

Wet feet - dry feet: borders and games

GUIDEBOOK

FRANCIS ALY'S



*Wet feet — dry feet: borders and games*

Solo exhibition by Francis Alÿs

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# FOREWORD

TAI KWUN CONTEMPORARY

Tai Kwun Contemporary is delighted to offer *Wet feet — dry feet: borders and games*, the first solo exhibition by Francis Alÿs in Hong Kong. Curated by Xue Tan and Sunjung Kim, and co–presented by Tai Kwun Contemporary and Art Sonje Center, Seoul, the exhibition highlights important recent works by the artist, one of the most influential conceptual artists of our time.

Francis Alÿs's artistic practice poetically fuses an imaginative, conceptual sensibility with the socio–political momentousness of issues related to urban spaces, transnational borders, and political structures, among others. While his works are charged with political concerns, what is more significant is how his works open up an artistic space for doubt and invention—often through ephemeral actions initiated and documented by the artist which leave no trace and yet conjure up fables.

It is thus an honour that Tai Kwun Contemporary is able to show works by Alÿs related to borders and to children's games, two complementary yet connected series of works. The bulk of the works in connection to the Gibraltar project have travelled from the 2017 exhibition *The Logbook of Gibraltar* at Art Sonje Center, curated by Sunjung Kim. This exhibition has further expanded this oeuvre with additional new drawings and paintings, as well as an up–to–date

presentation of *Children's Games*; in particular, works have also been commissioned specially for Hong Kong—a city to which he is no stranger and of which he is very fond. In fact, not only has Francis Alÿs engaged significantly with various locales in Asia but he has also been influential with local and regional artists, not least with his thoughtful street–level interventions as well as performances that critically reflect on the traditions of Land Art and Minimalist Art by way of a socially engaged element and a conceptual, fabular aura.

We are elated at the presence of the artist in Hong Kong for this exhibition. We must thank the artist, his studio and collaborators, the curatorial and installation teams, along with many, many others for their patience, perseverance, and dedication in making this exhibition possible, not least in overcoming difficulties related to the pandemic.

# Wet feet — dry feet: borders and games

by Xue Tan

A bridge allows you to move on but not to stay, it's about displacement rather than about permanence.[1]

One autumn morning in 2005, Francis Alÿs found himself captivated by a news article in *El País*, which described a legal dispute between Cuban migrants and the US immigration authorities. It was an unusual case: a group of Cuban boat people were intercepted by the US Coast Guard while disembarking on a bridge in the Florida Keys. The conundrum lay in the precise location—one of the many bridges that link the keys of Florida's southern peninsula—which defied easy categorisation under the "Wet Feet, Dry Feet" policy towards Cuban migrants. The policy, a 1995 revision of the Cuban Adjustment Act of 1966, limited the US's acceptance of Cuban illegal immigrants to those caught on land only; those intercepted in water would be sent back to Cuba. The legal battle for this group of migrants centred on a technicality: is a bridge "water" or "land"? Are their feet "wet" or "dry"?

Such was the spark for Francis Alÿs's works *Bridge/Puente* (2006) and *Don't Cross the Bridge Before You Get to the River* (2008). The artist was struck by the symbolic reverberances over such distances and by the enduring yearning to cross these bodies of water—the 172 km between Havana and Key West, Florida, and the 13 km of the Strait of Gibraltar between Morocco and Spain, both historic arenas of conflicts and mass migration. The geographical gaps have become symbols of conflicts, rivalries, ideological differences, and separation over the centuries, while the persistent movement of peoples also speaks to an eagerness to overcome this. Alÿs's vision of a floating bridge emerged: a chain of fishing and private boats going at opposite directions from their shores, creating an illusion of a bridge on the horizons of the Gulf of Mexico, and a line of children in the Strait of Gibraltar, connecting continents, nations, and communities, momentarily, ephemerally before their renewed dispersal. To make an impossible situation possible, believable—such is the imaginative power of Alÿs's art.

Francis Alÿs: What's life like around here?

Old Fisherman: Like everywhere else, with complaints...

With political problems...Like in any part of the world.

I've walked a lot. Here the sea is something wonderful,

but if you take me to a mountain, I will love the mountains,

and if you take me to a river, I'll fish in the river...

One has to smile to life, don't look for problems, they come on their own.[2]

Hong Kong is no stranger to the history of mass migration, from before the establishment of the British colony to the waves of

Vietnamese boat people in the 1970s–80s. In particular, the "Wet Feet, Dry Feet" policy in the US finds strange echoes in Hong Kong's "Touch Base" policy. In 1970s Hong Kong, hundreds of thousands of Mainland Chinese migrants undertook immense risks, often swimming from Shekou via Deep Bay (Shenzhen Bay) to Hong Kong, in order to escape famine, poverty, and various tribulations; the ones who swam were sometimes known as "Freedom Swimmers". [3] The "Touch Base" policy stipulated that refugees were to be sent back to the Mainland if intercepted at sea or in the New Territories; only if they reached south of Boundary Street—the formal boundary between Kowloon and the New Territories—were migrants allowed to stay legally in the territory. The migrants who made it and wound up staying in Hong Kong form part of the mythos of Hong Kong: some of them became incredibly successful entrepreneurs, forming the rags-to-riches legends of the "Lion Rock Spirit".

Such stories from history feel vividly present today. Migrants and refugees have existed throughout history; they share the collective experience of being displaced from their homelands. Indeed, the vast refugee movements and population displacements, notably across the Mediterranean in recent years, make up a continual litany of crises since the 20th century.

The number of international migrants has reached 272 million, continuing an upward trend in all regions of the world.[4] Thousands of refugees and migrants are known to have died in the Mediterranean Sea in recent years, and the real number is estimated to be considerably higher.[5]

Borders—physical or invisible, geographical or ideological, public or personal—remain at the heart of Francis Alÿs's artistic practice. Born in Antwerp, Belgium in 1959, Alÿs was drafted in 1986 to work in Mexico as an architect for non-government organisations in the aftermath of the 1985 earthquake; he has since then called Mexico home. The sprawling megalopolis of Mexico City is a vast labyrinth: disorienting, chaotic, and irresistibly mesmerising. Alÿs's deep observations of street life there naturally provided the entry point for his early works, with his works involving "urban

drifting" turning out to have been one of the most consistent threads throughout his practice, along with his particular manner of resistance to a fast-changing society, in that he lays claim to individual re-uses and appropriations of space in a public terrain. In the coexistence of the historic relics of the colonial era and glitches of modernism, he conceives works at the collision of rules and cultures, and in the blind spots of social (dis)orders. In Alÿs's art, there is a profound simplicity and honesty grounded in the spontaneous everyday life; it is autonomous from the economy of art and freed from various modes of artistic production.

Alÿs is known for his early solo performances, propelled by his long walks in the city, aimless with no set routine. This recalls *la dérive* [6] ("drifting"), a Situationist strategy elaborated by the French theorist Guy Debord, which involves playful experiences of urban situations with no clear purpose but with an awareness of psychogeographical effects. Many works of Alÿs are determined by chance and live situations on the street and within the urban fabric, with the artist intertwining his trajectory at the most minimalistic level. In *Placing Pillows* (1990), the artist inserted fresh pillows onto the frames of broken windows, a gentle sculptural gesture of "healing" the city that suffered severe damage from the earthquake.

In *Magnetic Shoes* (1990–1992), the artist walked daily through neighbourhoods in Havana with magnetic shoes; his footwork attracted a collection of metal scraps and other textures that in a way define the character of the streets. In *Paradox of Praxis 1 (Sometimes Making Something Leads to Nothing)* (1997), the artist pushed a large block of ice across downtown Mexico City for a continuous nine hours until the ice fully melted. Absurd yet starry-eyed, the work underlined the peripheral economy of countries of the South, where the majority of the population survives on massively "unproductive" labour.

Walking, in particular drifting, or strolling, is already—within the speed culture of our time—a kind of resistance. Paradoxically, it is also the last private space, safe from the phone or email.[7]

Some other of Alÿs's walks shake off poetic license, and are infused with indirect critiques and urgent responses to geopolitical

crises; yet there is still a sense of "uselessness" in the action. In *The Loop* (1997), Alÿs travelled from Tijuana, Mexico, to San Diego, California, without crossing the border between the US and Mexico. This journey had him circumnavigate the world from south of Tijuana through Latin America, across the Pacific to Australia, then north through Southeast Asia and passing through Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Seoul, and stopping through Alaska, Canada, and Los Angeles before finally reaching San Diego—without ever having crossed the US-Mexico border. The artist chose to displace himself physically in circumvention of the border, thereby subtly protesting the immigration tensions between the US and Mexico.

What can be the relevance of a poetic act in the context of sustained political crisis?[8]

In some cases, the politics makes itself abundantly clear. In *Green Line* (2004), Alÿs walked along one Israeli-claimed border of Israel and Palestine while carrying a dribbling can of green paint. This supposed demarcation of territories was drawn in 1949, in green ink on a map, after the ceasefire between Israeli and Arab

forces; over the subsequent years and decades, however, territories beyond the Green Line have also been occupied and administered by the Israeli military. Only made visible by the presence of occasional Israeli checkpoints, the Green Line is made literal by Alÿs's intervention—and unveils the military conflicts and political turmoil undergirding the ground itself, foregrounding the dispute which is impossible to be disguised by poetics.

In the exhibition *Wet feet — dry feet: borders and games* at Tai Kwun Contemporary, three intertwined projects—*Bridge/Puente* (2006), *Don't Cross the Bridge Before You Get to the River* (2008), and *Children's Games* (1999—ongoing)—are juxtaposed in order to present the artist's recent explorations in storytelling, with narratives anchored around borders, play, fantasy, and reality. The three projects were developed over a period of 20 years, enveloped with similar modes of fascination, and enacted with fluid and spontaneous narratives.

As an enthusiast of walking, Alÿs has long admired children's abilities in claiming public spaces as their own through squatting, running, and playing. Over the years, the artist has observed and filmed children at play in commonplace settings such as streets, fields, abandoned houses, and so on. Such curiosity has

accompanied Alÿs on his travels, including in countries that suffer from ongoing war and conflicts—in remote villages in Afghanistan and refugee camps in Iraq—as well as places where he has lived or visited—Nepal, Jordan, Mexico, Venezuela, France, Belgium, and Hong Kong, the newest addition to the project. This collection of children's games, now over 20 videos, continues to grow. The joyful kaleidoscope of children at play, exploring landscapes and relating themselves to the world and to each other, sets off a stark contrast with children living in dense contemporary urban cities, increasingly more isolated and yet deeply attached to digital devices and video games designed by adults. *Children's Games* is in a way an ethnographic study of these games by and for children, games that are not reliant on modern inventions, but on unarticulated practices, inherited traditions, and specific localities.

What importance has my life?  
I only want it to remain faithful  
until the end to the child I was...  
the child I was and who is now  
like a grandfather to me.[9]

## Lost innocence

Back in 2006, during the making of *Bridge/Puente* on the occasion of the IX Havana Biennale, Alÿs's vision of a floating bridge of boats became a tricky project to realise due to the political tensions between Cuba and the US. The fishing communities were asked to join an "aquatic ballet" while private boat owners were informed of participating in a "Land Art" project. The artist did not insist on making a physical passage; rather, it was essential for the "link" to be supported by mutual will.

How many boats does it take to  
create the illusion of a bridge?  
Enough boats to show the desire  
of each community for a bridge to  
happen.[10]

The year after, in Tangier, Morocco, Alÿs observed boys tirelessly skimming pebbles into the sea, with ripples seemingly reaching the other side (*Ricochets, Children's Games #2*). The idea then brewed in his mind: to connect Spain and Morocco across the Strait of Gibraltar.



Don't Cross the Bridge Before You Get to the River, 2007  
Diptych of oil and encaustic on canvas on wood  
14 x 20 cm (each)

Alÿs made some quick calculations. To span the Strait of Gibraltar, an actual floating bridge would need to link up 72 cargo ships (or 43 "mega cargo ships"). However, in the two years' preparatory run-up to the final event, Alÿs gradually became aware of the fishing communities' intense rivalries as well as corporate and political interests manoeuvring in the background. With the jostling of different agendas, how could the vision remain faithful? While the initial vision of the floating bridge was inspired by Robert Smithson's land art, it was reformulated with Francis Alÿs's characteristic qualities of ephemerality and social collaboration. Yet when a work becomes loaded with logistical matrices and political interests, it loses its poetic opening and artistic gesture.

Because of an urge to anchor an idea in reality? Because of the desire to provoke, in the heart of the action, this moment of complicity that could open up the possibility of change?[11]

The event was posed as an open-ended response rather than as the prescribed conclusion of the aforementioned sequence of events; the performance turned into a children's game. Two lines of children depart from the shores, holding model boats made from babouches and flip-flops, laughing and jumping in the water, genuinely amused and interested in realising the project, which was happening at the same time on the shores of the two opposite continents. The work recovers the imaginative dimension to Alÿs's work, an element which had been muted by the heavy logistical coordination of adults over the phone in *Bridge/Puente*.

They say that one of the great paradoxes of the art of playing with children is that you know you are doing well when you are doing nothing.[12]

Alÿs continues to film children's games. He never becomes directly involved, with the artist documenting children moving about in their own ways and playing their games—games which also echo the rituals, symbols, insights, superstitions, and even events

of specific societies and cultures. Sometimes, a game becomes a harbinger of real events in the world of adults, for example with "Contagion" of *Children's Games* (a new video commissioned in Hong Kong). *Children's Games* as a series has grown deep roots in his artistic practice—touching poetically on conceptual displacement and alluding lightly, whimsically on politics and social engagement. Viewers can observe a poignant sense of innocence and the redemptive power of play—universal and transcending conventions, languages, and borders. At the same time, there is a sensory void with children of the present day, suffering from the afflictions of war or poverty, or else those of anomie. Where does our future lead to, and what does the next generation picture or envision?

While talking with several Hong Kong artists, I realised that Francis Alÿs was perceived as a heroic figure by many of the younger generation of artists. His art offers a strong sense of

liberation, boundless possibilities, and independent autonomy from predetermined systems and economies. He carries about an attitude of defying conventional rationality and never interfering in an action, as if he intuits the physics of chain reactions, the boundaries of art and politics, the interplay of fiction and reality. Many of his works have inherited the vision of Land Art, and yet have transcended its enduring trace or physicality, all the while reaching for the scale of collectivity. His works are anchored in performances and events—one-off and ephemeral—yielding poetics and provocations at the same time, opening varying formats of experience, be it from the perspective of the witness, viewer, or listener. Exceptionally generous in sharing his art (with all his video works available online), Francis Alÿs does not rely on materiality; instead, many works are passed on, the way anecdotes, allegories, and children's games are—in the glow of eternity.

[1] Francis Alÿs: *The Logbook of Gibraltar*, Art Sonje Center, Seoul, 2018.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Elva Lai, *Freedom Swimmers*, 2017.

[4] "Population Division, The 2019 Revision", United Nations, 2019.

[5] Lorenzo Tondo, Maurice Stierl, and Molly Blackall. "UN refugee agency calls on EU nations to let in migrants rescued in Mediterranean", *The Guardian*, August 29, 2020.

[6] Guy Debord, "Theory of the Dérive," *Les Lèvres Nues #9*, 1956.

[7] Russell Ferguson, Jean Fisher, Cuahtémoc Medina, *Francis Alÿs*, Phaidon Press, 2007.

[8] Georges Bernanos, *Les Grands Cimetières sous la lune*, Castor Astral, 2008.

[9] Francis Alÿs: *The Logbook of Gibraltar*, Art Sonje Center, Seoul, 2018.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Francis Alÿs, *Salam Tristesse*, Iraq, 2018

Mobal Center - offensive

photos of the desert

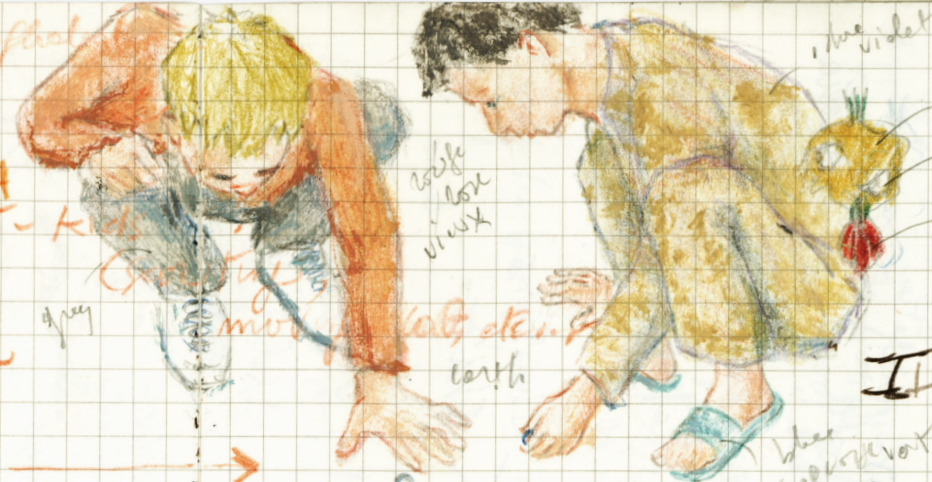
community  
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Q. after talk Baghdad ← Beauty ← Kabul - Beirut  
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risk factor / protestists - kids  
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perimetric ending  
film strip broken  
random umbilical  
Steel falling



this corner  
155 88



liberation  
freedom  
sol, ul  
gas wheel of road  
film/fiction/life goes on

I S Come  
I S Go

teeth  
egg  
flower

LAHIS monastery

so you're - heavy  
obscure passage  
soulful: hot feeling,  
he has captured the essence  
le Pen...  
spring

# Don't Cross the Bridge Before You Get to the River

Strait of Gibraltar, Morocco – Spain, 2008

The Strait of Gibraltar, a narrow sea channel of 13 km between Europe and Africa, is a historic site of conflicts and mass migration. Over the centuries, this geographical split has reflected conflicts, rivalries, ideological differences, and separation.

Francis Alÿs has long been interested in prominent geographical divisions. In his project *Bridge/Puente* in 2006, he tried metaphorically to connect Havana, Cuba, and Florida, the US, by means of the boats of fishermen and private individuals. Soon after, he shifted his attention to the Strait of Gibraltar. While observing boys skimming pebbles into the sea in Tangier, Morocco (*Ricochets, Children's Games #2*), the artist pondered creating a physical connection between the two continents: a chain of fishing boats going at opposite directions from their shores, creating an illusion of a bridge on the horizons of the Mediterranean Sea—momentarily, ephemerally before their renewed dispersal.

With the Strait of Gibraltar, it would have been almost possible to "bridge" the body of water with boats—but that would have been akin to an engineering or military operation. At the same time, additional concerns arose—physical, social, and political—and there was the inevitable risk that the artistic work would be subsumed by other agendas. As Alÿs noted, "The difference between a military

operation and an artistic gesture lies in the missing fragment of the bridge: the gap that has to be filled by our imagination."

Francis Alÿs then transformed the "bridge of boats" into a "children's game". For the artist, it was crucial that this image of dialogue between the two opposite shores came out of the mutual desires of the participants. In the two-channel video installation, one can see the children's performance from above the water as well as from below: two groups of children walking out into the sea in a line, from Spain and from Morocco simultaneously, with each child holding a model boat made from babouches or flip-flops, laughing and jumping in the water, genuinely happy and amused by the idea of the action. As the artist remarked, "Instead of building a story, what we are doing is installing a situation, a dance of the kids with the waves."

Aside from the video installation, a collection of over 100 paintings and drawings are on display in this room. These works were created in the two years' preparatory run-up to the performance, and provide insight to the artist's thought processes. These illustrative visions serve as the grounding space of Alÿs's artistic imagination.



Don't Cross the Bridge Before You Get to the River, 2008  
Tangier, Morocco  
Photo: Roberto Rubalcava



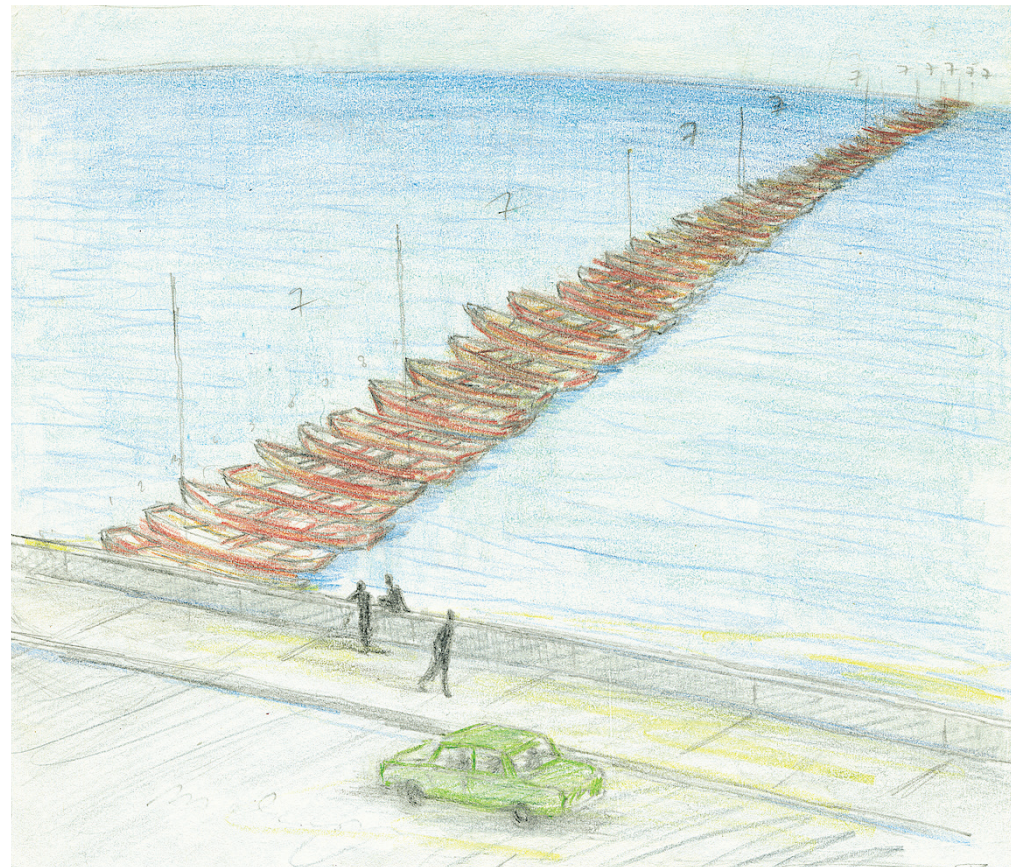
# Bridge/Puente

Havana, Cuba – Key West, Florida, 2006

Should a bridge over water be considered “land” or “sea”? Such was the vexing question facing US courts as well as the court of public opinion. Under the “Wet Feet, Dry Feet” policy of 1995, Cuban migrants caught at sea were repatriated back to Cuba (“wet feet”), while those apprehended on land would be granted the right to stay in the United States (“dry feet”). In 2005, a group of Cuban boat people were caught on one of the bridges connecting the keys in South Florida, sparking off a legal quandary. This was also the spark that had Francis Alÿs imagine a link created by people from both sides, connecting two landmasses and communities.

On the occasion of IX Havana Biennale in April 2006, the artist organised a performance that imagined a physical bridge of boats from the two sides, with well over 100 boats taking part in Havana and Key West, Florida. In part a homage to Land Art and an ephemeral action leaving behind no physical traces, the work circulated like a fable through word of mouth. In this respect, this work is characteristic of some of Alÿs's works (such as *When Faith Moves Mountains*, which involved 500 volunteers moving a huge sand dune

by 10 cm). In the end, the project opened up a poetic, conceptual space for the scope of the imagination, with an artistic language both easy to grasp while offering an acute vision (and in case one was wondering, the Cuban migrants in question were in the end granted the right to stay).



Study for Bridge/Puente, 2006  
Havana, Cuba  
Pencil on paper  
21 x 17 cm

## Children's Games

1999—ongoing

A collection of videos of children at play around the world, as documented by Francis Alÿs, *Children's Games* range from children playing musical chairs in Mexico to building sandcastles on a beach in Europe, from kite-flying in Afghanistan to hopscotch-jumping in a Yezidi refugee camp in Iraq. Some of the videos are set in peaceful locales, while others take place against a backdrop of war and conflict. All of the children's games reveal how children make use of simple, ordinary things—coins, sand, stones, chairs, marbles, among others—to conjure up an imaginary world of play and to form connections amongst each other.

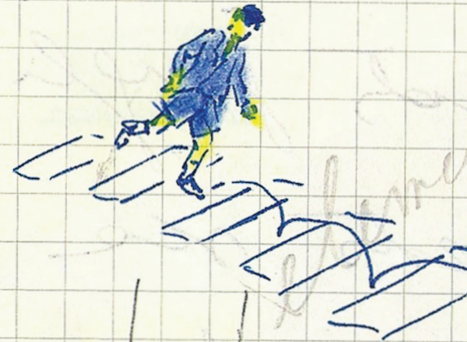
*Children's Games* is in the vein of Alÿs's artistic practice—touching poetically on conceptual displacement and alluding lightly, whimsically on politics and social engagement. Through the artist's observations and explorations of public space and everyday life, viewers can observe a poignant sense of innocence and the redemptive power of play: universal and transcending conventions, languages, and borders.

Ongoing since 1999, this growing series now comprises more than twenty games, most of which are presented in their entirety in this exhibition; Tai Kwun Contemporary has moreover commissioned children's games in Hong Kong. For specific details of each game, please refer to the Map.

Kabul, Afghanistan, 2011  
Photo: Francis Alÿs



Tokyo, mar 30, 2009  
(not) stepping on a line



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FEB 22, 08



# Playing along – a letter to Francis Alÿs

Yang Yeung

Dear Francis,

You lend a slender touch. You lay down no wilful centre. I end up being drawn to a detail—the frown of the boy in pink. I am sure you know who I am referring to—the ten-year-old flying a kite. [1] Perhaps it is the glare of the midday sun. Perhaps it is the intense concentration.

This is the only video of *Children's Games* on your website that is accompanied by a written interpretation. Your words flow as the boy's arms do, finding pleasure in failing to catch up: a body "in action with unknown forces, pulling to the left, pulling to the right, up, down, quick, over to the left again, and so on and on." An exclamation underlies the current of words you activate. You name what you see: "the mastery of non-mastery". For me, I would add that you show an accidental beauty of non-mastery becoming mastery, a cursive script of and in the air, always in the making. Such agility: he stretches his arms as far to the sides as he can so the kite becomes light enough for the wind. He joins them back swiftly so the paper diamond returns to a momentum ready for the next launch. Is this "domination of nature all in one"? I see him rather as a medium of the inanimate and the changing rhythms of nature—I see the commensurate and the coextensive. His confidence and strength are not self-conscious,

which brings out more beauty from his moves. His mission seems more than to free the kite into the air: also to lift his body off the ground and his Being up into the sky. I wonder how long he keeps moving this way, his way.

Sunlight dances in *Espejos (Mirrors)*. [2] It casts shadows, and drapes a fluid castle upon the built one. The boys, by the names of Isaac, Diego, Benjamin, Isaac, and Sergio, run in and out of both castles, pursuing light, pursuing each other. In subtle twists of the palm, they turn the fragments of a mirror into a light gatherer and a light dispenser at once. Move to aim, miss, run, and aim again, all the while voicing the imaginary sounds of a trigger at work—tightening, releasing. Did you, Francis, play along? Did you ask to? If you had, would the shadows of the walls have been enough of a shelter? Would you prioritise light, speed, or shadow in your moves? Perception is everywhere; the children move and are moved by it. Is this not the "intimate coupling between movement and perception" that the anthropologist Tim Ingold observes in grown-ups skilled in the handling of tools? [3] Only that in *Espejos (Mirrors)*, broken mirrors are not tools that serve a pre-designed function in a closed system, yet their rhythmic responses to what is around them are similar: "In this responsiveness there lies a form of awareness that does not so much retreat as grow in intensity with the fluency of

action." [4] Lines are drawn and re-drawn, some mobius-strip-like, varying and persisting. Memory must have begun in children in the body, from the body.

That same year, you follow grasshoppers. [5] Do we call the way children mutilate their hind legs violence, or is it more innocence—this repetitive casting of their playmates into a perpetual flight and fall without the hopping-in-between? Such grown-up words—violence, innocence. I picture you running around with them in the field. How did you choose whom to follow? How far did you go? Do you know how they first discovered such practical aeronautical knowledge? What comes before the game? How do they lead newcomers into the game? How charged is each of their throw—the whole body elongates, gathering around them the open sky and the expanse of air, to release the green critters once more. They must also have been tender, too—catching their playmates' half-broken body for the next throw. No competition. No ownership. No boundaries. Only cheering, laughing, sharing.

The magnanimity of their free bodies reaching out to infinity makes me think of the "Open" in Rilke. "The Eighth Elegy" speaks of a "pure space" that is not the "world" grown-ups see: "Only *our* eyes are turned backward, and surround plant, animal, child / like traps, as they emerge into their freedom." We have death before us, but

not "that pure space into which flowers endlessly open". And the animal? "[The] free animal / has it decline in back of it, forever, / and God in front, and when it moves, it moves / already in eternity, like a fountain." So majestically slow, so present but not full of itself. For the child: "Nowhere without the No: that pure / unseparated element which one breathes / without desire and endlessly *knows*. A child / may wander there for hours, through the timeless / stillness, may get lost in it and be shaken back." [6]

I came across this poem reading Jalal Toufic's essay "On Names". [7] You know how he leaves a curious footnote, as if for Rilke: "Is anyone who has the potential to undergo an over-turn ever in the Rilkean Open? Is it legitimate to advance that one day the human child in the mirror turned toward himself, and was no longer in the Rilkean Open?" [8] This Rilkean Open, that Toufic describes as that which comes before a name, is a more difficult reach for humans than for flowers because, "[r]eaching the condition prior to any name requires that one gets to a time that precedes one's interpellation of oneself (in the mirror) or that instances its undoing." [9] Perhaps an infant up to a year old, or the "transitory madness of King Lear", says Toufic. At first I thought Toufic sounded harsh—that over-turn that the dead undergoes, which "undoes his or her turn to answer the call by his or her proper name," [10] is

something that a mortal would never experience, including children. But then I thought he might be following along with Rilke to lend caution to how grown-ups take away the Rilkean Open in children. It may also have to do with what one does after the interpellation—children may move on or return to their own worlds, while we may exaggerate the pressure to show up as names require. Francis, did you encounter the children in the Open? Have they led you into their Open?

Which brings me to the girls in Kathmandu playing knucklebones: each round, a cadence. [11] As they spread open their palms on the ground and sweep the stones into a dance, a cradle for intimacy and intricacy is born. Their hands are eloquent as water is, making it at once a marvel and a challenge for the spectator to follow. They exchange chance and admiration. Seeing their reciprocal movements, I start reflecting on how the words “game” and “play” direct our attention differently. In an interview [12], you said you are interested in archetypal games. I see in your videos, however, it is not just “games” but the activity of playing that is manifested. “Game” may be the name for the structure; it is however the playing, the embodiment, that teaches us about freedom. Some years ago, an artist based in San Francisco introduced me to Hans-Georg Gadamer. On “play”, he says, it is like “reading”:

when the activity does not generate a “new independent reality, we nevertheless always seem to be moving in that direction.” [13] It is “borderline” the way reading is. “Play is less the opposite of seriousness than the vital ground of spirit as nature, a form of restraint and freedom at one and the same time.... For these our forms of play are forms of our freedom.” [14] I find your depiction of the children playing anti-compositional. You focus on how they bring their moments to life, how they play them out. You preserve the ways they play rather than tell stories *about* them.

What does it take for them to be where you found them? Are their games routine, or moments of luxury out of other chores? Are we seeing nothing special, or are we touching a fragility or precariousness for which we cannot or are too arrogant or ignorant to name the causes? What is left unshown? I cannot help but think of children's bodies that are constrained by deliberate policies of all kinds. If you make it to Hong Kong, you will probably encounter the common sight of children burdened with schoolbags the size of their torsos, walking in single file into schools. Children have also been burdened with injury and death. During the pro-democracy movement last year, children were among the protestors on the streets, children with their parents. Others tried to deliberate with the police. Anthropologist Sealing Cheng's nine-year-old daughter

wrote “in her best-ever handwriting” a letter to “Mr Policeman”, and with “two full pages featuring twenty photographs as evidence of police brutality.” She writes, “Let us talk about violence.” Her six-year-old daughter drew a tearful Pikachu with a thought bubble picturing his own death. Cheng says, “If we recognise that children are important stakeholders in the future—and the current movement in Hong Kong is essentially about its future—then it is crucial to see the strength in Pikachu's tears.” [15] The conflict zones we have been in keep changing shape; the others you have seen—how have they been?

I wish I could see the moment the children welcome you, at your first encounter, and the subsequent ones. There is something special about a child's welcome—an energy, strength, and mischief, too, that could (re)turn a brilliant sparkle in every dull grown-up's life. Allow me to end by sharing with you this little episode from the recent past. In 2005, one year after the tsunami hit the long coastlines of South and Southeast Asia, I visited a fishermen's village in Machilipatnam in the state of Andhra Pradesh, India. I joined the villagers in an informal village assembly. Little was exchanged in language, but much warmth resided in the smiles and eye contact. We were about to get up to visit some fishermen on the shore, when all of a sudden, I felt a small hand slipping into my right palm. It was

a little girl. Her black curly hair was shiny and thick. Her left eye was a little cloudy. She wouldn't stop looking me in the eye. She became the one who led me through the bush to the infinite and majestic beach stretching out from where the vegetation ended. The sea was grey, the waves, tall. She let go of my hand and started running around, playing with her mates, dashing her small feet upon the backwash. I am still in awe as to how the healing of her relation with the sea had come so soon, so tenderly, how she cannot but still love the sea, perhaps even more strongly.

Children don't wait. Why do we, moving forward with our backs turned towards the future, until it's too late?

Yang Yeung  
Writing from Hong Kong

Yang Yeung is an art writer and independent curator. She founded the non-profit soundpocket (2008– ) and A Walk with A3 (2015–17). She is a researcher of the Institute for Public Art and a member of the International Art Critics Association (HK) and Art Appraisal Club (HK). She currently teaches classics at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

- [1] *Children's Game #10 Papalote*, Balkh, Afghanistan, 2011.
- [2] *Children's Game #15 Espejos*, Ciudad Juarez, 2013.
- [3] Tim Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*, Oxford: Routledge, 2011, 59.
- [4] *Ibid.*, 61.
- [5] *Children's Game #9 Saltamontes*, Salto Acha, Venezuela, 2011.
- [6] Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, ed. and trans. Stephen Mitchell, New York: Vintage, 1989, 193.

- [7] Jalal Toufic, *Forthcoming*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014, 180. Accessed Sept 21, 2020. [http://www.jalaltoufic.com/downloads/Jalal\\_Toufic,\\_Forthcoming,\\_2nd\\_edition.pdf](http://www.jalaltoufic.com/downloads/Jalal_Toufic,_Forthcoming,_2nd_edition.pdf)
- [8] *Ibid.*, 276, footnote 184.
- [9] *Ibid.*, 183.
- [10] *Ibid.*
- [11] *Children's Game #18 Knucklebones*, Kathmandu, 2017.
- [12] JBH Reports, "Francis Alys — Interview". YouTube, Jan 11, 2020. Accessed Sept 21, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XIbMXLQWvfg>.

- [13] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, ed. and trans. Nicholas Walker, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986, 126–7.
- [14] *Ibid.*, 130.
- [15] Sealing Cheng, "Pikachu's Tears: Children's Perspectives on Violence in Hong Kong", *Feminist Studies* 46, no. 1 (2020), 216–225.



Don't Cross the Bridge Before You Get to the River, 2007  
Oil on panel  
12.7 x 17.8 cm

# BIOGRAPHY

Francis Alÿs (b. 1959, Belgium; based in Mexico) has a complex and at times elusive artistic practice that poetically fuses an imaginative, conceptual sensibility with the socio-political momentousness of issues related to urban spaces, transnational borders, and political structures.

Trained first as an architect, after moving to Mexico Alÿs shifted towards art making, relishing its freedom and flexibility. Through observations of and engagements with Mexico's vast urban fabric and everyday life, Alÿs has presented artistic arguments in the form of parables, opening a space for imagination as well as dislocating the sense of the ordinary. *In Paradox of Praxis 1 (Sometimes Making Something Leads to Nothing)* (1997), for instance, Alÿs pushed a large block of ice through the streets of Mexico City, until the ice fully melted. Absurd yet starry-eyed, the work invites wonder but also evokes awareness of the spatial plane of the street, with its hubbub of pedestrians and street vendors, and indeed a whole economy that depends on ice in tropical climes. Many early works focused on Mexico have some aspect of this "blue-collar conceptualism".

Among a diverse range of works, one has also seen Alÿs take on a certain naturalistic heroic romanticism with his efforts

to enter the eye of tornados, while in other works, his engagement with boundaries and borders invests his oeuvre with a more overt sense of politics. *The Loop* (1997), for instance, involved Alÿs circumnavigating the world in an opposite direction in order to get from Tijuana, Mexico, to San Diego, California, without ever crossing the US-Mexico border. In *The Green Line (Sometimes Doing Something Poetic Can Become Political and Sometimes Doing Something Political Can Become Poetic)* (2004), Alÿs walked along the border between Palestine and Israel—a border though contested was not immediately apparent to the eye, despite its name—while dribbling a line of green paint behind him.

More recently, Francis Alÿs has come to realise that one important element of his oeuvre involves children at play, through his videos relating to everyday actions of street life or to large-scale performances about borders. This brings a different dimension of the universal fable that has always been inherent in his work, combining play, innocence, and observation, through a poetic sense of dislocation that offers a liberating vision while commenting on socio-political issues of norms, languages, and borders.

Alÿs has had solo exhibitions around the world, including at the Tate Modern, London; The Museum of Modern Art, New York;

Kunsthaus Zurich, Switzerland; and Museo de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid; among many others. He participated in Venice Biennales held in 1999, 2001, and 2007; in particular, he sent a peacock in his stead for the 2001 Venice Biennale. Alÿs also took part in dOCUMENTA (13) in 2012.

# LEARNING AND EXPERIENCE

Welcome to join our learning and experience events and activities designed for visitors of different backgrounds and needs. We hope to explore possibilities in the dialogue between art and audiences.

## Guided Tours

### Tai Kwun Contemporary Weekend Guided Tours

[Sat & Sun] Cantonese Sessions: 2:00 pm | English Sessions: 4:00 pm

### Public Art Guided Tours

[Sat] 3:00 pm

### Family Fun Guided Tours

Biweekly [Sun]: 11:00 am | 3:00 pm

### Teacher's Morning

Date: 29 Nov 2020

Time: 10:30 am – 5:00 pm

## Family Day

Dates:

01.11.2020    15.11.2020

29.11.2020    13.12.2020

27.12.2020    10.01.2021

Times:

Family Tour and "Bubble Blowing Nose" Workshop:

11:00 am – 1:00 pm

Family Tour and "The Ping-Pong Friends" Workshop:

3:00 pm – 5:00 pm

Francis Alÿs

*Wet feet — dry feet, borders and games*

Curated by Xue Tan (Tai Kwun Contemporary) and Sunjung Kim (President of Gwangju Biennial Foundation)

Assisted by Erin Li (Tai Kwun Contemporary) and Heehyun Cho (Art Sonje Center)

Head of Art: Tobias Berger

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Ingrid Chu, Jill Angel Chun, and Joey Wong

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Courtesy the artist, Peter Kilchmann, and David Zwirner

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