

Francis Alÿs: *Politics of Rehearsal*
Excerpt of Exhibition Catalogue Text

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We know the conventions of the masterpiece: it is a work of art that is totally resolved, that leaves nothing to be added. As Virginia Woolf put it, “A masterpiece is something said once and for all, stated, finished, so that it's there complete in the mind.”ⁱ Comparably, Michael Fried has influentially argued that in a successful work of art,

*at every moment the work itself is wholly manifest.... It is this continuous and entire presentness, amounting, as it were, to the perpetual creation of itself, that one experiences as a kind of instantaneousness, as though if only one were infinitely more acute, a single infinitely brief incident would be long enough to see everything, to experience the work in all its depth and fullness, to be forever convinced by it.*ⁱⁱ

Francis Alÿs, despite making some of the most compelling art of recent years, has an ambivalent relationship to this idea of complete resolution. He certainly wants his work to remain in the consciousness of those who see it. He seeks the clearest possible articulations of the premises that he wishes to explore. In that sense he is looking for the quality of instantaneous presentness that Fried identifies. Yet he is at the same time highly reluctant to bring a work to an unequivocal conclusion. Certain ideas and motifs are kept open, always available to be pushed in new directions, reconfigured for new situations. In addition, he has consistently embraced an explicitly durational element in his work. Indeed, he has explicitly described his work in these terms, as “a sort of discursive argument composed of episodes, metaphors or parables, staging the experience of time in Latin America.”ⁱⁱⁱ

From the beginning of his career as an artist, Alÿs has adopted a way of working that tends to reject conclusions in favor of repetition and recalibration. He has, that is, put the idea of rehearsal at the heart of his practice. A focus on rehearsal means that the moment of completion is always still to come. Each completed rehearsal opens the door to a further rehearsal, one more iteration in which things can be improved, simplified, or deleted. If a work is still in rehearsal, then it can always be changed. The moment of completion is always potentially delayed. The final work is always in some sense projected into the future, a future that is always advancing just ahead of the work. In the interim it can constantly be revisited, and its presence can be constantly shape-shifting, not just in the form of documentation through photographs or video, but also through written descriptions, or oral accounts passed from person to person.

The refusal of closure is true not just of performance-based works, but also of the paintings, drawings, and sculptures in Alÿs's studio, which often remain there for years, picked up and put down again, sometimes worked on, sometimes used as starting points for new work. Each

delay in letting them leave his hands increases the potential for them to be reconfigured in some newly productive way. His drawings in particular bear the traces of endless revision. In the end they are palimpsests of overlaid scraps of paper, held together with tape. Works that are performative can constantly be tested out in new situations, different countries, even. Does a premise that works in Mexico City still work in Europe? In Los Angeles? And does it work in the same way, or differently?

Alÿs's emphasis on process and response does not, then, tend towards the immaculate resolution of the masterpiece. The idea of rehearsal does, however, contain within it an ideal of what the finished work might possibly be, even if its incarnations continue to flicker and change in the light of the fire in the Platonic cave. For Alÿs, that flickering, the movement back and forth and around an idea, is as productive as a determined path towards a fixed and identifiable goal. In some cases, there may well be no goal beyond the process, which is almost always a series of more or less tentative moves towards an idea.

One of Alÿs's fascinations has been with the action, sometimes enormously protracted, that produces no identifiable result. *Paradox of Praxis 1* (1997) is the record of an action carried out under the rubric of "Sometimes making something leads to nothing." For more than nine hours, Alÿs pushed a block of ice through the streets of Mexico City until it was completely melted. On one level, this was, as Alÿs said, "a settling of accounts with Minimalist sculpture."^{iv} Like many artists of his generation, perhaps most notably Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Alÿs felt the need to (literally) work his way through the powerful legacy of the dominant art movement of the previous generation. And so for hour after hour he struggled with the quintessentially minimal, rectangular block, until finally it was reduced to no more than an ice cube that he could casually kick along the street.

Beyond the specific relationship with minimalism, though, there is also something casually insouciant about Alÿs's performance. Gritty as the context is, there is something of the dandy in his willingness to put hours of effort into producing a result that is almost literally invisible. As the great theorist of dandyism, Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly, wrote, "A Dandy may spend ten hours a day dressing, if he likes, but once dressed he thinks no more about it."^v The dandy, that is, may put an enormous amount of energy into an activity, but if it should ever appear that he did, or that he was in any way concerned with the result, then the effect will be lost. Much of Alÿs's practice reflects a comparable desire to downplay the results of his intensive labor. "Sometimes making something leads to nothing."

Alÿs's most recent activities in making something that leads to nothing, *Ensayo 3* (2006-7) have in fact been related to the ancient idea of generating something from nothing. In his studio, Alÿs and his collaborators have been working on models for perpetual motion machines, so far without success. The Utopian idea of a machine that would produce energy without consuming it has been a dream of scientists and engineers for centuries, rather like alchemy. For Alÿs, sincerely as he produces the wooden models based on drawings in old texts, this work is also a continuation of the critique of modernity in its Utopian aspect, as the panacea that is supposed to cure all ills.

ⁱ Woolf, letter, January 1, 1933, in Nigel Nicolson, ed., *The Sickly Side of the Moon: The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume 5, 1932-1935* (London: Hogarth Press, 1979).

ⁱⁱ Fried, "Art and Objecthood" (1967) in *Art and Objecthood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 167.

ⁱⁱⁱ Interview with Francis Alÿs, Mexico City, 2005. An edited version of the interview appears in *Francis Alÿs* (London: Phaidon, 2007). All further quotations from Alÿs are drawn from this interview unless otherwise indicated.

^{iv} Saul Anton: "A Thousand Words: Francis Alÿs talks about *When Faith Moves Mountains*," *Artforum*, Summer 2002, p. 147.

^v Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly, *Dandyism* (1844), trans., Douglas Ainslie (New York: PAJ, 1988), p.53, note.

The dandy may not be the first figure that comes to mind in connection with Alÿs, who is never overdressed. But then as Barbey d'Aurevilly also wrote, "One may be a dandy in creased clothes.... Incredible though it may seem, the Dandies once had a fancy for torn clothes." (*Dandyism*, p. 31, note.) Baudelaire is said to have scuffed up his suits lest they look too new. See Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. and ed. Jonathan Mayne (New York: Da Capo, 1986), p. 27, note 2.