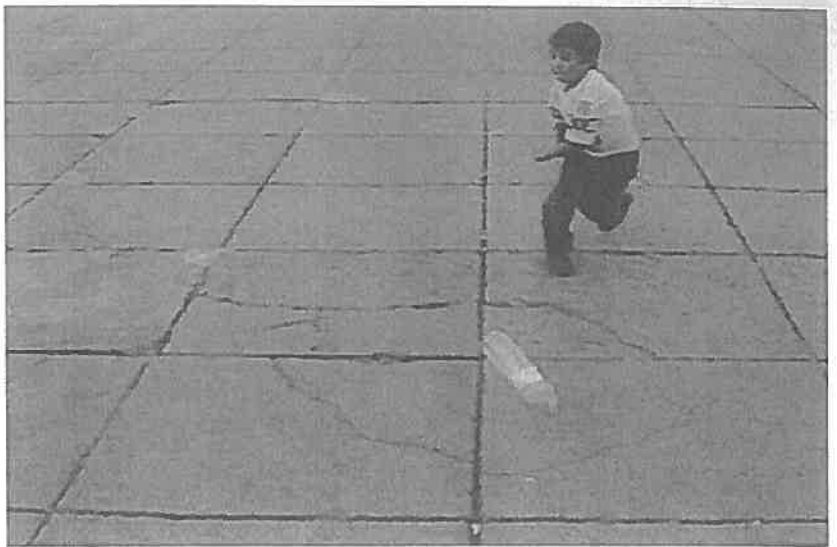
ALÿS: I think I am quite local but I'm not. Or I'm not but I am. It's a trap. It's funny, you have to leave the place you come from to be asked if you belong to it. In 1998 when Rina Carvajal invited me to participate in the São Paulo Biennial, she asked a straightforward question: 'How do you position yourself – as a European or Westerner – in relation to your host country, with the place and culture where you choose to live and develop your practice?' To address that issue I looked into one of the West's most controversial exports, the model of modernization (as moving away from tradition), in order to analyse Mexico's complex relationship to that imported ideology, and to investigate in particular how the syndrome of progress and the dogma of productivity are lived and understood south of the US border.

FERGUSON: *You referred once to your 'disguise' as a foreigner. Did you feel you dropped the disguise at some point?*

ALÿS: I wish I could, but I can't. I am a misfit. I am too tall, too pale and too *gringo* looking. But things are not always that schematic. In the building where I live in the city centre the population is very young. I have been around for much longer than most of them, so in a way, for them, beyond my foreignness I have become a sort of local reference. I suppose I may be even a character for some of them. When – very occasionally – a big-shot collector comes to visit the studio, he shows up in a limo with black smoked windows and two carloads of bodyguards. So, as everyone in the building deals some kind of shit, they must think I'm doing big-time deals for these big-time mafiosos to come here and visit me. So it gives me some kind of status in the hood after all.

FERGUSON: *And what came after Turista? You continued to work around the Zócalo, I know.*

ALÿS: A couple of years later I put together a short film called *If you are a typical spectator, what you are really doing is waiting for the accident to happen* (nicknamed *Bottle*). I say 'put together' because I went back to some discarded video footage, stuff I had kind of absentmindedly filmed on the Zócalo in early 1996, while I was waiting for the flag-raising ceremony to take place. It turned out that the material perfectly illustrated a preoccupation I had in mind. The camera was following an empty plastic bottle being blown around by the wind. There was to be no



interaction between the camera (that is, me) and the protagonist (the bottle). The camera would just follow the bottle, record its *dérive* and wait for an accident to happen to it. Ultimately what happened turned out to be quite different. First, passers-by felt provoked or stimulated by the camera, and they started interacting with my subject, kicking the bottle around and jumping over it and so forth, and later on, as I was filming with my eye glued to the viewfinder, the bottle left the main square and crossed a busy street. As I followed it hastily, I was hit by a car – nothing dramatic, but hard enough to send the camera flying into the air and crashing on to the ground. End of the take. I went back to that footage because I loved the fact that whereas one expects something to happen to the subject – the bottle – the accident actually happens to the observer of the bottle. The fact is that the act of observing had interfered with the course of things. My contemplative, non-interference contract was coming to an end.

FERGUSON: *So the bottle piece really marked a change in your status as an observer, from an outsider to someone a bit more directly involved.*

ALÿS: Something new was triggered. On the one hand, as there had been a shift in my relationship to the place, I started to produce a series of works reflecting on the state of local politics. *Cuentos Patrióticos (Patriotic Tales)* (1997) was directly inspired by a political episode that had happened on the Zócalo in 1968, and its disguised re-enactment on the same location nearly thirty years later was a direct comment on the current state of politics, the way history was repeating itself, and how the whole political scene was frozen by a corrupted and dysfunctional political apparatus. On the other hand I continued questioning the mechanics of artistic production and the status of production itself with a piece called *Paradox of Praxis I* (1997). It was composed of two symmetrical, though opposing, principles: ‘sometimes making something leads to nothing’ and ‘sometimes making nothing leads to something’.

In parallel I started working on my first animated movie, *Song for Lupita* (1998), in which a woman endlessly pours water from one glass into another and back. I wanted to demonstrate the Mexican saying ‘el hacerlo sin hacerlo, el no hacerlo pero haciendolo’ – literally ‘the doing but without doing, the not doing but doing’. It staged a kind of resignation to the immediate present by inducing a complete hypnosis in the act itself, an act which was pure flux, without beginning or end.



Los mismos burócratas se burlaban de las disposiciones gubernamentales y en la supuesta manifestación de "desagravio" denunciaron que eran obligados a asistir bajo amenazas de índole económica y luego externaron su apoyo a los estudiantes...

OUT THE 'CEREMONIA DE DESAGRAVIO', MEXICO CITY
VE

SONG FOR LUPTA, 1998
DRAWING FOR ANIMATION
PENCIL ON TRACING PAPER
EACH 35 X 29 CM

Mañana, mañana
Is soon enough for me.

Animation is all about timing, and I think it was around this moment that I realized that Latin America's relationship to modernity and the dogma of efficiency could be explored from that angle. I understood that through films, events or performances the *mise en scène* of certain time schemes could render the time structure I had encountered here in Mexico. From then on I started developing what would become over the following years a discursive argument composed of episodes, allegories or parables that staged that experience of time.

FERGUSON : *What was the first attempt?*

ALYS: My first trial was a video installation called *Cantos Patrióticos (Patriotic Songs)* (1998-99). It was based on a story I had heard of a ferryman who, while transporting people from one side of a river to the other, gets blinded by the sun in the middle and loses his sense of orientation. No longer knowing which side to row to, he gets lost – as they say here, 'entre dos aguas' (between two waters) – and rows around in circles. The story is interpreted by several singers, with the narration in a mirror construction – the last verse is the first, the penultimate is the second, and so on – and the singing is chopped up by a series of stops that also rule a game of musical chairs on the opposite screen. The interruptions of the lyrics produce a progressive disarticulation of the narrative, and soon any understanding of the story becomes lost in the assemblage of words and syllables, notes and bars, and the attempt to tell the story takes the lead over the story itself. I was looking at Latin America as a kind of broken mirror, a single reality constituted by a multiplicity of dispersed fragments.

Something quite ironic happened during the long making of *Cantos*. Over time, like my ferryman lost his orientation, I lost what I was trying to say, and the more the piece progressed, the less I could remember why I was doing it. The only thing that brought the piece to completion was the energy of all the people involved in the film and my responsibility to them as its instigator. The experience taught me a lot about collaboration, how it is about letting the original scenario go, letting it be translated by others and bounced back and forth. If the story is good enough, it will get back to you or achieve its shape by itself. If it isn't, then it's better for it to die away.

CANTOS PATRIÓTICOS (PATRIOTIC SONGS), 1998-99
IN COLLABORATION WITH RAFAEL ORTEGA,
MEXICO CITY
THREE-CHANNEL VIDEO
28 MIN. 30 SEC.



FERGUSON: *One of the things that seems very characteristic about Mexico City – at least from the outside – is a constant pushing back and forth between the embrace of modernity and a resistance to it.*

ALÿS: It probably happens in other places too, but this is the one I know the best. It seems particularly palpable in this part of town, the old city centre with all its anachronisms. Its three layers – pre-Hispanic, colonial and modern – co-exist more than overlap. 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. I suppose that in our age of the global market economy you could argue about whether that modernity was ever even achieved. But what matters now is the memory of it, whether it was a reality or a fiction. You can have a nostalgia for something that never really happened.

FERGUSON: *I noticed a cartoon pinned to your studio wall with an old man saying, 'Of course, it was a long time ago, but at the time it seemed like the present.'* [laughs]

ALÿS: I think there is a whole aspect of my practice that just tries to deal with all these anachronisms, to represent and to document them. I have seen some urban activities disappear from one day to another because of a radical change in city policies. When I first went to Lima, the Old Centre was very much like the Centre here, with street sellers everywhere. A year later there was not one street seller to be found. From one visit to another a whole culture had been wiped out. What I am saying, simply, is that to have witnessed those kinds of drastic evolutions in the life of a city makes you want to document more systematically the manifestations of these parallel, informal economies that are the obligatory components of the Latin American megalopolis.

The style of the documentation series is influenced by August Sander's *People of the Twentieth Century* or the eighteenth-century prints *Cries of London*. My method of shooting is always systematic and tries to respond technically to the encountered situations. *Sleepers* (1999-2006) will always have the camera at ground level. *Beggars* (2002-04) takes a quasi-hypocritical high viewpoint. *Ambulantes* (1992-2006) is always shot perpendicularly to the passing subject at a distance of five metres or so. In that sense it is as neutral a register as can be, and it is that which might give it its archival value over time.

FERGUSON: *You once referred to yourself as 'a former European'. Earlier I asked you if you were a Mexican artist. Are you a Belgian artist in any sense?*

G. VENDRAMINI
(AFTER FRANCIS WHEATLY)
HOT GINGERBREAD FROM
CRIES OF LONDON, c. 1772
ENGRAVING
43 X 33 CM

AUGUST SANDER
BRICKLAYER'S MATE, 1928
GELATIN SILVER PRINT
29 X 23 CM





UNTITLED, 1997
COLOUR PENCIL ON PAPER
5 X 4 CM

Given:

A generic situation - for example, a small town 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 talked about, but the source has been lost along the way.

Premise:

- The rumour is instigated and spread verbally by one or several agents.
- The rumour is fed until any physical evidence appears as a direct consequence of the rumour.
- The rumour attempts to infiltrate a given situation without adding or subtracting any physical element to it.

ALŸS: As you know, since you are Scottish, Belgium has certain imprints that you can't wash away. And being a Flemish-born French speaker doesn't help.

FERGUSON: *Do you see a continuation of your work as an architect in your art?*

ALŸS: Beyond the obvious fascination with urban phenomena, there's the fact that methods and practice of architecture are based on collaboration. It's a team product.

FERGUSON: *There is a stereotype of the architect as an egomaniac who collaborates out of necessity but at the same time attempts to exert total control. In a lot of your projects you have worked collaboratively with a variety of other people. I'm wondering to what extent you are attracted by the possibility of surrendering some control, and to what extent you need to retain control personally over what you produce.*

ALŸS: Perhaps you should ask my collaborators. [*laughs*] The collaboration process is to watch an idea bounce back and forth, and eventually develop its own course in that bouncing (*el rebote*). The project starts with a mess of notes and drawings, incidental quotes and documents, and usually out of that process the medium defines itself spontaneously. At that stage I start looking for specialists in that specific medium to enter the project, and their translation of the plot automatically reshapes the original concept. The more the project evolves, the more this bouncing back and forth between myself and the collaborators intensifies, and it can lead to a final shape sometimes quite far from the original intention. It's in that process that the project takes on its own life and develops. The more ambitious the logistics of the project, the more I will turn into a producer or a coordinator of the project and, when it happens, a spectator of my own fantasy.

And then there are all the other ingredients of the live 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. Once the action is launched, there is no longer any strict or unilateral plan to be followed. Only the actual course of the action itself will provide a response to the preliminary axiom.

The only constant rule I have witnessed is that if the storyline – the plot proposal – is clear and strong enough, it will resist all these mutations. The situation will unfold in a way not unlike what your intuitive expectations were. It is the test of the scenario. If the scenario does not hold, the action will deviate and become something else.

FERGUSON: *Despite the inevitable collaborative element in architecture, it is also about making something that is very fixed and with very clear boundaries. It seems that perhaps one of the things that led you away from architecture is an interest in where those boundaries are more permeable, or where there are spaces between fixed entities.*

ALŸS: You mean the cracks in the system?

FERGUSON: *Yes. I'm also thinking about the man in the Zócalo who spends his time scraping the gaps between the flagstones with a wire hook. I thought of that figure as in a way a self-portrait of you, in the sense of this interest in exploring the spaces in between.*

ALŸS: When I stepped out of the field of architecture, my first impulse was not to add to the city, but to absorb what was already there, to work with the residues, or with the negative spaces, the holes, the spaces in between. 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.

I'll try to always keep the plot simple enough so that these actions can be imagined without an obligatory reference or access to visuals – the story of the mouse that was freed in the storage space of the largest collection of contemporary art in Mexico (*The Mouse*, 2001), or of the guy who pushed an ice block until it melted down completely (*Paradox of Praxis 1*) – something short, so round and simple that it can be repeated as an anecdote, something that can be stolen and, in the best-case scenario, enter that land of minor urban myths or fables I mentioned.

FERGUSON: *You're making it clear that the source of a lot of your work lies in things observed in the real environment, and yet, at the same time, I feel that there is a strong element in your work of the dreamlike.*

ALÿS: What do you see as dreamlike?

FERGUSON: *There are certain elements singled out that defy conventional rationality, and for me that has something of a dreamlike quality in the sense that everything seems very real and convincing yet at the same time somehow irrational. This is perhaps especially true of the paintings.*

ALÿS: I think a lot of what is happening in this world is way more irrational than what I am illustrating. But it's true, when it comes to images, painted images in particular, the rules are different. 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.

Also, painting allows me to retreat from the sometimes hectic rhythm of the performances and film productions, and to distance myself from them without losing contact with them. 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.

And of course, last but not least, painting has freed me from some economic pressure by allowing me to finance numerous projects that proved not to be very lucrative. Now I remain my own master, and up to the last moment I can change, postpone or cancel any ongoing production.

FERGUSON: *I guess I see what I'm calling the dreamlike aspect of your work also in some of your performative works, not just your paintings – for example, the loose thread on the sweater that unravels further and further and further (Fairy Tales, 1995/98). It is a real thing that takes place in the world, yet it also –*

ALÿS: Yes, but it can also travel as an anecdote or fable.

FERGUSON: *So you see them as fables or parables rather than as dreams, or even daydreams. Like the man whose sweater catches on something and who doesn't notice for a mile.*

THE MOUSE, 2001
PHOTOGRAPHIC DOCUMENTATION
OF AN ACTION, MEXICO CITY

On Saturday 3 March 2001 at
5 p.m. I entered the Jumex
Collection with a mouse in
my pocket. At 5:10 p.m.
I freed the mouse.



ALÿS: Until someone else notices. In Stockholm, once the walk was done and the sweater unravelled I retraced my steps to document the journey, following the long blue thread on the street and in the park. Midway back I ran into this old lady who was patiently rolling a ball of blue yarn under her arm, carefully gathering up the wool of my unravelled sweater – maybe to knit a similar one at home.

FERGUSON: *Is the passing on of the story where humour comes in? In some of your projects there is a pungent humour that contributes to its persistence as a story.*

ALÿS: Humour helps to catch the spectator's attention. It's a way of trapping him in the narrative. You make me think of something else. My iconography has often been described as naïve, flatly figurative, two-dimensional, but that simplicity can sometimes help seduce the viewer's eye. It's the direct language of the sign painters, where communication for any audience comes first. That's what fascinates me about Magritte. His painting is so flat and somehow physically disappointing, yet it is so performative and communicative. Magritte himself was coming from the world of advertising. There are billions of images around us, and they move fast and are extremely persuasive and efficient. Painting works against that speed effect. It is slow, very poor in a way, so if you can make that little contact, provoke that little spark in someone's head, it is a small miracle amid the speed of our digital age.

FERGUSON: *Sending a peacock to the opening of the Venice Biennale (The Ambassador, 2001) is very funny, but it also has an element underneath that is critical. People who are there see the peacock and think it is funny, but the peacock is also functioning as a critique of all the preening people who are attending the opening.*

ALÿS: Humour has a critical dimension. To laugh can be a way of abstracting yourself from a situation, a way of negating its reality. When the public first saw Manet's *Olympia* their reaction was to laugh, because they could not understand it and maybe they did not want to understand it, and laughter was the only answer they could give to its physical presence. Humour is a double-edged weapon.

FERGUSON: *It can be attack and defence. It can be both the sword and the shield.*

ALÿS: *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.

FERGUSON: *I guess the other side of my suggestion that there is a kind of dream element in the work is that there is also a lot of work in the work. Just looking around the studio it seems that there is a lot of work going on here, a lot of production.*

ALÿS: The studio is a bizarre place. Some of the things you see lying around have been here for years.

FERGUSON: *It gives the impression there's a lot of work.*

ALÿS: There is and there isn't. The images build themselves in layers over a long period of time, with all the moods and accidents that can happen in between. It's 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.

FERGUSON: *So the work is not really generated primarily in the studio?*

ALÿS: Not so much any more. In the days of the sign paintings project, yes, because we were all working here. But now the mechanics are more complex. The studio is where the raw material is processed and passed on to others. It's the relay point. 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. I am never exclusively in one narrative at the time. Rather, I am always linking data from different sources. Recently this aspect has exploded geographically, but it could easily go back to just one location when the time comes. Again, all these parallel stories try to be part of a single narrative.

It's like when you walk in the city. Walking here from the Zócalo there have been fifty different situations happening, with fifty incidental noises, smells and images. They've all just been furtive glimpses, bits of incidental information, but while walking lost in your thoughts you have somehow integrated them all, and they have shaped your thoughts at the arrival point.

FERGUSON: *But you're a fast walker.*

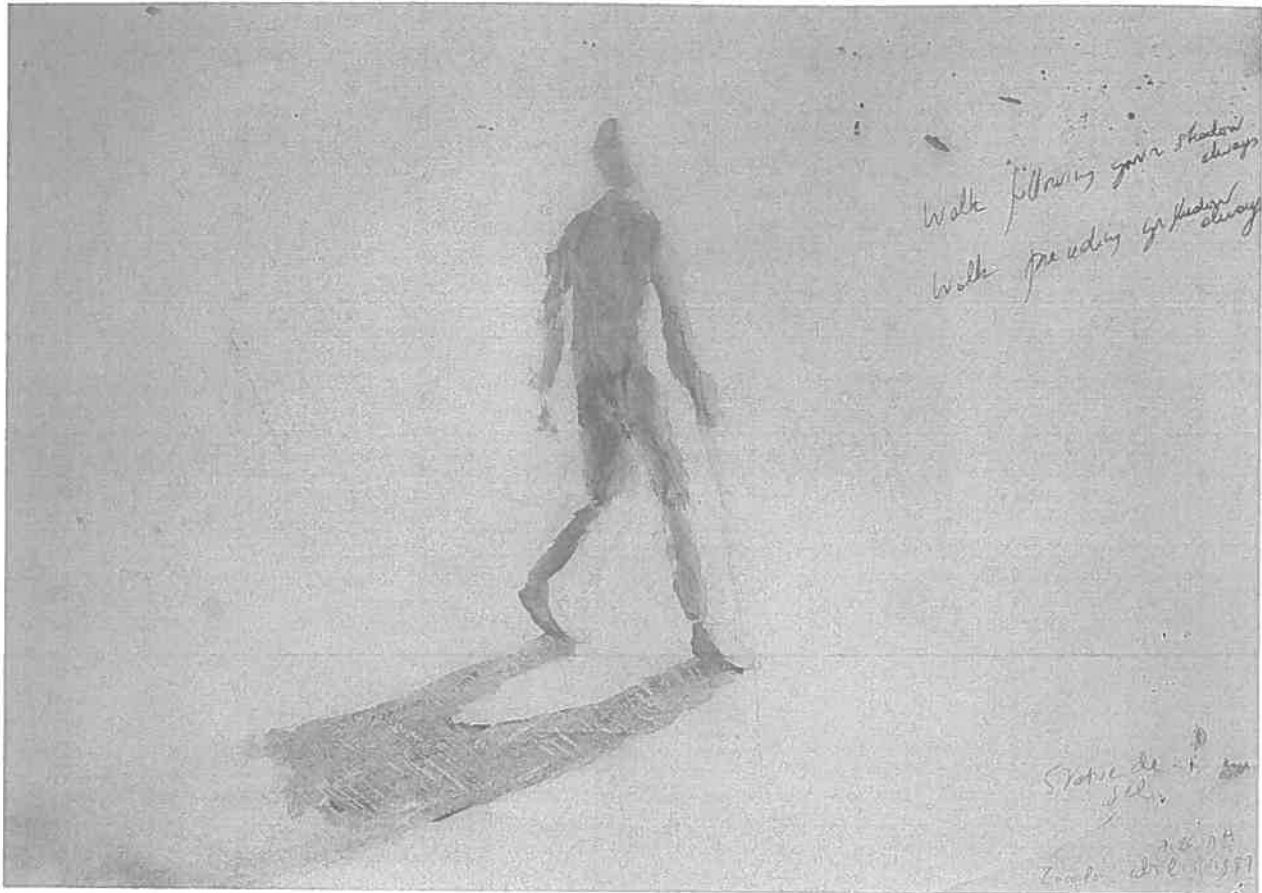
ALÿS: Because, unlike a few years ago, I wouldn't want to be confused with a tourist. [*laughs*] In Mexico City only innocent tourists go slowly.

FERGUSON: *I wanted to ask you about the importance of walking in your work, starting with walking around your neighbourhood here, but also more generally about walking as a generator of projects and ideas and stories.*

ALÿS: 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 e-mail. But it also happens to be a very immediate method for unfolding stories. It's an easy, cheap act to perform or to invite others to perform. The walk is simultaneously the material out of which to produce art and the modus operandi of the artistic transaction. And the city always offers the perfect setting for accidents to happen.

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. I see the slide carousels series as an attempt to reproduce those furtive meetings, those side glimpses I mentioned earlier, when you look at someone or something for two seconds while walking on the street and yet it is enough time to fully capture the tragic dimension of the situation.

FERGUSON: *In Ambulantes all of the people shown have a very defined purpose to their pushing and pulling. They are walking in the city because they need to move something from one place to another. There seem to be two kinds of walking in your work. There are pieces that have a set script or set of things that will happen during*



the course of the walk, and there are others that are aimless or drifting. Maybe Narcotourism (1996) is the most aimless of all your walks.

ALÿS: *Narcotourism* responded to a very specific invitation. For the first time, after having been in Mexico for nearly ten years, I was asked to do a work in Europe, in Denmark. Copenhagen is for me a real archetype of the bourgeois European city. I realized I had no desire to be there, so my response was to be physically present but mentally absent. The drugs became a means of escaping the reality of a return I was not ready to face.

FERGUSON: *Does the model of the flâneur interest you?*

ALÿS: 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.

FERGUSON: *Certainly to attempt to re-enact that model is to participate in a kind of nostalgia or romanticism. Of course, at the time of Baudelaire the flâneur was the essence of modernity. 'It was a long time ago, but at the time it seemed like the present.'*

There is, even in the earliest conception of the flâneur, a detachment from the city as well. The flâneur, modern or passé, is someone who observes the city but is never a participant in the action of the city. I think your walks, wherever they are, at least

hold out the possibility of participant action that will have an effect – or, as you say, an echo – that will persist afterwards. Perhaps the true flâneur in your work is The Ambassador, Mr Peacock. He conducts a kind of flânerie around the gardens of Venice and is admired but does not participate in events. So perhaps Mr Peacock is your surrogate flâneur.

ALÿS: Yes, absolutely. He could be a real nineteenth-century gentleman. [laughs] He should be doing this interview.

FERGUSON: *You have made other works in Venice.*

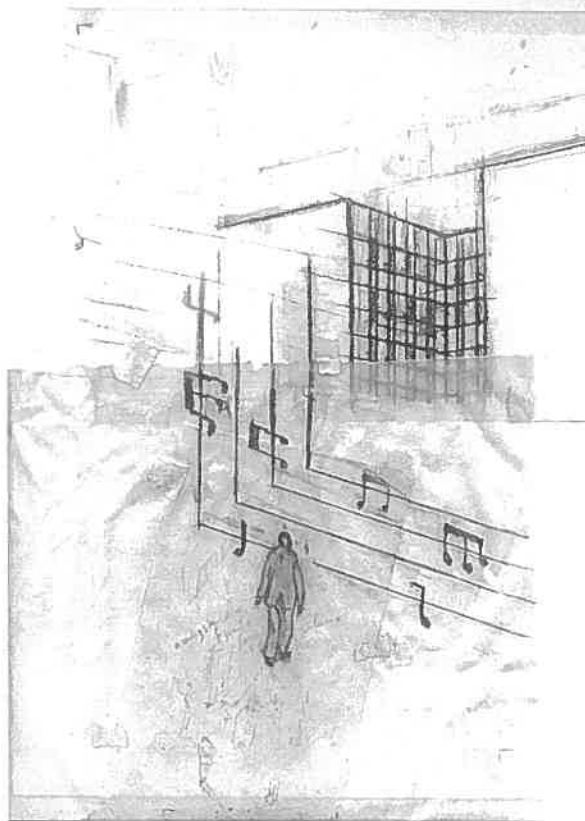
ALÿS: In June 1999 I did this sort of homage to Fluxus with a musical piece, a walk titled *Duett*. It was inspired by Plato's speech of Aristophanes, which in short is that it is in our nature to be incomplete, to be bisexual. I entered Venice by the train station, while a friend of mine, the Belgian artist Honoré d'O, arrived on the same day via Marco Polo Airport. We started wandering, looking for one another in the labyrinth of Venice, each of us carrying one half of a tuba, hoping that we would be led to one another. There was a simple dramatic construction to the piece, with A and B needing to find each other. Eventually, there was a happy ending, maybe even a moral to the story, with the physical reunion of the two halves and the resulting production of a sound.

Last year with the help of Artangel and Rafael Ortega I orchestrated an event in London based on similar mechanics but introducing a different dimension (*Guards*, 2004-05). I re-staged the plot with a regiment of sixty-four Coldstream Guards. Each soldier entered the City of London walking normally. When he heard the steps of another soldier he would join in, fall into step, and the two would start marching together. They would eventually meet another soldier or group of soldiers and repeat the same protocol, continuing until the full formation was complete. It was like the spreading of a rumour, but also the progressive building of a square, as the final figure to be formed by the full company was an eight-by-eight soldier square. You have to imagine the whole thing performed by this perfect machine of synchronization of a British regiment. In *Duett* when two people were looking for one another it had a kind of sexual dimension, but when the number of participants grew to sixty-four what had been a love story turned into a social allegory.



FLUXUS SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA PERFORMS PHILIP CORNER'S 4TH FINALE, CARNEGIE RECITAL HALL, NEW YORK, 27 JUNE 1964

UNTITLED (STUDY FOR GUARDS), 2004
LONDON
PENCIL ON TRACING PAPER
38 X 26 CM



Guards walk
of London,
rent streets
ther's route.

ugh the City
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l into step and
g for more guards

g eight by eight
omplete formation
osest bridge.

bridge,
and disperse.

FERGUSON: *If we extrapolate from there, to what extent do you see your work playing an instrumental role in the political sphere? Do you think your art, or art in general, can produce change in the world?*

ALÿS: I wish. [laughs] Political could be read in the Greek sense of 'polis', the city as a site of sensations and conflicts from which the materials to create fictions or urban myths are extracted. I think being based in Mexico City, and functioning in Latin America, the political component is an obligatory ingredient to address the situation. But it would be very hard to say to what extent your act can have a real echo, and even more to what extent there is any relevance for a poetical act to take place in a location going through a political, military, religious, social or economic crisis.

Back in the summer of 1995 in São Paulo I performed a walk with a leaking can of paint (*The Leak*) that was described as a poetic gesture, a *beau-geste*. More recently, on the fourth and fifth of June 2004, 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.

FERGUSON: *This question of what art can achieve in a politically charged context is a very complex question.*

ALÿS: Society allows, and maybe even expects, the artist – unlike, say, the journalist, the scientist, the scholar or the activist – to issue a statement without any demonstration. This is what we call 'poetic licence'. Fine. But this condition leads to a series of questions. Can an artistic intervention truly bring about an unforeseen way of thinking, or is it more a matter of creating a sensation of 'meaninglessness', one that shows the absurdity of the situation? And can an absurd act provoke a transgression that makes you abandon the standard

THE GREEN LINE 2004
PHOTOGRAPHIC DOCUMENTATION
OF AN ACTION, JERUSALEM
VIDEO
17 MIN. 45 SEC.

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

assumptions about the sources of conflict? Can an artistic intervention translate social tensions into narratives that in turn intervene in the imaginary landscape of a place? And finally, 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?

FERGUSON: *In general with your work, even if it is an echo rather than a statement, do you see it in a broader sense as a kind of resistance to political power as it is currently constituted?*

ALÿS: Considering the present state of politics in a good part of the planet, yes absolutely.

FERGUSON: *A straight answer. [laughs] Are you aspiring to make something that is both poetical and political?*

ALÿS: In Jerusalem the axiom behind the walk was, 'Sometimes doing something poetic can become political and sometimes doing something political can become poetic.' I tried to confront a situation that I might have dealt with more obliquely in the past, like in Lima for example. I had reached a stage where I could no longer hide behind the ambiguity of metaphors or poetic licence. 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.

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 absurd 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.

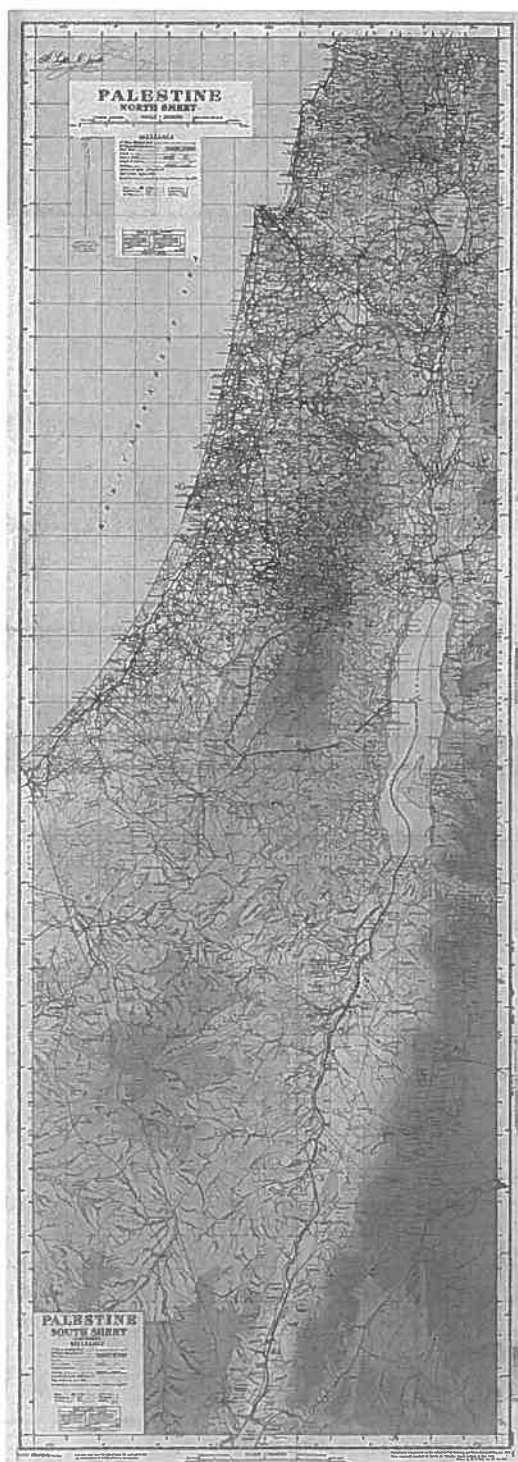
FERGUSON: *There is a certain amount of repetition that is integral to your work. Certain motifs are repeated, and the whole idea of repetition itself is quite present. Is that a way of tying different storylines together or just of letting a particular storyline develop through time?*

ALÿS: I think that there is only so much one has to say.

FERGUSON: *What about Re-enactments (2000), in which a certain sequence of events are repeated?*

'During the months from December 1947 through June 1948, there was heavy fighting in Jerusalem and its immediate vicinity. The city was divided in two by the front lines. The statutory basis on which the partition of Jerusalem rested was the cease-fire agreement signed on 30 November 1948 between Moshe Dayan, "commander of all the Israeli forces in the Jerusalem region", and Abdullah al-Tal, "Representing the Arab Legion and all the other forces in the Jerusalem area". The lines were sketched on a mandatory 1:20,000 scale map. Moshe Dayan drew the Israeli line with a green grease pencil, while Abdullah al-Tal marked his front line with a red one.'

(Meron Benvenisti, *City of Stone*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1996)



RE-ENACTMENTS, 2000
IN COLLABORATION WITH RAFAEL
ORTEGA, MEXICO CITY
TWO-CHANNEL VIDEO
5 MIN. 20 SEC.

ALYS: *Re-enactments* belongs more to the drifting category, although the scenario is very linear, following the seven steps of a classical dramatic construction. I think I was looking for a 'round' scenario, and the one in which I buy a gun and start walking down the street waiting for something to happen was likely to have all these steps: a context (the city), a protagonist (me), a cause for the conflict (I buy a gun), a conflict (I walk with the gun on the street), a response to the conflict (the reaction on the street), a climax (the arrest scene), and a moral (I am taken away by the police).

Retrospectively I think I made a fundamental mistake. Whereas I could have chosen a number of other scenarios, I got entangled in one that responded too well to the general expectation, the image of Mexico City that was exported at the time, with its ingredient of urban violence. And that last aspect seems to be the one that prevailed in the public's memory. I forgot a basic rule. When a work is produced within a very local context, it can easily acquire a totally different reading later, so the parameters for the piece need to take into account its possible life as an export. I had a similar problem with the sign-painting project. It was often reduced to an exotic exercise of style, conveniently bypassing the market proposal I had projected.

More than anything I was looking for an action whose dramatic construction could be easily re-enacted, which is what occurred, since the next day the exact same action was filmed again, but this time with everything pre-arranged. The people on the street were warned. The police were accomplices and even played themselves. Everything was staged. The idea was to juxtapose two films, each presenting an identical action, except that one would be the documentary of a real event, of 'the way it happened', and the other would be a scrupulous re-creation of the course of events as they appeared in the first film, thereby fictionalizing the reality of those events. I wanted to question the rapport we have today with performance and the ways in which it has become so mediated, particularly by film and photo, and how media can distort and dramatize the immediate reality of the moment, how they can affect both the planning and the subsequent reading of a performance. What is supposed to be so unique about performance is its underlying condition of immediacy, the imminent sense of risk and failure. At the time I needed to re-address my relationship to that medium.

FERGUSON: *That was echoed in an institutional way with The Modern Procession (2002), to mark the Museum of Modern Art's temporary move to Queens. In the end the Public Art Fund commissioned the procession, and the Museum of Modern Art commissioned the film of the procession, insisting on the distinction between the event and the record of it in a way that, to outsiders, might seem arbitrary.*

ALYS: Yes. It was the necessary legal trick to make it all happen.

FERGUSON: *Do you see the possibility of a further move into the realm of the cinematic, where you could pursue a more complete story, rather than a fragment or an iconic image that functions as an echo. Is that a possibility for you in the future?*

ALYS: It is tempting, of course, although I rarely deal with more than one idea per work, one situation at a time. In that sense, paradoxically, I am not a storyteller. Except if you look at a story as a succession of episodes. But if I were to make what you call a 'more complete story', a feature film, I would not start at the beginning or the end. I would need to work from some middle, because the middle point, the in between, is the space where I function best.



UNTITLED (LA RONDE), 2002
PENCIL ON TRACING PAPER
42 X 46 CM



FERGUSON: *My understanding of the initial development of the rotulista work was that the cycle back and forth between you and the sign painters could potentially have continued endlessly with changes introduced by you or by them in each round.*

ALÿS: Like a visual version of Chinese whispers. But I think we were also trying to propose an alternative system to the market, one where we could impose our own rules.

FERGUSON: *Was there an element of making each one different so that it could carry a higher price, as a unique object?*

ALÿS: Yes and no. Yes, each of them was unique. Yet they all belonged to various series, as they were all referring to a similar model, so they depended on one another. It was their grouping or proximity that made them exist. As for their price, the fact that we were – and still are, for sure – maintaining copyrights on each image, allowed us to maintain a low market value, one that went against the idea of the unique and the rare – hence expensive – ‘original’ product. Retrospectively it was a naïve attempt to challenge the rules of the market, as recent resale prices in auction houses of some of these paintings have demonstrated, but for a moment it functioned. In the space of three years we produced a massive number of paintings, invading the market if you will, saturating the demand, which allowed us of course to maintain low prices but also to make a decent living out of it. Incidentally, the project acquired an unexpected documentary dimension. Over the last decade the sign-painting tradition has nearly disappeared. It has been driven out by computer-generated signage.

FERGUSON: *To me Mexico City still seems to have an enormous amount of hand-painted signage everywhere, compared to the United States at least.*

ALÿS: What really disappeared are its figurative elements. The signs are more text-based now. But then that could have a positive reading. It could mean that in the last couple of decades the literacy rate has increased enough that the figurative ingredients are no longer indispensable.

FERGUSON: *But in terms of repetition more broadly, not just vis-à-vis the sign painters, you have an ongoing interest in the idea of rehearsal. One of the key elements in a rehearsal is repeating something until you can do it properly. So there is a strong repetitive element in the idea of rehearsal as well.*

ALÿS: Yes, but 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.

Sound and rhythm also have been key tools in that process, as a means to destabilize the perception of time, a way of diluting time. In animation you learn that true synchronization of sound and image is virtually impossible. An audio accent takes four frames, whereas a visual accent happens in just one frame. So in film you can only suggest the illusion of synchrony.

Again, the *Rehearsal* films are part of a more extended narrative, Latin America’s

RELIGIOUS PROCESSION IN
TEPOZTLÁN, MORELOS,
MEXICO, 2000



REHEARSAL I, 1999-2001
 IN COLLABORATION WITH RAFAEL ORTEGA,
 TIJUANA, MEXICO
 VIDEO
 29 MIN. 25 SEC
 PREPARATORY SKETCH

ambiguous relationship to the concept of production and the dogma of efficiency. That investigation really started in the mid-1990s with the piece in which I pushed a block of ice during an entire day through the streets of Mexico City until it melted completely. It framed the debate by questioning the imminent contract of production: sometimes making something leads to nothing.

In the *Rehearsals* series there is a progression in the argument. In *Rehearsal 1* (1999-2001) the action is quite hypnotic, with the little VW going up and down the hill like a pendulum. After a while, the attention shifts from the finality of the action to the act itself, something I had played with already in the animation *Song for Lupita*.

In *Rehearsal 2* (2001-06) we have a scenario in which the development of a mechanics – such as two steps forward, three steps back, four steps forward, three steps back – and in which, although the progression is not linear and occurs in a different temporality, there is some kind of progress at the end of the day. It's just a different pace. Postponement or delaying does not mean stagnation. There is always a progression, but through a different mode.

FERGUSON: *Because it is something that nominally has a beginning and an end, if you keep starting it and stopping it again, the beginning and the end become part of a bigger process or story.*

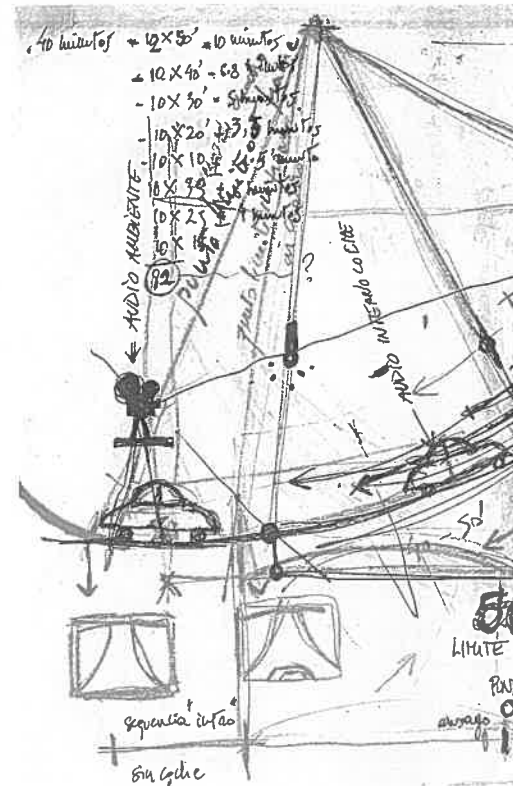
ALÿS: Yes. You end up within this middle sphere. This aspiration to something that cannot be defined can also become a sphere for a society to function, a way of resisting an imported concept of progress. It's a story of struggle more than one of achievement, an allegory of process more than of synthesis.

FERGUSON: *I wonder how much repeating something prevents its resolution or its conclusion. How does that relate to a project such as When Faith Moves Mountains (2002), where there is an almost ridiculous, endless amount of work, but something was actually achieved, in that this giant sand dune mountain really was moved a few inches in one direction. On the other hand there is an inherent futility in the gigantic amount of labour it took to achieve that result. Do you see a connection between that piece and the idea of rehearsal and repetition?*

ALÿS: The motto of *When Faith Moves Mountains* is 'maximum effort, minimum result' – simultaneously stating the ridiculous disproportion between an effort and its effect, referring to a society in which minimal reforms are achieved through massive collective efforts. But the action also wants to suggest an alternative to imported models of development, to modernity's concept of linear progress.

Speaking of *When Faith Moves Mountains*, I always found it quite ironic that some people criticized the project for its gratuitousness, when voluntary collaboration was the *sine qua non* condition of the action. I suppose nowadays political correctness has moved on to economic correctness. But more to the point, I think today it's difficult to pass on an attitude that doesn't conform with the climate of scepticism 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 evangelical preachers, seem somehow out of place.

FERGUSON: *The idea of maximum effort and minimum result reminds me of The Loop (1997), in which you travelled from Tijuana to San Diego, basically by circumnavigating the globe, looping around the entire perimeter of the Pacific Ocean. You only had to go a few miles, maybe only a few metres, but you travelled tens of*



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 to circumnavigate 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.

thousands of miles. The essence of a loop is that it can be repeated – you could go round again, even if in this case you probably would not want to. Equally, in Lima they could presumably move the sand dune another few inches, or even move it back.

ALYS: As the action of the wind constantly does to sand dunes.

FERGUSON: *In a way it is also like the myth of Sisyphus, this desire to keep pushing the boulder up the hill.*

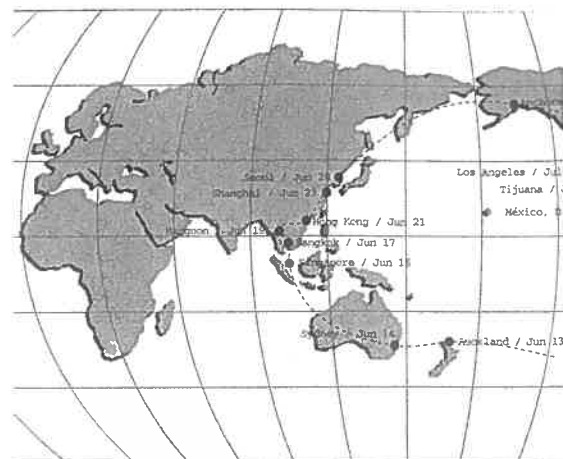
ALYS: Apparently, yes, but, unlike in the Sisyphus myth, which is utterly fatalistic and doomed to repeat itself, there is a element of redemption involved here, a progress of sorts – even if it is different from the Western linear understanding of progress – but also a blind faith in the need for the action to happen. Though its arithmetic may be dreadful, it still needs to be carried out.

The impossible condition in which the vanity of the action is paired with its absolute necessity is addressed – heroically and ridiculously – in the tornado chase (*Tornado* [working title], 2000-present) or in a recent piece in which a 16 mm camera pursues mirages as they appear and vanish perpetually into the horizon (*A Story of Deception*, 2003-6). I found in that pursuit the perfect image of *fuite en avant*, of fleeing forwards. What immediately seduced me in the mirage's endless escaping was that it materialized the very Latin American scenario in which development programmes 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' (to quote my friend Cuauhtémoc). If you look into the larger cinematic or literary tradition, mirages have always been called upon in order to introduce scenes of apparition, like the one in *Lawrence of Arabia* in which Sherif Ali ibn El Kharish first appears. But I tend to see the mechanism of the mirage as exactly the opposite. While one approaches it, the mirage eternally escapes across the horizon line, always deceiving or eluding our progress, inevitably preceding our footsteps. It is a phenomenon of constant disappearance, a continuous experience of evasion. Without the movement of the observer, the mirage would be nothing more than an inert stain, an optical vibration in the landscape. It is our advance that awakens it, our progression towards it that triggers its life. It is in the obstinacy of our intent that the mirage comes to life, and that is the space that interests me. If there is disillusionment, it is because we want to catch it, to touch it.

When I refer, by way of the mirage metaphor, to the modernity that always seems to be within our reach but escapes us, I don't mean to say that modernity is the goal or what we should be pursuing. What interests me is the intent, the movement towards the mirage. For me, the emphasis is on the act of pursuing itself, in this escape forwards. I see the attempt as the real space of production, like the field of operations of a real or realistic development. Obviously you could reply that all this is purely a projection of mine, pure fantasy, that I've fallen into the mirage's trap.

FERGUSON: *We have come back over and over again in this conversation to the role of fiction and storytelling. Placing a story into circulation is very important in your work. But I am also interested in how the image relates to the story.*

ALYS: I started making paintings because the street interventions and the three-dimensional objects I was making at the time were getting more and more hermetic. They were becoming art-world products, and I was losing contact with a wider audience, with the public. The images were a way of breaking that pattern.



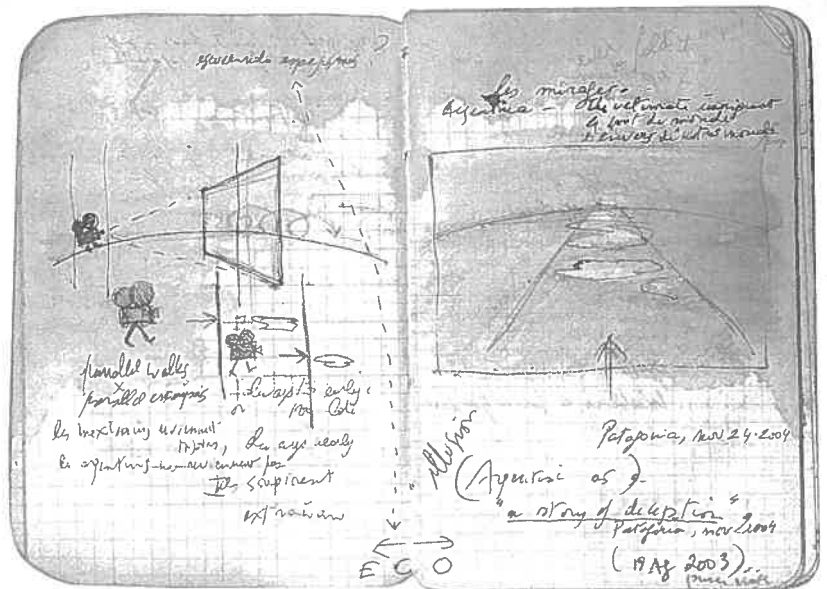
Subject: SHANGHAI /23 June 1997
Sent: 6/23/97 10:11 AM
Received: 6/23/97 11:15 PM
From: FRANCIS ALYS, 110123.630@compu
To: Olivier Debroise, debroise@lan

Not much to do with the Tintinesque Shanghai of 1
exoticism still flourishes. Insignificant detail
Is it just a matter of geography?
At this point, whether I travel east or west, it
week to reach a homeland.
As I become progressively unable to read the loc
happily losing knowledge of my self.
At night I crash, emptied.
I don't even dare resist the vain romanticism wh
crude reality of a mutating Shanghai.
Pure present.

Hardly any dogs around.
The few I saw are discreetly being walked late a
Most have been killed during a cleansing of the
They are the advance victims befe a three year p
"modernization" of the whole downtown area.

After a methodic packing ceremony, the morning's
quest for coffee.

A STORY OF DECEPTION, 2003-06
 IN COLLABORATION WITH RAFAEL ORTEGA
 AND OLIVIER DEBROISE
 16 MM FILM
 4 MIN 20 SEC
 INSTALLATION, PORTIKUS, FRANKFURT, 2006



The language that I used at the time was directly borrowed from sign painters and their characters. The man in the suit was the main protagonist of those street advertisements. A lot of the situations that the paintings illustrated were echoes of actions that happened on the street but which had no reason to exist as a photo document. I called the sign painters, who ended up being the co-authors of those images, because the language they were using was the most direct and communicative I could think of. I was not a painter. I had no interest in style, and their iconography fitted my needs. Also, I try to make a clear distinction between what will be addressing the street and what will be directed to the gallery wall.

The sign painters' main skill lies in the aesthetic resolution of a visual plot or a situation. In the beginning I would give them quite resolved and elaborate images, but over time I began giving them just sketches. They would really be the ones proposing the way of communicating that situation at its maximum power.

FERGUSON: *Either the story or the image can work in your mind, or your collaborator's mind, or the viewer's mind, and generate some other event or image.*

ALYS: Yes, it is always kind of bouncing or ricocheting.