

(Ella)

The gap or failure of reason is precisely the blind spot that makes it accede to another dimension, the dimension of thinking, which articulates itself on the different as its indeterminable necessity.' — Michel de Certeau

Francis Alys **the art of balancing on a tightrope** / Michèle Thériault
In seeking to grasp the work of Francis Alys, we are confronted with its powers of elusiveness, flight and diversion. Not only is it multifarious: walks, painting, drawing, video, film, assemblage, photography, writing, songs, music — but an idea or a project will often be transposed from one medium to another, even one artist to another, thus imparting 'mutability' to the work's field of operation. This characteristic of a practice that eludes its own circumscription — and ours — dispersed in a constant mobility of forms, mirrors the artist's singular walking activity throughout the city.

Alys likes to stroll and intervene in cities, especially Mexico City, laboratory of an impossible and chaotic modernity. The walk is his privileged space of operation.² It attests to, and intersects with, a multitude of presences: the acts and gestures of unknown people, local and marginalized histories, coincidences — in all, with everything that partakes of the intimacy of life and makes up its imaginary; everything that coalesces in one's memory through a glance or through a moment of listening. One can't define this walking in relation to place — this would be more a question of stability and order ("in accord with which elements are distributed in relationships of coexistence") and not, according to the subtle distinction between place and space proposed by Michel de Certeau, "of intersections of mobile elements [...] actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it." In short, de Certeau concludes, "space is a practiced place."³ The space of the urban stroll is the dissonant space of the experience of the 'outside': of crowds, of the insignificant, of unknown and unusual things one encounters, of chance and of the unforeseen. This space is also the arena of mobile practices that elude the regulating structures of the State: of a history and of stories that slip through the net of History: of an inscription that cannot be made.

Walking and, indeed, all of Francis Alys's work evoke the practices of diversion used by the ordinary consumer as analyzed by Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. This essay, dedicated to "the ordinary man", constitutes a kind of "antidiscipline" where the author favours surreptitious forms of creativity in everyday life over the analysis of the disciplinary and repressive mechanisms of the apparatuses of power. Thus for de Certeau, this "ubiquitous character walking in countless thousands on the street" is "the murmuring voice of societies" through time — the one who "comes before texts" and is consequently indifferent to them.⁴ This man, woman, child or group and family develop "ways of operating" and create heterogeneous gaps in the systems they infiltrate.⁵ Institutional structures, programs, property and power are subtly thwarted by ruses, surprises and stratagems of all kinds: interruptions, accidents and minor, anonymous faults in codes and reason that are lost in time.

Alys walks, observes, listens, encounters, converses, takes notes, and thus gently creates an archive of urban haphazardness and of the 'unreasonable' aspects of everyday life. Sometimes the artist performs an intervention — a surreptitious action in its own way, its only witness a passerby who may remember a gesture or an unusual trajectory with curiosity or indifference. Sometimes the passerby may even ignore the artist's action entirely. Strolling through the center of Mexico City, Alys placed pillows in the frames of broken windows. During his daily walks, he pulled behind him a magnetized object fitted with four legs on wheels. Over time, *El colector* was buried under a heap of metallic waste that had 'stuck to its skin'. In Havana, Alys slipped into magnetic shoes and strolled through the city. In Ghent and São Paulo, he walked carrying a can of paint leaking a slight trickle, got lost, and regained his way to end up at his point of departure, namely the gallery. During a week in Copenhagen, he strolled through the city under the influence of a different drug every day. In Venice, after entering the city by way of different points, Alys and a companion left in search of one another, each one carrying one half of a tuba helicon. After two days, they located each other reassembled the instrument and blew a single note.

"The invention of a language," Alijs asserts, "goes together with the invention of a city. Each of my interventions is another fragment of the story that I am inventing, of the city that I am mapping." Through interventions that both defy and fuse with the city — paintings, bricolages, notes, drawings, objects and films — Alijs devises "ways of making," procedures of resistance that allow him to escape what he cannot escape, to create his everyday reality, just as ordinary consumers "invent" theirs "by poaching in countless ways" from a system they cannot escape.⁷ Walking induces poaching. The artist's complementary works appear like particles raised from the maelstrom of unusual information that surrounds him. They come to rest on a variety of supports to tell their story.

One cannot call Alijs a *flâneur* in the Baudelairean or Benjaminian sense, a *dériveur* in the Situationist manner or a Fluxartist. He certainly falls within this continuum in that his activities of displacement and intervention take place in a modern/postmodern urban milieu and comment on it. But Alijs's walks have none of the pensiveness of the first, the programmatic nature of the second or the ludic quality of the third. Rather, they belong to their era and moment, they are a dissonant echo of the current situation of the artist — or more precisely, of an artist for whom the practice of art is a continually reconsidered paradox. One that is anchored in the local and evolves from a thousand fragments collected here and there in a world that will soon no longer possess an 'elsewhere'. And one that also seeks to connect with a popular ethic in a world (of art) that appropriates the popular in order to annihilate it immediately.

The artist operates as though balanced on a tightrope, eminently aware of the fragility of his practice, of the vanity of making and of its disappearance, and of the paradox inherent in the brush of art with non-art. In 1997, Alijs carried out an intervention in Mexico City called *Paradox of Praxis*. At 9:15 am, he began to push a large block of ice down a street. He pushed it through the city streets, labouring at it until, by 6:47 pm, it was no more than a puddle of water. The following comment accompanied the images that were taken of his progress: "Sometimes, doing something leads to nothing." In the context of an exhibition of contemporary Mexican art at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Alijs presented

this walk/intervention as a video projection set up facing another projection that allowed us to follow visually the course of an empty plastic bottle moving on the ground throughout the city.⁸ "Sometimes," we read on the wall, "doing nothing leads to something."

This act and these words elucidate his art. Sometimes there is something in the commonplace, and nothing in artistic 'gesture'. The commonplace can also contain artistic gesture, just as there is sometimes a conjunction between 'nothing' and art. The distinction is not always clear. How can they be reconciled? Perhaps by cultivating a fragile and ironic poetics of the anonymous and the commonplace, and by dispersing the material aspect of his work, perhaps even its authorship. If there is nothing more banal than a man walking in the city collecting observations here and there in passing, then the irony and fatalism of a man who insists on dragging a block of ice, defying common sense, until it has totally evaporated amounts to an excess of banality that can be greeted with derision and consternation, but that nevertheless imparts presence to the public and anonymous gesture and act. This presence, however, is fleeting because it will inevitably disappear, but not before it has woven the haphazard fabric of urban life even more tightly.

Subtly playing on this irony of anonymity and dispersal, Alijs generally diverts his physical person in any documentation on his walks/interventions. One rarely distinguishes a face; rather, one sees feet, a step, a view from behind, a moving silhouette, caught like the features in the surrounding setting — a fragmented and mute character who seems to fear being transfixed in the still image. Strangers in the invisible crowd are the real witnesses. The art world, in turn, gains access only through a picture postcard bearing instructions for the execution of the walk — a souvenir document of an act already lost, and which, one might believe, may never have occurred. Indeed, there is often nothing to assure us that this excursion really existed in deed and in fact. Moreover, anyone, anywhere who receives one of these cards can follow the artist's precise and simple directives and undertake the same walk. It thereby escapes its own originator and becomes subject to all sorts of transformations. Alijs even goes as far as to confuse the doubling of his person and ours in an intervention entitled *The Doppelgänger* (1999).

The printed cards show a man walking from the back. This man, the accompanying text tells us, could be our double. In every new city we visit (Mexico, Istanbul and London in this case), we are invited to wander in search of such a figure. Once we spot our likeness, we are asked to walk alongside the person until our pace adjusts with his or hers. This identity game creates a network of links between strangers with infinite possibilities for confusion with the other. But it is also a way to recognize oneself, if only for an instant, in the fleeting and formless crowd.

The paintings, objects, drawings and videos of Francis Alys also appear as scattered and 'unreasonable' moments lost in the banality of everyday life. Discrete and intimate in size and execution, they refuse to vie for space. (His small paintings are approximately 20 x 25 cm; his video projections, 40 x 60 cm, and his sculptures/objects are invariably small). Through our experience of them, they suggest those phenomena that occur in our peripheral vision and that, once perceived, draw us into their singularity. They seem to dissolve through the ambient space into the private and moving eye of the passer-by/observer, who becomes immersed in them like a reader is immersed in a story, no longer making the distinction between his or her imaginary and the materiality of the page and the words. In the paintings and drawings, even in some of the objects, one often finds a character in a dark suit, a depersonalized being. This mute, stereotypical figure is also exploring the excesses of the common and the anonymous. There is nothing dreamlike or surrealist about these images of a man represented in unusual association of poses and objects, for all the possible scenarios the artist proposes are quite viable, although improbable. They can be likened to one's encounters with the strangeness of the (urban) world: its accidents, enigmas and incongruities.

With his disparate "ways of operating" and his continual quest to define an artistic practice that is both relevant to art, to its ambient milieu, and even to a local culture, Alys produced a series of works with Mexican sign painters (*rotulistas*) from 1993 to 1997.⁷ The artisans prove to be the 'author' of these pieces as much as Alys, the working principle being as follows: Alys gives to three or four *rotulistas* a small picture

painted by him of a scene involving his gray-suited character. Each painter is invited to interpret it in his own way. The resulting paintings are more imposing in size than their model and are executed in the style of each particular artisan, with certain additions, omissions and minor, varied modifications. This exercise often results in a kind of *mise en abyme* of the copy as Alys himself subsequently 'retouches' his 'original' work. Moreover, Alys does not appropriate the presentation of these paintings as each of these ensembles has three or four authors. Eventually, Alys and the *rotulistas* will offer their services in a sales catalogue from which clients will be able to order a painting corresponding to their particular demands. Of course, this approach to producing art comprises the dismantling of notions of authorship and originality. Moreover, Alys does not appropriate a popular style, as did artists of the Russian avant-garde, Pop or the appropriation artists of the 60s and 80s, but rather works alongside it (and the artisans), letting it be deployed and multiplied in space and time. As critic Cuauhtémoc Medina rightly indicates: "[Alys] makes use of the sign-painters not only for handcrafting or as an anti-artistic device, but to generate a dialogue with traditions differentiated from aesthetic conception."⁸ Alys blurs the 'artistic' trajectory of his identity, loses himself in the play of the copy, and thus thwarts and resists the esthetic apparatus by momentarily making it operate in reverse.

By moving from one activity to another, one medium to another, or by juxtaposing them, Alys appears to want to constantly transform and displace his role as an artist, to make it more elusive. It suggests an artistic practice that is a mode of existence and a way of thinking that requires mobility and precariousness to gauge itself. Such a practice occupies a resolutely fragile territory that oscillates between the futility and disappearance of the artistic act on the one hand, and on the other, its tenacity. The artist's short animated films and videos illustrate this with disarming precision. In *Mañana* (1998), a female character schematically drawn on the film pours liquid from one glass to another. In *The Banquet* (1998), Alys trains his camera on a dog moving here and there on a beach while nervously scrutinizing the bare surface of the water. The reception of these moving images is infinite since they are presented without interruption in a

seamless loop. In both cases the acts depicted seem to lack a motive. With a subtle irony, the images join together a banal, perhaps trivial, act and its unfathomable presence and power of incongruity. They reformulate the "paradox of practice" into a playful game of repetition, and into a mode that is both stationary and mobile.

The Last Clown (work in progress) is a pointed and ironic testimonial to this shifting between media and the flight from one activity to another that can be consolidated in an open ensemble. This work brings together small paintings, a multitude of drawings and studies and a film animated by the artist. Laughter, even derision, permeate the work. A walk, an anecdote and an image on a background of sound all share the stage. At the origin of this ensemble is a commonplace but personal story of an accidental fall taken by a friend of Alijs which gave rise to a discussion between the two on the ambiguity of the current role of the artist.

Walking, by nature, defies borders. The walk, as it progresses, will make use of many subterfuges. Thus, it is entirely logical that it be extended into Alijs's paintings, drawings and films. Moreover, his gray-suited character is often seen, in his paintings and drawings, looking pensive while strolling here and there. Once again the work refuses to stand still. The film, animated with the artist's drawings, as well as the accompanying sound constitute the site of a dual negotiation between a still image and a moving one, and between the exhaustion of the image (if not painting) and the alternate possibilities of sound.

To some extent, *The Last Clown* is also the artist who finds himself performing on stage, and the atmosphere of jazz and circus music suddenly cut with canned laughter simply serves to dramatize the comic aspect of his performance. For this character, who, on his path encounters a dog that brings about his fall is led, by means of this brief video and the multitude of drawings and sketches to take the same fall over and over again, and incessantly relive a form of failure and humiliation. The spectators may chuckle, perhaps even laugh derisively. In the notes that appear here and there in the margins of the sketches, we can read "the state of the arts" and "do my little dance — *juglar*

— *malabarista, saltimbanque*." Immediately below is the silhouette of a tightrope walker who advances on a wire, pole in hand. The words "gallery", "museum" and "studio" are written around the image. Lower still, we read, "in the absence of the artist, please dance."

The *saltimbanque* is both a clown and, by virtue of profession, a nomadic being. One who slips from one stage to another, playing upon his identity while knowing how to take full advantage of the accidental and the extemporaneous. His field of operation lies between humour and derision. He would be well advised to master the art of juggling.

Alijs fights inertia — the inertia arising from the weight of contemporary life, from Mexico City and from the conventions of the art milieu. He never stands still, he continually juggles and eludes us. He diverts the spectator and himself by means of minor failures, accidents and unforeseen events which he subtly reverses in the rumblings of everyday life.



Thus my life is a flight and I lose everything and everything belongs to oblivion, or to him (Alijs). — *Alijs and I* (after *Borges and I*)¹¹

notes

1. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, Steven Rendall, tr., p. 202.
2. On the subject of the artist's walks, see the list on p. 81 and the catalogue, Francis Alijs: *Walks/Paseos*, Mexico City: Museo de Arte Moderno, 1997.
3. Michel de Certeau, op. cit., p. 117.
4. *Ibid.*, p. v and p. xv.
5. *Ibid.*, p. xiv and p. 34.
6. Francis Alijs in Francis Alijs: *Walks/Paseos*, op. cit., p. 15.
7. Michel de Certeau, op. cit., p. xv, p. xiii and p. xii.
8. The exhibition was called *Moi et ma circonstance* and was held at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts from November 4, 1999 to February 6, 2000.
9. See the catalogue, *The Last/The Copy of the Last*, Guadalajara: Arena Mexico and Monterrey: Galeria Ramis Barquet, 1995.
10. Cuauhtémoc Medina, "Francis Alijs: Tu subrealismo", *Third Text* (Spring, 1987), p. 47.
11. Francis Alijs and Kitty Scott, Francis Alijs: *Walks/Paseos*, op. cit., p. 35.

This essay also benefitted from insights gained during an interview with the artist that took place on October 25, 1999.

But then something happened that silenced every mouth and fixed every eye. In the meantime, of course, the tight-rope walker had begun his work: he had emerged from a little door and was proceeding across the rope, which was stretched between two towers and thus hung over the people and the market square. Just as he had reached the middle of his course the little door opened again and a brightly-dressed fellow like a buffoon sprang out and followed the former with rapid steps. 'Forward, lame-foot!' cried his fearsome voice, 'forward sluggard, intruder, pallid-face! Lest I tickle you with my heels! What are you doing here between towers? You belong in the tower, you should be locked up, you are blocking the way of a better man than you!' And with each word he came nearer and nearer to him: but when he was only a single pace behind him, there occurred the dreadful thing that silenced every mouth and fixed every eye: he emitted a cry like a devil and sprang over the man standing in his path. But the latter, when he saw his rival thus triumph lost his head and the rope; he threw away his pole and fell, faster even than it, like a vortex of legs and arms. The market square and the people were like a sea in a storm: they flew apart in disorder, especially where the body would come crashing down.

Zarathustra's Prologue (6)

Thus Spoke Zarathustra

Nietzsche



Fellow countrymen: We were at the edge of the abyss. But we have made a great leap forward! — *Legendary speech by a South American dictator.*

falling from grace

I remember reading about a man who was practicing karate kicks in his 10th floor apartment and died when he went through a window he inadvertently left open.

There was also that photographer that fell into an open drain in Mexico City, a "gringo hole" as a painter used to say, and lost a testicle.

Just recently, a friend of mine told me about the tragic death of Humphrey Jennings, British Surrealist artist, documentary filmmaker and member of the Mass Observation Team, who fell from a cliff into the sea when he was trying to frame a shot for a film he was doing in a Greek island.

I do not know why I collect all these stories, as if they were pearls of the same necklace. They mix in my mind with shameful events of my own: the roar of laughter that interrupted a radio transmission of talks between strikers and authorities at the National University when I fell flat on my face on the proscenium...

Every time we face ridicule, it is worth remembering what T.J. Clark once suggested: in terms of the history of the avant-garde, innovation is frequently achieved when experimenting with incompetence or obscurity. There is nothing wrong in wearing once in a while the Emperor's new suit. But it is better to watch out, as Beuys said, so as not to become the King's jester.

At the end of the day, art is becoming a dangerous form of enigmatic amusement.

If I closely associate the tightrope walker and the jester it has to do with the prologue of Nietzsche's Zarathustra, where those characters are seen as symbols of two kinds of risk: death and laughter. Keeping that reference in mind, "the last clown" is in a certain way another name for the last man. The artist is just somebody who feigns value on the basis of productive failure.

Cuahtémoc Medina



Subject: Last Clown
 Sent: 14/03/1920 19:13
 Received: 20/03/2000 16:27
 From: francisalys
 To: Michèle, auterimo@microtec.net

----- Forwarded Message -----

From: Pip Day, PipDay
 To: francisalys, 110123,630
 Date: Lun 20 Mars 2000, 12:03 PM

----- Forwarded Message -----

Date: 3/16/100 8:52 PM

i turned on this weird italian (dubbed in german) movie one morning on tv. As far as i could tell, it was about a love triangle between trapeze artists in a circus - 2 men, one pro and another less experienced, and their partner, a woman. the 2 men were locked in an odd competition, attempting to impress the woman by performing progressively more dangerous feats - each act accompanied by increasingly suspenseful music and dramatic camera angles. but it seemed the men were actually trying to impress each other; while the woman carefully manipulated the whole situation. i recall something about tricks without safety nets and then something about a big travelling circus scouting for talent, which even further provoked the trio. I can't remember the ending, maybe i fell back to sleep, but after all of that build up, i have only a vague image of the woman walking off with one of the men, i don't know which one, as the other watched on.

- the start of the act -

do my little dance (A) Juggler → Macabre to Galambangin



including your hands
 a possibility of failure is expected?
 consistency
 consistency

in the absence of the artist,
 please act as you'd expect him to (act)

if you are a real operator, what you really are doing is waiting for the accident to happen.

Always gotta be at what you just done.

using X what
 (only jivots,
 Thaba etc...)