Teacher’s Documentation
31.01.2018 - 09.04.2018

BEIRUT ART CENTER

FRANCIS ALYS
KNOTS N DUST

NAEEM MOUHAIEMEN
TWO FUNERALS AND A MEETING
This Document is aimed at teachers: it is not meant for students’ use. It does not replace the visit, nor is it a record that documents the exhibition. It is a research tool to be used by the teachers to address the exhibition in relation to different knowledge backgrounds so that they can refer to it in the course of their practice. The Workbook exists to facilitate the teachers’s use of the visit for work-in-class purposes and to inspire them and guide them through their teaching practices.

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Cover Images:  
Francis Alÿs, Tornado, 200-2010. Video, 40 min. Video still.
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I. Curator’s Statement

Francis Alys

Beirut Art Center is pleased to announce its exhibition, Knots’n dust by Francis Alys; the rst solo show in Lebanon (and in the region), gathers the artist’s early and recent works that explore themes of turbulence: the motions at the core and their outspread effects, ranging from the miniscule to the mon-umental.

The show goes back and forth between the smallest element of unrest and instability to the most exaggerated form of disorder that this small unit can engender; from instability to total chaos, from meteorological phenomena to geopolitical manifestations, from a simple knot in the hair to an ascending spiral. This project was two-years in the making with Marie Muracchiole for Beirut Art Center, around a new animation film, “Exodus 3:14” (working title), that portrays a female character completing a benign and beautiful gesture that the loop transforms in a Sisyphean task. With this knot, a vortex opens itself; the hair in nitely undoes itself as in a gesture of self-absorption in which she appears both engaged and detached.

Knots represent links and bonds, as well as resistance and binding. They are the smallest unit in the making of a fabric yet they are its sine qua non mechanical condition: a continuous surface that can bring some opacity, some support for projection, inscription, hiding, drawing and building.

This exhibition gives focus to the preliminary, the intuitions, the rebounds, the traces or the result of the process of making, showing the course and the detours of the ideas, each element building links between apparently disparate works. Alys’s work is characterized by fragments that borrow from one another, sometimes exchanging status, and encompassing videos, drawings, sketches and installation. Studies and sketches become paintings, and some paintings are also templates that can multiply. On display are six small canvases connecting tornados to hair, whilst they associate with the motion of sketching.
Knots (walks) Mexico 2006 produces its own code of registering the incidents of a walk: the small reactions, movements and accidents that happen to the stroller. These notes are written with different knots accompanied by their translation on a sheet of paper, tying the knots to actions and situations. Tomados is a 33 min video where the artist chases “dust devils” and attempts to enter their eye with a camera in hand. Francis Alÿs then films their windless core, a monochrome of dust that literally abstracts him from the outside world.

As a local echo of this series, the show includes photographs taken by Alÿs in the streets of Beirut in 2015 during a sand storm. Was this yellow dust traveling with the wind from the uncultivated soil of the neighboring countries Iraq and Syria, where war previously held most of the agriculture? In many regions there, the soil is not fixed anymore by roots and plants and has become volatile after years of conflicts. The desert walks and flies away, the political situation draws a migrant landscape from one desolated country to a modern metropolis that receives a veil of dry mud.

Between the traces and the oblivion of the country’s wars and wounds, between memories of a faraway golden age and the never ending (re)construction of an increasingly globalized metropolis, Beirut seems to produce a space inside of the tornado, in its eye, with a vision of history frozen in monochrome. You can see it as a space for freedom or for alienation. You can build on it or drown in it. But it will not be the same for everyone nor will it be forever. As in many of Alÿs’s work, every affirmation walks along with its opposite, any gesture comes with its own undoing. “Doubt, doubt again & doubt better”. This poetic step invites the spectator to engage in larger issues throughout deceptively insignificant details. The exhibition opening will be followed by a conversation between Marie Muracciole & Francis Alÿs, and a program of parallel events will take place throughout the exhibition period with figures such as Jean Rolin and Micheal Taussig.
In the mid-20th Century, forms of the “Third World” as seen in Movement for Afro-Asian Unity, pan Af-ricanism, the Nonaligned Movement, and others, imagined transnational forums where the global South could reconfigure planetary leadership, ending Euro-American control. Two Meetings and a Funeral (2017), premiered at documenta 14, is a three-channel fragmentary history of 1973, a high point in this fever dream, but also the moment when it started coming apart from internal mistakes and external forces.

Pivoting around the 1973 Nonaligned Movement (NAM) meeting in Algiers, and its ideological opposite in the Organization for Islamic Cooperation (OIC) meeting at Lahore in 1974, the film travels through the many warring tentacles of the “new” cold war, and the contradictions of decolonization movements that neglected to liberate their own leadership. Sweeping over the residues of transnational architecture (Niemeyer, Moretti, Le Corbusier, and, finally, an anonymous Chinese company) in New York, Algiers, Dhaka, and in conversation with Vijay Prashad, Samia Zennadi, Atef Berredjem, Amirul Islam, and Zonayed Saki, the film explores the buried tensions between forces vying for leadership of the “Third World.” It proposes that the utopian hope of the Third World project failed not only because of external enemies, but also the fatal mistake of a 1970s pivot from Socialism to Islamism (wrapped around pan Arabism) as unifying ideology.

Naeem Mohaiemen combines films, installations, and essays to research failed left utopias, incomplete decolonizations, and tragic misrecognition of allies—framed by Third World Internationalism and World Socialism. The protagonists, inhabiting a doomed masculinity, are in “a revolutionary past meaningful in the sudden eruption of a revolutionary present” (Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, Bidoun). His work is currently on view in the solo show There is No Last Man at Museum of Modern Art (PS1) in New York.

Two Meetings and a Funeral was commissioned by documenta 14, co-commissioned by Sharjah Art Foundation and...
Marie Muracciole

Ford Foundation (Just Films), with additional support by Arts Council (UK). Courtesy of the artist and Experimenter (India). Beirut Art Center will be hosting a program of parallel events with figures such as Samia Zennadi among others.
Anna Dezeuze: The piece you presented at your first solo show in the UK in 1999, 61 out of 60, was related to the Zapatista movement in the Chiapas. How was it displayed?

Francis Alÿs: It was simply presented on a table. It was only shown once, at the Lisson Gallery, in the late 90s. I'd made 60 plaster figurines of guerrilleros, which I broke into hundreds of pieces, and then I reused the material to create 61 figures. It was like the small miracle of the multiplication of the Zapatistas at the time. There was a laptop next to the work which allowed visitors to be in direct contact with the Zapatista website in the Chiapas, a Zapatistas internet site where you could chat. It was intended to draw attention to the existence of the Zapatista movement because I realized that it was practically unknown in England; I’m not sure whether it’s better known now. The relations between Britain and Latin America are practically non-existent, since it did not form part of the British Empire. This is beginning to change because contemporary Latin American art has opened internationally, but it remains a bit of a caricature especially in Britain because I think it belongs to another history.

AD: In terms of your relation to Mexico, and your thoughts about Mexican society in which you live, how would you position the Zapatistas?

FA: Zapatism is directly linked to 1994 when there was a clear fracture in Mexican society. 1994 was a year of great disillusionment in Mexico, and Zapatism was probably the event that attracted the most media coverage. In terms of my personal experience of the city, and of my artistic trajectory, 1994 was probably the moment when I shifted from the role of an observer to one that sought to get involved in a more political arena – I mean ‘political’ in the sense of ‘polis’, ‘of the city’.

Also, everyday life in the city changed considerably at that time. When I arrived in the 80s, you could walk around the city at night without any problem. The government’s complete loss of credibility really happened in the mid 90s, when the neo-liberal programs and promises collapsed, and the state lost all control over the situation. It has not really been able to recover ever since. Somehow that period also marked a clear shift in my relations with Mexico. People realized that the promise of ‘progress’, of entering the ‘First World’, was a complete fraud, and the reaction that followed that deception was quite violent – disgust, and rejection of all political power and representation and, later on, a reaction against the whole north American model of society. So it was really a turning point in local history, and in my own personal history. To go back to the Zapatistas, they probably stood for this rupture, although their own discourse was completely different. They remain a kind of barometer of the national health.

AD: What about your more recent work, exhibited at the Vincent Award in Amsterdam, The Lynchings? This kind of imagery seems unusual in relation to your other work.

FA: Yes and no. It’s not fundamentally different from other projects where I want to flag up a phenomenon which is becoming increasingly common. In this case it is the phenomenon of lynchings that emerged in the early 2000s, as a way of saying ...

AD: There is no justice.

FA: Yes. It was also a crude manifestation of the disillusionment of indigenous comunities in places like Guatemala or the Chiapas, which were utterly frustrated by the ineffectiveness of the state legal system and saw in such methods – lynching is a very generic term – means of reintroducing a code of justice that could escape central government authority, and of regaining an autonomous space, some kind of identity in the age of globalization. It is an ongoing phenomenon that is not covered
much beyond the front pages of the local newspaper, and which is not really analyzed outside of the immediate local context. It’s a phenomenon that seemed to me nevertheless quite revealing of a general state of things in Mexico and in some other Latin American countries today. I wanted to translate this horror – a little like Goya’s images of war.

AD: So they’re paintings based on newspaper photographs?

FA: No, no. They’re paintings – there are only three or four of them, very few – based more on echoes of events that I heard or read about: of undercover police- men in Tlahuac who were burned alive, or others elsewhere who were hanged by the mob. In general, the images that make it into the papers are very poor in quality; they are usually taken with mobile phones in the middle of great confusion. So my images don’t have a precise source – they come largely from the description or rumor of the events. They are – I don’t think ‘allegorized’ is the relevant term – reduced to the essence of the scene. In Amsterdam they were presented alongside a series of texts that I had found in newspapers and on the web around this phenomenon.

AD: Is it a surprising type of imagery, since this kind of violence tends not to be present in your work as a whole.

FA: Is it any more violent than taking a photograph of someone sleeping in the street? I’m not sure.

AD: You are referring to your slide show, ‘Sleepers’, begun in 1999, which shows images of people and dogs sleeping in public spaces. Do you ever fear that this kind of image, like the ones in the other slide shows – ‘Ambulantes’, ongoing since 1994, or ‘Beggars’, ongoing since 2000 – might be interpreted as voyeuristic, or even sentimental?

FA: Certainly it’s always a risk. It’s like walking along a tightrope. I’m constantly involved in damage control because the documentary series can be read as paternalistic, naive, sentimental or judgmental, especially when they’re exported outside of their original context.

I’m always aware of this risk, but when you address a certain sphere of society – a kind of sub-society – that risk is an unavoidable collateral effect. Yet all these people who live around my studio in the historical centre of Mexico City remain the principal inspiration for many of my projects, and they are a constant reminder of the crude reality of the metropolis.

With the ‘Sleepers’ series, what interested me was the use of public space in such a private way. It was this ‘private within the public’ sphere that I was interested in. There are few activities as private as sleeping, and it’s this way of appropriating space – whether it’s 2sqm or the hidden-away places in the city – and the way this is completely integrated within the urban system, that I’m interested in. It’s not a marginal activity any more, it’s something that has become part of what the city offers.

It’s the same with the ‘Beggars’, and the way they beg at subway entrances: it’s this appropriation of this particular space, for this specific activity, that I’m interested in.

AD: So you’re not that interested in the question of whether they have a choice in the matter or not?

FA: I’m interested, of course, but I don’t think it’s something I could translate in the work. If I did I would fall precisely into a more patronising reading. I believe my role as an artist – with the advantage of being always a little out of sync with the reality of my adoptive home, even though I’m losing that distance lately – is to witness how this society in which I’ve decided to live since 1990 works, how it is evolving, and how it manages to maintain its own identity throughout this evolution. That’s the dimension – which isn’t necessarily only the artist’s privilege – that I’m interested in personally, in relation to both the city of Mexico and to other places where I’ve found myself.

AD: Can a witness be a force for change?

FA: There are different levels. There is a kind of consciousness-raising, which is the first stage – to awaken a reaction which might help improve the reading of the situation. That’s the small miracle of the contemporary art scene: it has been opened to a wider public, and I think at that level the artist’s potential to act and to intervene is certainly much bigger now than 20 years ago. Up to what point can the artist influence the course of local history? I don’t know. It is impossible not to react to urban aggression in Mexico City. It is a personal need to constantly position yourself in relation to a changing urban entity, and to record these changes, as well as an urge to make people aware of what is being lost, and what may be gained eventually. But of course I’m not talking about a social program for on-site interventions. Let’s say that I’m more at a recording, flag-waving stage.
I think the artist can intervene by provoking a situation in which you suddenly step out of everyday life and start looking at things again from a different perspective – even if it is just for an instant. That may be the artist’s privilege, and that’s where his field of intervention differs from that of a NGO or a local journalist.

**AD:** This kind of poetic rupture is of course at the heart of your 2004 work, Sometimes doing something poetic leads to some- thing political and sometimes something political leads to something poetic, also known as ‘the Green Line’ (see AM307).

**FA:** Yes, in this case in particular, the action had to be borderline ridiculous for people to start talking beyond stereotypical discourses on the left or on the right, whether Palestinian or Israeli. It was about recreating spontaneity in a situation which is not spontaneous at all, which has become so weighed-down by its own inertia, its ‘impasse’.

**AD:** Is this why you chose to make the piece on your own, rather than make a collective work like When Faith Moves Mountains in Lima in 2002 or Bridge/Puente in Key West-La Havana in 2006?

**FA:** I didn’t consider the option of doing a collective piece, maybe because someone had to take on the responsibility in order to provoke a shift, and in this specific case this responsibility had to fall on one individual rather than on a collective body. But it was the collective action of When Faith Moves Mountains that raised the question of the extent to which one can play between the poetical and the political, and which triggered the piece in Jerusalem. There were specific reasons why I chose Jerusalem as the site for that project. It wasn’t a commission, it was a project that I sought out, and I think I chose Jerusalem because it was – in terms of an intervention within a conflict situation – the one that was the most archetypal, the most historically representative of a conflict situation that was ...

**AD:** Extreme?

**FA:** It’s extreme because – to use a cliché – Jerusalem is the cradle of western civilisation, and that’s a large part of the reason why it has such international resonance. But it is a minor conflict. I’m afraid to say this, but as important as it may be – and of course any human life that is lost is the most important thing in the world – if you look at the numbers, I would say that since the beginning of this year [2008] there must have been around a maximum of 100 victims or so, whereas the narcotics conflict in Mexico has so far claimed the shocking figure of almost 3,000 victims. Does the British press talk much about this internal gang war? I doubt it. In terms of casualties only, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is a minor conflict, yet it is a millennial conflict, and perhaps one of the most representative today of the clash between two cultural models. It has incredible international resonance, although in comparison with many conflicts taking place on the planet today, it is a small conflict. It’s this paradox that I found interesting.

**AD:** It’s a conflict that’s very violent at the level of discourse, too.

**FA:** I was criticised for interviewing mostly left-wing people, whether on the Palestinian or Israeli side. The reality was that because of my personal sympathies, my contacts naturally happened to be left- wing, so it was very difficult to approach right-wing people who would agree to talk. We tried to approach the Rabbi of Jerusalem, but we got nowhere. The closest we got in terms of centre-right was Shimon Peres – we had three meetings scheduled with Peres, which were all cancelled at the last moment. The action itself was a pretext for the commentary. In a way there were 15 potential actions, and I chose the most obvious, the most immediate one, in order to provoke a reaction. My intention was not to intervene within the space of a conflict situation, but to generate, through this act, a commentary about that situation, the opposite, if you like, of what I do here in Mexico, where a given situation exists, and I try to – I was going to say ‘exploit it’ – to transcend it, to translate it. In the case of Jerusalem, I first had to interact with the situation in order to trigger the discourse, whereas here it is the existing situation that triggers the discourse.

**AD:** And in terms of your practical experience, did you have problems intervening within the city – at the checkpoints perhaps?

**FA:** Very little. In fact, one of the inter- viewed people – Rima Hamami – said when she saw the film: ‘You are a real sneaker, you walk fast, like a Palestinian in the crowd.’

**AD:** But another of your interviewees, Eyal Weizman, criticises this ease. He says it’s not easy for a Palestinian to walk around.
FA: The action was made easier by the fact that a lot of people did not identify the route, or the action, and that has something to do with the issue of memory, the fact that history is forgotten more quickly than we think. And I certainly played on the tactical margin described by Meron Benvenisti when he recounts how Moshe Dayan drew the original green line with a green wax crayon and the 3-4mm line on the 1:20,000 scale map represented, on the ground, a 60-80m-wide strip of land equivalent to a whole city block. This allowed me to avoid the checkpoints in advance by walking along the other side of the block, while remaining within the width of the green line.

AD: So you were able to avoid checkpoints. But there is one at the end of the film.

FA: Yes, it was the exit, it was inevitable – it’s the only road in that place.

AD: But if you’d been Palestinian you may not have been allowed to pass.

FA: That’s true. Maybe it’s something similar to what happened with my revolver work, Re-enactments, 2000, in which I walked down the street with a gun until the Mexico City police stopped me. Perhaps because of its ridiculous or absurd quality, an artistic action becomes excusable, and sometimes it can make its way through unlikely situations because it simply cannot be taken seriously. Humour – or a humorous dimension – often allows you to bypass situations that would not otherwise have been allowed to happen if I had taken, for instance, a militant attitude.

AD: The ease with which you walk through the city makes me wonder about something more general in your work. What I like a lot in your work is that you manage to speak of a general human condition through your own individual narratives. Obviously this is very different from the discourse of ‘identity politics’ where one talks less of the human condition than of the Palestinian problem, the condition of women, or of gays ... How would you situate yourself in this context?

FA: If there is a possible field of action it must pass through an acceptance that the human condition is the most immediate, the most tangible of spaces. I’m not going to speak of a space of ‘intervention’, because it’s not intervention so much as conviviality. Intervention would imply that I am external to the situation, whereas I think in the collective actions I attempt to erase that distance by creating a space of conviviality.

AD: And solidarity?

FA: It is a kind of solidarity, but even the term solidarity may be somewhat condescending. By conviviality, I mean being in the same place at the same time for the same goal or reason – even if three hours later everyone has gone back to their own private world. I think that it’s possible to achieve this conviviality through – and I’m going to use a term that’s a bit outdated today – through endurance. I think here we go back to the discourse surrounding work as a space of conviviality, but I’m speaking of physical work. When I was a student for some time I used to be a demolition contractor, and that was a fantastic space of conviviality – to destroy a house with a group of ten people is one of the most intense collective experiences. I don’t want to fall into sentimentality here – I don’t come from a working-class background, and on average my activity is probably more intellectual than manual – but in my experience, activities that involve a highly physical component, and are collective, lead to a degree of complicity that is much more difficult to achieve in intellectual activities.

I have been thinking about this as Raphael Ortega and I were working on an event in the Straits of Gibraltar this summer. It was a rather straightforward project, an image of a bridge of boats between Tarifa and Tangiers.

AD: Did you use the same system as in the Bridge/Puente you made between Florida and Cuba?

FA: Yes, it was similar, but in the Florida/Cuba project I was left with the feeling that I hadn’t exploited the full potential of the action.

AD: Why?

FA: Because I think I focused too much on the Havana side, thinking that it would be immensely difficult to make something concrete happen over there, so I left the Florida side somewhat behind. These projects are fuelled by the organisers’ convictions – in this case those of Taiyana Pimentel, Cuauhtémoc Medina and myself – and the imbalance between the responses on each side was more a consequence of our degree of involvement with each side than a true manifestation of each side’s intention. The end result was misleading, in a sense – we ended up with too many boats in Cuba, and not enough in Florida, which led people to conclude that Cubans are eager to leave and Americans are not. This reading, which happens to correspond too neatly to the general expectation, did not necessarily reflect the reality...
of the situation, but was largely influenced by the logistics of the project.

AD: So, did you manage to resolve the problem in Gibraltar?

FA: In Gibraltar we changed the mechanism. Instead of fishermen, we worked with teenagers, and with models of boats – shoe-boats, as we called them. It became much more of a celebration of the passage in between, a ritual of sorts. The metaphorical dimension was present, but in a more ludic way. There’s a section where the action turns into a children’s tale, or a fable, soon after the two lines of kids, coming from each shore, meet up on the horizon.

What I was interested in – and that was largely a lesson from the Key West-Havana project which had turned out a bit like a military operation in terms of the logistics involved – was getting back to a project that would be more playful, where the viewer had to provide, through his or her imagination, the missing fragment that would unite Europe and Africa. That missing stretch on the viewer’s horizon became the condition sine qua non for an artistic operation to take place. Since the distance between the two continents is only about ten miles in some parts of the Straits, we could have imagined the possibility of gathering enough boats to make a real bridge joining both sides. But to do so would have turned it into a military operation, recalling the way in which such bridges get built during floods or wars. The political connotation was so evident that there was no need to insist on that aspect.

Anyway, the reason I’m bringing all this up is that it was an occasion where conviviality through collective effort was really achieved. It was a collective effort geared towards making a gesture. It’s not easy to document, however. The direct record of the action can only suggest something of the emotion of the moment, and most often simply recording the event will not be enough to translate that emotion. The documentation becomes another chapter of the story, which cannot compete with the event. Each chapter represents a specific life of the project, and you should not let one take over from the other. It is very difficult to find the right balance: when you do the event you shouldn’t be influenced by its documentation, and when you do the documentation you shouldn’t be presenting the facts so much as conveying to the viewer your memory of the emotional dimension of the facts. Each time, you have to reinvent a language to tell the story.

AD: I like that very direct, very open relationship to reality in your work. But I get the feeling that in some works this relationship gets lost precisely because you’re too concerned with this issue of documentation. For example, in The Rehearsal II of 2005, which involves a female striptease artist who stops and backtracks in the course of her act according to an audio recording of a singer rehearsing a Schumann Lied with her pianist, it felt very ...

FA: ... theatrical?

AD: Yes, especially in comparison with The Rehearsal I of 1999–2004, in which the Volkswagen Beetle tries to go up a hill, also following a rehearsal recording, in this case of a Mexican brass band.

FA: Yes. The striptease in Rehearsal II is much colder. I would almost say that it’s a flat image. I saw it as an episode in a larger narration, as part of a whole. The seduction game and the linear progression inherent to the striptease offered the ideal situation for what I wanted to illustrate: the feeling of frustration provoked by an endless postponement of any conclusion. The striptease literally embodied the temporal space that I was looking for, and I didn’t really question the space of representation. Yet it is possible that the connotations of the situation itself take over from the temporality that it tries to represent. It is different, in its aesthetic, from my other works. Were you also wondering about this relation between reality and representation in Gringo, 2003?

AD: I like this work very much because in it your relation to reality is very direct, and the vulnerability that this involves becomes visible.

FA: Yet this suggestion of vulnerability happened by accident. We had wanted to stage this a lot more than we were able to. Originally we were in fact working with a trained dog and a dog handler who was going to help us film the scene. But there were other dogs on the road where we had chosen to shoot. They had been calm when we had started, but after the first and second takes they got restless and they attacked and bit the trained dog because they probably felt that their territory was being invaded or threatened. The dog handler got really upset and left in a rage, and we ended up working with the street dogs, so we were driven right back into a field of operations that involved a direct intervention in a given situation.

AD: But you didn’t get bitten, did you?
FA: Oh, I got bitten all right!

AD: Oh dear, it isn’t exactly Chris Burden’s Shoot, but it’s not that far off ...

FA: Thinking of that work, I think there’s a space of direct relation to reality, of sincerity and emotion, that’s related to youth. Often works by young artists are poignant in their – I wouldn’t say naivety – but certainly in their ingenuity, their absolute conviction. And because I’m no longer ‘young’ – you know, when they’re doing a mid-career survey of your work like the one planned for Tate in 2010, then that’s it, it’s one foot in the grave, one way or another – I have become more sensitive to youth and to what artists whom I respect and admire did when they were young. Often there is an emotion – and I’m not talking about nostalgia here – a kind of emotion that gets lost little by little with maturity, sometimes in line with the artist’s growing confidence, ambition, or doubts. It’s slippery territory. I think this is an inevitable phenomenon – and this is why I say it’s a personal worry.

AD: What about your paintings? I have a feeling that your paintings and your drawings are the most personal side of your work, the most hermetic in the sense that they appear to relate to your personal preoccupations and obsessions.

FA: My paintings are always created in parallel with the actions. It is a way of taking a certain distance from the logistical problems involved in a project like the one in Gibraltar, for example, which concern production, managing unions, permits, transport, etc – they’re very, very concrete problems that are not poetic at all. So drawing and painting are my way of thinking about a project without thinking about – of thinking about it in a different way, from another angle. The Gibraltar project generated lots of drawings because it was such a long project, and because it was a project that somehow lent itself to images. It’s a therapeutic activity. It’s really a way of processing ideas.

The paintings and drawings are also what finance my other projects. I don’t systematically lose money with these projects – though I often do – but they’re definitely not projects that generate profit, or at least not the profit that would help produce the next project. They break even at best. So there’s certainly an internal logic in my mode of functioning.

AD: To go back to our discussion regarding reality and representation, I have the feeling that the paintings occupy a purely ...

FA: ... imaginary space? Yes, absolutely.

AD: A space which in fact allows you to return to reality in a more direct way once you’ve finished the paintings.

FA: They certainly clarify my discourse. But they’re really a way of going forward with out thinking about it. Painting is such a slow activity. It’s not like writing, because there’s a point where you let go. And because it’s so easy, and so irresponsible – unlike real action.

AD: And it’s a more sensual activity.

FA: Yes, but it’s a real space for thinking, which I need, and a kind of step back from the speed of the other projects where once the production is launched, everything has to go fast. Drawing and painting are the opposite: they involve stepping back from this rat race. But of course it’s a space that I question a lot with regard to the other side of my production. Are they compatible? It’s a necessary process, let’s say, in my own practice, but is it necessary to disseminate them? Sometimes yes, sometimes no. I’ll tell you one thing: I’ve saved you from a lot of paintings. Most of my paintings are painted over two or three others, so there’s always a process of natural selection going on.

AD: I’d like to ask you about your axiomatic formulas, like ‘sometimes doing something leads to nothing’ or ‘sometimes doing nothing leads to something’ (and vice versa). This way of thinking in terms of pseudo-mathematical axioms, where does it come from?

FA: In the case of the 1997 ‘ice piece’, Paradox of Praxis I, which corresponds to the axiom ‘sometimes doing something leads to nothing’, and involved pushing a block of ice around the streets of Mexico until only a puddle was left, there is actually a counterpart that I am still working on: ‘sometimes making nothing leads to something’. I wanted to relativise each axiom through its opposite, even if it sounds complementary, in a way. That helped me take away any kind of real positioning. If you make two proposals that cancel each other out, it is also a way of saying that neither is primary, neither has more weight than the other in terms of the proposition.

AD: So we’re back on that tightrope again?

FA: Yes, we’re back on the tightrope.

Since 2006, Mohaiemen’s The Young Man Was project delved deep into the history of the 1970s ultra-left. A different medium was used in each portion of the project, testimony to Mohaiemen’s diverse range and sophisticated approach in handling complicated material. United Red Army (2012), a film about the 1977 hijack of a Japanese Airlines flight, is his most ambitious and widely seen film. Writer Kaelen Wilson-Goldie described it as:

A Ph.D. candidate in Anthropology at Columbia University, Mohaiemen has a style akin to that of an academic: uncompromisingly critical, skeptical without nostalgia or romance. And yet the artist within him manages to create powerful, immersive and ultimately fascinating experiences that forcefully challenge our conceptions of truth and history.

How did you become interested in alternative history versus official discourses?

I had a rough awakening which dislodged me from an abiding loyalty to official history, moving me to a position of skepticism about historical accounts that are too perfectly composed. It was 1993 and I was working on a project that explored the 1971 war that split Pakistan and created Bangladesh. I was on a Watson fellowship to collect oral narratives about the “good war” that created Bangladesh.

The first detour came through a friend who was connected to Chatra Union, a leftist student group. He insisted that the first people I interview should be members of the underground left.

What was compelling about this channel – which I thought at that time was a mere detour – was that these were people who had never been interviewed, which meant that there was a lack of rehearsal and performativity in their accounts. Amitava Kumar talks about this issue in Husband of a Fanatic: how a survivor of the Gujarat riots had become, through too many interviews, mechanical in the telling of a story too often told.

What started as a detour became my main focus: I soon discovered that these interviews were much more compelling than the ‘usual’ people I interviewed, and they began to consume my time and mind space fully. I would go home and transcribe the interviews at night and right away there would be metaphorical land mines in the path of collection of oral histories. The radical left, and especially the Maoists, were viewed with wariness during the war by both the Indian government and parts of the war command. So when these are the first stories you record, everything starts turning upside down right away.

How, if ever, did you resolve such dramatic contradictions?

After a year of recording stories, I had an impossibly chaotic collection of tapes. Nothing really made sense to me because I was still trying to hold on to my original thesis. And I did not have the language or theoretical framework to accept and digest stories that were so sharply at odds with each other.

Twenty years later, I now know that there is a way of working with these stories as a patchwork mesh of myths and events, where the pieces don’t have to fit. Now, I would probably argue that friction, and rubbing away at each other, can lead to a healthy equation. But back then, at the end of 1994, I was quite paralyzed by the cul de sac I had worked myself into. I kept working on, or to be more precise, worrying at, the material. But in the end I gave up. I couldn’t weave a story, any story, out of
it. Or at least that is how it felt.

That is roughly when my interests shifted, not to alternative histories as much as an interest in many, messy, contradictory histories. Also, out of that moment in 1994 came a commitment to trying not to drive to a conclusion. I falter often in that commitment, though.

A footnote: I have recently returned to this material, through the encouragement of CAMP. I am working with them to digitize the tapes from 1993-1994 and see how they look and feel after a gap of twenty years. We will be making the footage public, open to new research and reflection for anyone interested.

Your choice of media is always closely and inextricably linked to your subject matter. I found the sandstone moulds of your father’s photographs in Rankin Street, 1953 (2013) particularly unique and captivating: the moulds evoke a strong sense of the past, like ancient carvings on walls, but there is a curious vacancy or emptiness in the subjects when compared to the prints. Could you tell us a bit about how you got the idea for those moulds?

My mother sometimes claims, in a humorous vein, that my inspirations come from her side of the family, where there was both a historian (her father) and a novelist (her uncle). I think a larger factor may have been the fact that I was a loner as a child and my only playmate was the family library.

Anyway, in 2010, I found this box of my father’s negatives and wondered out loud how many more boxes were lost in the years after 1953. My mother interjected, “But don’t forget I used to draw a lot. I should have kept going.” I asked my mother if she wanted to draw responses to his photographs, and she smiled and shook her head. That’s her way of gently saying: no, I am too busy.

I kept thinking about what response my mother would have given if she had wanted to speak back to my father’s images. From there came the idea of raised surfaces that reflect and speak back to the photographs.

But there’s not really a one-to-one correspondence with the negative space of the photographs. I work with the serrated edges until there is a certain number of stalactite/stalagmite-like formations, enough to render the surface illegible. But I don’t think I succeeded fully. Viewers can still make out the surface, maybe more than I wanted.

When I explain the minutiae of the making, I feel the whimsy is getting stripped away. It all sounds very deliberate and schematic, but it wasn’t. There was a lot of doodling and wandering around and going for walks. And then the moulds came. Perhaps it would be better to quote Natasha Ginwala’s review in Art-Agenda that described the work as “anthills, the steps of an agora, and a forest’s edge.” I wish I had thought of those words, but she did it instead, beautifully.

I found Kazi in Nomansland (2009) and the story of the mute Bengali poet Nazrul Islam fascinating, both as a historical anecdote and as an analogy for all those who have their words appropriated or re-written. How did the project come about?

My friend Udayan Chattopadhyay, a storehouse of exhaustive knowledge about pre-1947 united Bengal, first told me that Kazi Nazrul Islam was the only person to appear on stamps of all three countries: Bangladesh, Pakistan and India. I didn’t fully believe him, and so I went to many stamp collectors to try to trace copies.

In an old Dhaka post office, the Director showed me a seminar essay. There were 328 stamps issued by Pakistan from 1947 until the 1971 liberation of Bangladesh. Only one of these featured a Bengali and that was Nazrul Islam.

His assistant interjected: “Sir, there was also the 1956 stamp that had ‘two anna’ in Bengali script.” And he replied, “Yes, but that one had distorted Bangla.”

The Dhaka GPO had 19,538 of the 1977 Nazrul commemorative stamps still in stock. In one week I had bought 3,000 of them while working on this project. Soon, collectors started wondering what was going on. My friend, curator Zaid Islam, joked that I was causing a tiny tsunami in the stamp market and that I had better not be planning any more limited editions.

Salam, an obsessive philatelist who had been tracking me, confronted me halfway through the project: “Did you go to the Post Office to buy vintage Nazruls? You should have come to me. Their stamps have been in godowns, totally damp.” He pulled out his reference notebook to dispute the 328 number and showed me Pakistan’s “Pioneers of Freedom” series: Suhrawardy, Fazlul Huq, Khaza Nazimuddin, Sir Salimullah. But a phone call to his mentor revealed that this series had actually come out in the
In the 1990s, the 1 for 328 statistic stayed intact.

In the list of reasons why "Pak Sarzamin" broke apart into Pakistan and Bangladesh, there are many economic and cultural statistics. Stamp politics is only a small p within that universe. I was interested in that small p.

The viewing of your film United Red Army (2012) is almost a physical experience, because of the darkness, disorientation and the extraordinarily high stakes involved in the conversation between just two men. How did you create the tension in cinematic language?

I thought for a long time about the idea of making the entire film in darkness, with only text. That would have been an endurance test for the audience. With the final structure, I was curious about the effect of being in darkness for extended periods of time, and the effect of the surprise of opening your eyes and finding yourself in the middle of the archive.

When I first listened to the audio tapes – twenty-two hours, repeatedly, over many days – I started getting a little delirious: I was inside that story and straining to hear every word. There are patches of tape where it is impossible to make out what is being said and I kept playing them in the hope that, just this once, it would be clear. I wanted a structure that would induce people into that obsessive habitation of the story, without having to be immersed in the tapes for 22 hours.

In Bangladesh, some people who have seen the film asked if I had shifted to the late 1970s – my earlier work took place between 1971 and 1975, before the first coup – as an attempt to demystify the military regimes. Well, that is part of the research path: for a country with a history of interventions into democracy (in both the Pakistan and Bangladesh periods), it is impossible to consider where politics might lead next without understanding those events.

On another level, the film is bracketed within the larger The Young Man Was project, which is, among other things, an inquiry into the compulsions that make people join messianic movements that from a contemporary space seem doomed, but from within their contexts, must have appeared to hold tremendous potential.

What are some of your main influences, including artists, writers, theorists or poets?

One person who has been on my mind a lot since The Young Man Was project started is the historian Afsan Chowdhury. It is his diary entry from which the title comes, and that same diary provided the skeleton and coda for the film Afsan's Long Day.

Afsan fascinates me as a certain type of iconoclast formed in the crucible of the early 1970s. He was co-editor of the majestic seventeen volume collection of documents of the 1971 war, but he broke with orthodoxies, challenging the established statistics and discussing revenge killings. The latter now seems more normal, because younger academics like Dina Siddiqi have now written excellent essays like "Left Behind by the Nation". But when Afsan wrote those polemics or spoke at seminars in the 1990s, he was one man alone against the tide. I am fascinated by these people who were willing to break early with established truths.

What’s next on your agenda, in terms of both artistic and research endeavors?

I try not to separate the work in that way; there is both overlap and generative schizophrenia. I am working on a Ph.D. in Historical Anthropology and this academic year is my comprehensive exam. I am also researching my next film, tentatively titled The Last (White) Man, which looks at a man who, coincidentally, was doing Ph.D. fieldwork in South Asia and then dropped out to join the ultra-left for a period. It’s a complicated story and I don’t know the solution to the storytelling puzzle yet. I gave a talk about the story as part of Creative Time’s Global Residency, but the film form is not clear to me.
IV. Workbook

The following exercises have been designed to be adapted for students and participants of multiple age groups and backgrounds. This workbook encourages critical learning and self-reflection through experimentation with artistic production, and treats the following exercises as tools for both long-term teaching methods that can pool into each other and as individual teaching exercises.

The workbook actively recommends the use of diverse materials. Methods of making can be used as instruments for larger-scale thinking, and we encourage students to consider the materials they view here in the center and that they choose to use themselves. The relationship between materials and formats should also be taken into consideration, as multimedia installations are strong focal points for both exhibited artists.

Time, space and scale are important themes in the work of both artists – Francis Alys and Naeem Mouhaiemen.

In different ways, these artists play with the boundaries between reality and fiction, past and present. This has inspired our workbook’s objective, which is to place students within spaces of tensions – be they imaginary, personal, social or physical – and to reassess their relationship to time, history and the mundane.
1. Stories Easing Tensions

Francis Alys’ artistic practice being an interdisciplinary one, the recurrent thread that would sew it, turning it into one big toy, as Michael Taussig puts it, would be the action of narrating. Branching out from an architectural background, he felt that the most beneficial action in today’s world would be to “insert a story into the city rather than an object.”

Story-telling, one of the hinges to Francis Alys’ artistic practice, transforms his work into an open discussion that would trigger the stories to circulate and in turn build a collective mythology. Placing fiction at the core of his work, he is able to extrapolate truths from those territories of tension to which he exposes himself, sometimes individually (Re-enactments 2000), sometimes collectively (When faith moves mountains).

a. Aims of this exercise

This exercise is a playful, yet analytical exploration of “spaces of tension”. Such spaces can be understood as being contradictory - analogous to old vs. new (…), social order and disorder (protests, riots, etc.), personal conflicts and collective conflicts - or the multiple aspects of a broken physical space; resulting from the construction of a wall, fence, gate, highways that separate areas from others, etc.

Students will be asked to construct their own responses to these spaces of tension in a method of their choice, for example through sketches, painting, collage, writing, recorded interviews, photographs and videos; placing story-telling at the core of their process, in order to stress-out a reality they believe to be relevant to address.

Additionally, a week of reflection would be fitting, allowing them to reflect on their research and narrative development.
We encourage the students be pushed to explore multiple methods of creative production and documentation of a long-term process (such as writing, drawing, diagramming, mapping, taking photographs and/or videos, sound recording, etc.). Experiments with paint, collage and other visual mediums are also to be supported.

b. Materials needed

Splitting the activity in several tasks, the first one would be for the students, working individually or in groups, to choose their space of "tension". From there they should explain to the class why they wish to study this tension and where they perceive it happening.

Afterwards, have students document their first research. This can be done through sketches, notes and interviews and/or through academic research. Though in the case of groups of older students we recommend that a combination of these be explored.

Have the student or group then discuss their research and compose a reflection or response to the "tension" they investigated. The aim of this task would be to get the students to agree upon a common subject, by the means of argumentation and group brainstorming. This would impel them to reflect on a greater scale about their conception of tension, and what is really necessary to be approached. The final result will be a re-imagination, a story, that changes the students’ and the audience's perception on that tension.

The story can play with the space of "tension" like in Francis Alÿs's performances but it can also be blunt or sarcastic, like Jeff Wall’s "Mimic" performance (1982) or paradoxical like Randa Mirza’s photographic series "Beirutopia" (2010). The story can also introduce a traditional fictional narrative, with a larger critical intent, such as in Alfred Tarazi’s Dear Madness exhibition (2017).

Finally, the students can decide how they want their story to be told, through any creative making technique they choose; a written story, a drawn/painted/collaged storyboard, a video, or a theatrical performance can be taken into consideration.

c. Activity

The emphasis on creating the story that will be told, through any creative making technique they choose; a written story, a drawn/painted/collaged storyboard, a video, or a theatrical performance can be taken into consideration.

d. Conclusion

Through this exercise, students will not only learn the value of research and making process, but also think about the choices that go into representation. It will also allow them to visualize and understand "tension" as the result of complicated relationships and events; as well as sensitizing them to the power of story-telling.
Jeff Wall, Mimic (1982)


Randa Mirza, Beirutopia (2011-ongoing)
2. The three W’s of Walking
(Walk, Where, Why)

"walking, happens to be a very immediate way of unfolding these stories"
Francis Alÿs, interview with James Lingwood (2006)

Regularly staging walks, when acting on his own, Alÿs investigates spaces of urbanity or bordering territories that are understood as socio-political or geopolitical enclaves. Alluding to the figure of the "flâneur" – primarily present in the work of Baudelaire and later developed extensively in the writings of Benjamin – Alÿs is able to distance himself from these spaces of subjection; walking is then perceived as an act of realization. Being subsequently immersed in these marginal spaces, the artist is capable of providing a specific reading of his direct environment, one that is completely strip of sentimentality and prejudices.

Only then, when situated in the threads of time and space, could an activation of critical space happen.

a. Aims of this exercise

In addition to urging the students to become aware of the act of walking itself, this activity encourages them to explore new ways of experiencing their everyday environment by walking. They would have to re-map their house, school or daily path, one that leads them to a specific destination they usually go to. In doing so, they would be prompt to ask themselves the following questions:

How do we walk? Why do we walk?
Why are we here? Why did we follow this path and not another?
Where are we heading to?

The students would have to construct a personal map relative to their own walk. The use of several readings of a map is encouraged; a map can be sewed, drawn, written, cut, reversed, etc.

This activity would then be divided in two sections;

أ. أهداف هذا التمرين

بالإضافة إلى حث الطابع على أن يصبحوا واعين لفعل المشي بذاته، سيعزّجهم هذا النشاط أيضا على استكشاف طرق جديدة لاختبار بيئاتهم اليومية عن طريق المشي. إذ يستعينون جيداً في إعداد رسم خريطة منزلهم أو مدرستهم أو المسار الذي يسلكونه يومياً للوصول إلى مكان محدد يقصدهم عادة. سيقومون بهذا التمرين إلى طرح الأسئلة التالية على أنفسهم:

كيف نمشي؟ لماذا نمشي؟
لماذا نحن هنا؟ لماذا اتبعنا هذا المسار وليس آخر؟
إلى أين نتجه؟

سيعنى على الطلاب بناء خريطة شخصية ملتزمة بنزعتهم، ونحن نشجعهم على استخدام قراءات متعددة، إذ يمكن للخريطة أن تكون أو ترسم أو تكون أو تقطع أو تقلب، إلخ.

يتمكّن هذا التمرين إلى قسمين:

المشي، أين، لماذا

ب. أهداف هذا التمرين

"يحدث أن يكون المشي طريقة فورية للكشف عن تلك القصص" 
Francis Alÿs, interview with James Lingwood (2006)

يعرض فرانسيس أليس فعل المشي بشكل منظم في أعماله، وهو يحقق في المساحات الحضرية أو المناطق الحدودية أثر كرادوس جغرافية إجتماعية-سياسية حقيقية. ممكناً إلى صورة البحث (flâneur) – التي ظهرت بشكل أساسي في أعمال شارل بوتليير - وتطورت لاحقاً على نطاق واسع في كتاباته وأعمال بيامين – يستخدم أليس أن يأتي بنفسه عن وسائل الإخضاع تلك. حيث يتحول المشي إلى فعل إدراكي وتحقيق، بعد أن ينغمز في هذه المساحات الهامشية. صيح الفنّان ناشراً على توفير قراءة محددة تحكي عن هذه البيئات الهامشية، وهي قراءة خالية تماماً من العاطفية والأحاسيس الساива.

عندما فقط، أي عند التواؤد بين خيوط الزمان والمكان، يمكن للفضاء القديم أن يحدث.
A – how do we walk? Why do we walk?

To better approach these two questions, we recommend that students with their educators research and discuss the following artists and groups who have used walking in their practice as an active performative instrument as opposed to an instinctive movement: Eadweard Muybridge (Man Walking), Etienne Jules Marey (Motion Study – Man Walking), The Judson Dance Theater and specifically Bruce Nauman’s Walk on the perimeter of a square, strongly inspired by Samuel Beckett’s’ Quad I + II.

"Would man have the power to steer the action of this constant phenomenon of which he doesn’t think about?

For me, from this point onwards, movement contained thinking, the purest action of the human being; the verb, the translation of these ideas; then the gait and the gesture, the more or less passionate accomplishment of this verb.

Then, walking being understood as the expression of the corporal movements, and voice as the intellectual movements, it seemed to me impossible to disavow movement. Under this circumstance, the profound knowledge of walking became a comprehensive science.”

Driven by the curiosity to define natural movement in 1833, De Balzac sits at a café in Paris and observes passersby. The outcome of his study, a deception. He outlined that thinking has a strong effect on our gait and body gesture. Furthermore, he argues that the loss of correct movement, which is the natural one, is subject to social conventions.

He disseminates his research results in his essay, Théorie de la démarche. Later, it served as a witness to an ambitious project that captivated the 19th Century, which was to strip bare the human movement in order to relocate its alleged essence.

Throughout the observation of diverse walking manners, De Balzac articulated a semiotic of movement which enabled him to distinguish the different human social classes or professions. Through eleven aphorisms, de Balzac establishes a classification of movement; from them on, gait is subject to codification.

He concludes his observation with the following sentence:

“So, thinking is the power that corrupts our movement, which twists our body, which makes it explode under its despotistic efforts. Thinking is the great dissolvent of the human species.”
The aim of their study was to isolate movement from its cultural components in order to study it in a more or less controllable environment; their research was driven by the preoccupation of representation by anatomists of the human body in movement.

The following sentence depicts an important aspect of their drawn conclusion:

“During the walk, the leg would be no more than a pendulum performing an oscillatory movement to which the muscles do not contribute.” – walking is then merely a mechanical movement, a strut which isn’t subject to any human voluntary decision.

The aim of the provided skeleton-image in their book:

1. These are partial images; they only show the parts that form the object of the Weberian theory. It is then the layout of images that lets the authors isolate their subject of study – the locomotor apparatus – from the rest of the human body.

2. The images form a series that suggests to the reader a succession of steps. This way, a fiction of a man walking at different speeds is performed.

These two scholars provided the first elements for an extensive research whose main thread was the obsessive project of correcting the representation of human and animal motions, in the sphere of art or other realms of representations. This was made possible in 1870, with the manufacturing of a new photographic device, the chronophotograph, by Eadweard Muybridge, in correlation with the studies of physiologist Etienne-Jules Marey. The latter claimed the importance of this new device, which he considered from this moment onward to be “the instructor of our movements.” In fact, he considers science as being the liberator from the Old Régime; he claims that the body at its natural state will finally be revealed, but only through the aid of artifices:

“the access to the natural state of the body requires a meticulous

Simultaneously to the writings of De Balzac, which classified the bodily movements as specific social signs and exposed the vanity of a mechanical definition of movement, scholars such as the Weber brothers strove to demonstrate movement as the simple result of functioning mechanics. In 1836, they published a book based on their study, The Mechanics of Human Walking Apparatus, in which they willingly drew comparisons between the machine and the human mechanics.
task, a constant measuring and controlling of the body movements, that would be done increasingly through the use of laboratories and machines.”

Left: Weber Brothers, illustrations extracted from “The Mechanics of Human Walking Apparatus” (1836). Notice the reduction of the human body to the spine and legs when studying the act of walking or running.

Above: Etienne-Jules Marey, Chronophotograph, “ Mounted White Horse” (1886).
Below: Eadward Muybridge, Chronophotograph, “Horse in Motion” (19th century).

Notice the difference in how they both express movement by focusing on different elements – the movement itself and the body when in motion.
For these last three questions, we recommend addressing the following artists and groups: The Fluxus Group, specifically their performances, the Mono-Ha Japanese artist collective, Tony Chakar (The Sky Over Beirut), Stanley Brouwn (This Way Brouwn and Man Walking Planet Earth) and Bourchra El Khalili (Walking Towards Revolution). As well as keeping in mind the act of dérive, introduced by the Situationist International.

Students should work individually for this exercise. Each participant should pick a commute or walk that they have routinized (for example home to school, school to friends, etc.). Have them map the exact course that they take from their starting point to that destination and then reflect on that walk: why do they take those specific turns? Is it about elongating the walk or shortening it? This actually reverses De Balzac’s process, as thought is introduced to reflect on a habit as opposed to his process of using thought in the initial stage. Students begin to “corrupt” their own routine. From there, students must reshape their habitual walk, avoiding the streets that they normally take and use this new walking path to reflect on their original course. This can be done through notes, writing, sketching or diagrams.

This exercise will also use routinized walking courses as a base.

Task: observing classmates, passersby, family members

Students here are asked to reflect and evaluate the differences between Marey and Muybridge’s approaches, what they allow and how these allowances differ one from the other. For a more long-term exercise, students can choose through painting, drawing or photography to recreate both approaches and visualize what it means to pay attention to the body and to the motion itself.

The chronophotographs achieved by Marey, on the contrary to those of Muybridge, permit a reconstitution of the action in its fluidity and to imagine it in a slowed motion. The successive phases get entangled; the instant can never appear isolated from its past or future. Muybridge’s chronophotographs showcase a clear recognition of the body and not the movement, whilst the outcomes of Marey depict the inverse, we consistently perceive the movement, but not necessarily the body.
This exercise will also use routinized walking courses as a base. Students can choose the same path that they reflected upon in the first task or another habitual walk of their choice. Students are asked to either map it or walk it and reflect on its length: is it the shortest path possible? Does it minimize their fatigue? From there students must accomplish two tasks. Firstly, they must shorten the path either by increasing their speed of pace or by shortening the path itself and then reflect on what they have gained and lost from doing so. Secondly, they must increase the time of the walk also through their pace or by elongating the journey with more twists and turns and similarly reflect on gains and losses.

When reflecting on these changes, it is encouraged to juxtapose Weber brothers’ scientifically pragmatic approach of studying walking as a biological obligation with an experiential evaluation of the walk. This allows a direct criticism and reflection on both approaches.


Guy Debord and Asger Jorn, The Naked City (1957)
a. Aims of this exercise

This exercise looks at the significance of monumental scale buildings across the world to explore how architecture is used as a symbol of power. In his work Two Meetings and a Funeral, Naeem Mohaiemen looks at the role of gigantism in architecture in Algiers, Dhaka, and New York, and questions the building’s roles as power symbols. Students will be asked to choose a building to research in groups.

This exercise can be adapted to any time span and level of education.

b. Materials needed

For a shorter lesson plan, drawing materials, and Internet access if possible, will be needed. For a longer lesson plan, collage material, paint and cardboard such. Recyclable and untraditional materials are also to be suggested, such as toilet paper rolls, newspapers for Papier-mâché or make-up for color.

c. Activity

Firstly, the class should be divided in to groups and asked to research "monumental" buildings throughout the world. Each group should select a building from a different country to the rest of the groups in the class.

From there each group must research the history of the building. Why was it designed to look the way it does? Who build it? Who designed it? Who paid for it? What is the building used for now?

It is also encouraged for groups to create a drawing or model of the building (dependent on time scale). The intention of this is to help the students understand a history of the building.

This exercise will help the students understand a history of the building.
d. Conclusion

and commonalities of the researched buildings is to be initiated. This is designed to stimulate thought and discussion on the use of architecture as a symbol of power, be it political, financial, creative or national.

Finally, student groups will be asked to choose a space where they will build their own monumental architecture or piece. They should think about their intended audience, who or what they wish to monumentalize and the historical moment they wish to place their piece in. Here, the exercise allows them to fictionalize an alternative history to the area, person or community they are addressing. Groups should also ponder how their monument could reshape perception.

Through this exercise, students will not only understand the grander circumstances that lead to the construction of monuments or monumental scale architectural works but also their impact on reshaping history, social sentiment and political circumstance. Monuments act as proxies between past and present and between different agents of power. Creating their own monumental piece allows them to actively involve themselves within a fictional dynamic of that same process to reimagine the monumentalized and create alternative histories.
5. At the Crossroads

**a. Aims of this exercise**

This exercise encourages students to consider the difficult decisions they might make at a ‘cross roads’, and the different outcomes that this cross road could have lead to. In his work ‘Two Meetings and a Funeral’, Naeem Mohaiemen explores the history of tension between the Nonaligned Movement (NAM) and Organization for Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in 1973–74. His film proposes that this cross roads lead to the failure of socialism in the ‘Third World’. This exercise asks students to consider crossroads they have experienced or witnessed, and critically engage with the alternative events that could have happened if a different decision had been made.

**b. Materials needed**

Writing materials, sketching materials, paper and possibly paint.

**c. Activity**

Students will be asked to think about a decision that they have experienced or witnessed that could have had a number of outcomes. This will be their personal crossroad.

They will then be asked to write a short letter, poem or story in their own words, about what the cross road was, what decision was made, and what could have happened if a different decision had been made.

The students will then get in to pairs, and exchange their writing. They will be asked to creatively respond to their partner’s writing through drawing, painting, or their own notes. This will allow students to compare and contrast their stories, and discuss the direction the cross roads could have taken from a different perspective.

Finally, student groups will be asked to choose a space where they will build their own monumental architecture or piece. They should think about their intended audience, who or what they wish to monumentalize and the historical moment they wish to place their piece in. Here, the exercise allows them to fictionalize an alternative history to the area, person or community they are addressing. Groups
should also ponder how their monument could reshape perception.

d. Conclusion

The exercise facilitates a reflective and self-reflective process for the students, encouraging them to not only revisit crossroads within their own lives but to rethink them and the events that led up to them. This questioning of individual decision opens a window to criticizing larger scale decision-making processes and their results. Through this method taken at the individual human scale it opens itself to the assessment and interpretation of others, facilitating a pluralist approach to decision-making.
V. Additional Readings

The following readings share a thematic characteristic that does not necessarily read in a direct manner: that of paradox and inconsistency. Both Francis Alys and Naeem Mouhaiemen use alteration, fragmentation and contradiction in their work in ways that allow numeral different experiences and relationships to be formed between their works and the audience. Time is no longer linear and unchanging as opposed event-based historical education formulates it, space and geopolitics are no longer rigid, negating the physical and transcendental barriers built by the nations of the world and the relationship between work and play, labor and result, effort an outcome all blur and intermingle in ways that contradict each other.

The following readings directly and indirectly refer to the body of work and practice of both artists. The first three readings focus on Francis Alys’s artistic practice and his transformation of artistic production into works of play, relationships and inquiries that question the habitual state of modern lifestyles and mundane routines, for example the act of walking that for all people is as instinctive as any other routine and as such is not revisited. The last two writings refer to reassessments of history itself – its study, perception and recording – which intertwines with Naeem Mouhaiemen’s continuous questioning and evaluation of historical discourse.

Art-game, is how Michael Taussig depicts Alys’ work. Writing an essay about REEL-UNREEL, Francis Alys’ video work in Afghanistan, Taussig sets forth the combination of simplicity and abstraction in the artist’s works. This cooperation being pointed out, Taussig is then able to express Alys’ works as humorous acts capable of uncovering exchange circuits, both in the social and geo-political spheres.

Throughout his essay, he portrays multiple aspects of Alys’ work; unfolding them as child games, he sews an interesting thread between his works and that of Walter Benjamin. As in many of Francis’ works, REEL-UNREEL has no clear beginning or end. Therefore, as well as being intensified, the tension becomes continuous. In this manner, Alys’ games produce perpetually, in Taussig’s words, a world on its own and unpredictable from what was before and what comes after.

Through her writing, Cuauhtémoc Medina provides a detailed encounter with Francis Alys’ practice and multiple works. Her work, entitled “A Crowd Art”, not only introduces the diversity of Alys’ experimentations and mediums, it also sheds light on the criticality of their process; how he takes into consideration a questioning and revisiting of medium specificity as well as socio-political context for the sake of site specificity.

Beginning with revisiting of painting, she goes through the development and progression of his practice leading to the point where two significant inquiries are brought to light: what is the relationship of the viewer to the pieces displayed and more importantly what is the relationship of each piece to the other and to itself? Simultaneously read as individual works and parts of a whole, both physically and in time, Alys work can be seen as one elongated artistic process as well as a series of single artworks, Medina’s text showcases this and juxtaposes it to the number of contexts he addresses.

The Practice of Everyday Life, a book written by Michel de Certeau in 1980, explores how the ordinary man subtracts himself silently from the conformation implemented by consumerist objects, languages, laws, and rituals.

Through the practice of everyday life, man is able to deflect objects and codes. Thus, reclaiming space and usage in a personal manner. The following text presents excerpts from Walking in the City, the 5th chapter of the book. In this chapter, De Certeau confronts the unified city to the walker. Moving in ways that are not tactical nor determined by the strategic grid of the streets, the latter
resists the planned city. Therefore, the walker redirects strategies of governments and other institutional bodies. By rerouting the regulated scheme of the city, pedestrians are writing it. In doing so, each pedestrian produces a personal language, perpetually adding to the city a new layer of meaning. Walking becomes a generator of words.

“linking acts and footsteps, opening meanings and directions, these words operate in the name of an emptying-out and wearing away of their primary role. They become liberated spaces that can be occupied”. Furthermore, he argues that the city is actualized only when you step in it. He declares a “rhetoric of walking”: meaning is revealed as it is created. The city is then assimilated to Saussure’s Langue, while walking in it in a certain path becomes a Parole.

Olivia Chirobocea, in “Perspectives on the Relation between History and Fiction”, sheds light on the crisis of history’s perception and study by recounting not only the intense and continuous assimilation of fictive narratives and fetishisms into historical fictions and adaptions but also how fiction has always been a part of historical narrative construction, as far back as the integration of history into mythology in ancient times.

The 20th century particularly played a strong role in romanticizing history and rendering attractive to consumers and audiences through cinema and fiction writing, yet the complexities and issues with historical studies goes far beyond the fictive fantasies of the cinematic world and spread to the entire discipline of historiography and academics, not to mention the multitude of ideologies and processes that have fragmented history into numerous “histories” that do not necessarily relate to one another, but even compete and negate each other.

“History” is a single word that the English language applies to a multitude of notions. The 20th century more than any other era has showcased the blurring of the line between constructed and researched history, fiction and the past. More importantly, the continuous integration of critical thought in academia and of romanticization in fields such as cinema especially for historical adaptations and fictions have impacted the studies, approaches and perceptions of historiography – the study and construction of history.

Tobby Widdicombe in his writing proposes that, in order to remove history “from a state of crisis”, fiction and fallacy should be accepted as an irreducible factor from historiography and more importantly that utopianism should be integrated into historiographical thought in that utopianism acknowledges the rupture of past from present, that fiction is an inevitable fact when writing of history and that history follows an ideology. His writing can be seen as gateway into understanding the value of alternative histories, and flexible perceptions and questionings of historical discourse.
Art-game, is how Michael Taussig depicts Alÿs’ work. Writing an essay about REEL-UNREEL, Francis Alÿs’ video work in Afghanistan, Taussig sets forth the combination of simplicity and abstraction in the artist’s works. This cooperation being pointed out, Taussig is then able to express Alÿs’ works as humorous acts capable of uncovering exchange circuits, both in the social and geo-political spheres.

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In Kabul in early June 2010 I slept behind massive concrete bunkers and five pat-downs by scowling security guards every time I entered the hotel. They looked at me as a potential suicide bomber and I looked at them the same way. They would act mean and they would act efficient, better than professional actors. It was a game we played, all five pat-downs many times a day just to get in and get out, never knowing whom to trust. I played a game of badminton out on the lawn there with my young friend Tom Francis, but after a few tries became mystified and frightened to learn that I could not coordinate my body. Every time I threw the shuttlecock in the air to serve, I missed it, and with that realized I was missing an awful lot of other things as well, not so much about Afghanistan and the wars there as how to “come to grips” with that, meaning in the first instance how to frame it and talk about it and how to “serve it”.

“Very disorganized, pouted the German ambassador after his fourth attempt to get a cup of iced mint tea in our bunkered luxury hotel. Was he also referring to what he perceived as our foolish mission of “making art” in Afghanistan?

After all, anyone with the slightest acumen knew there was no way out of the hopelessly routinized way the West talked to itself about Afghanistan, moving the pieces around the same old chess board that had been used for Iraq and before that. . . Kipling had referred to this stretch of territory as subject to the Great Game between super powers, and you really had to wonder if what were now inside of was not a variant of that same game with three men slugging it out — Bin Laden, Bush, and Cheney — collapsing world historical forces into grotesque puppetry of good and evil awash in billions of dollars especially for Cheney’s old outfit by name of Halliburton. Everyone sensed this, but in the chaos of mixed motives, secrecy, deceit, short-term necessities, and games concealing other games, the more you tried to figure it out, the more it slipped through your fingers. Truth was a grey mist of rumor, guerrilla tactics, and entangled bureaucracy made mistier still by the certainties propounded daily by the experts. Truth was make-believe. All “very disorganized”, that’s for sure, something that Francis Alÿs, with that great calm he exudes, must have felt in his eight trips to Afghanistan since 2010.

In this situation “making art”, as with his film REEL-UNREEL and the color bar paintings, suggests a way out of the game. These works are about games, too, if not games, themselves. It could not be otherwise. The first is about two kids racing through the streets of Kabul using film reels as hoops, the other is about the game armies love to play with stripes of colors as with medals and , in this case, with the blazons troops wear on their upper sleeve ostensibly for identification but also, surely, to ward off evil spirits. But first, to get a sense of what’s required to get in close to make such art, think of how foreign journalists work in this situation of danger and fluid boundaries. They need a “fixer” — someone who speaks English as well as a couple of Afghani languages and has, as they say, “connections.” In 2010, I was told a good fixer cost 150-250 USD a day, 1,000 for an interview with a Talib. A somewhat unsettling term, the “fixer” hovers between a cluster of words like a translator, prostitute, pimp, sleuth, and anthropologist. It is a highly risky occupation. But then so is being a foreign journalist and photographer. The journalists I met there were usually young, under twenty five, stunningly smart, not yet jaded, still overcome by the enormity of it all, and great risk-takers, such that I could never understand why the material they published by their editors back in London or New York always sounded the same no matter who wrote it or what it was about, a regular sausage machine with a dash of “human interest”like death and torture thrown in.

There was a pale slender woman wearing s blue chador down to her ankles, her face largely uncovered, waiting on the tarmac at Herat on the Iranian border for the flight to Kabul. She was a
Dutch journalist going to cover the assembly of (all male) tribal elders on June 3rd, rumor being that Kabul would be attacked by some Taliban-instigated suicide bombers, “Boring” she said, referring to these assemblies. She bore the face of a saint, and the grace, too. Her eyes were tired. She had been on the beat for years; Cambodia, East Timor, Iraq, and now Afghanistan. “Iraq fatigue”, she explained, was what was preventing the translation of her book on Baghdad into English. This trip started three months ago. In her chador she looked at home. In Herat she was researching the suicide in 2003 of a female writer. She works as “slow journalism”, which I guess evaded the worst of the sausage machine, like Michael Herr was able to do, writing on the war in Vietnam at his own pace for Esquire magazine in the 1960s. His book Dispatches is generally considered one of the finest, if not the best, book on that war from the viewpoint of the American soldier. Frederic Jameson wrote somewhere that it changed our very language. It is hard to imagine that happening today. The very soul has been sucked out of representation. Not every irony and cynicism can get a toehold.

Which brings us to art, or “art”, as James Agee, that tamed genius of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, would have put it, “art” being something he abhorred in the writing and photography of the poor when he accepted a commission report on the condition of white share-copper in Alabama in the 1930s.

On one of his eight trips Francis was “embedded” for fifteen days as an artist in five “forward operating bases” with UK forces (the US would not accept him) in the Helmand province. It was then that he got the idea for his “color bar” series, drawn to the “tactical recognition flashes” the British soldiers wore on their upper left sleeve. Why make “art” out of these flashes and, anyway, why are they called “flashes”? Listening to the artist, I get the idea that their basic simplicity — these little patches of stripes of color — is a catharsis from the bewildering overload of conflicting information that “Afghanistan” generates. Yet does not such simplicity succeed because it combines with abstraction and thus is not in simple at all? It is a catharsis because the simplicity is too simple. It is a mystery. In other words, despite the staid, ever-reliable stolidity of the flashes, they are actually just that — “flashes” of this and that like fireflies in the night-stand that is Afghanistan.

From the moment I met him, Francis struck me as an odd bird. A flash, you might say, A Firefly, for sure. Blessed with an ever surprising imagination, he was searingly practical, as well. If Charles Fourier needed an engineer to construct his utopias, well, here he was! Francis took in detail like a sponge and, more than that, saw connections and patterns in the eye of the hurricane dissolving all patterns. Meticulous and cerebral as his work is, it owes much to children’s games. “They are major source of inspiration in my work,” he once told me, adding that in collaboration with filmmaker Julien Devaux, he had to date made at least fifteen videos of these games (which you can view as the first item on his website).

Does this mean his work is generally “childish”? Well, yes. And no. Is Magritte childish? Or Duchamp? It is childish in its studied innocence and self-absorption, cut off from the busy world of adults, the pesky mothers and the demanding fathers. Like a children’s game it sails off into uncharted seas — and by children’s games I mean the games children have played with each other for a long, long, time, not the ones invented by adults such as video games generally isolating the child from other children and from their own bodies.

Actually, I first met not him but his shadow or empty space because he had disappeared, causing our chaperone all manner of anxiety. Like a naughty child he had played hooky to wander around threatening Kabul with his new found Afghani architect friend, thereby manifesting yet again his ceaseless curiosity in the marvelous photographs he would send by email of our travels together, shots you would carefully archive, as much for their aesthetic power as for what they were about. You could see it in the “extra mile” he would go to get some other view, that extra question, that extra immersion, that comes to fill the notebook. Much, if not most, of Francis’s artwork involves games in which exchange and circulation recur, invoking the idea of the gift in the circuitry of the social. “Work” as in “artwork” is somewhat of a misnomer for this art. “Art-game” would be more appropriate and that is why — and how — these art-works are so often overworked jokes, as with the artwork called Watercolor, a video 1:19 minutes is length, in which a plastic pail of water dipped into the Black Sea in Turkey is taken and emptied into the Red Sea in Jordan. That’s it, Watercolor! 1:19 minutes. But how long did it take to travel from the Black Sea to the Red?

This humor — uncovering exchange circuits that were not obvious before the artwork — is immediately apparent in Le Temps du Sommeil (“the time of sleep”), 111 little paintings (roughly even seven inches by five inches) created between 1996 and 2009, exhibited in the Irish Museum of Modern Art, and published as a small book in 2010. The exchanges depicted may be between objects, such as pouring the contents of one glass into another, back and forth, or they may involve uncanny dimensions of the social world, as evident in the very last entry in this book, “I will
wander the streets of Tokyo until someone calls my name.”

The most significant gift involving exchange and circulation, however, occurs at the meta-level wherein the painting on one page is juxtaposed with a short text of one or two lines on the facing page, the connection beginning — how shall I put this? — a gift exchange between image and text, barely a connection, a “flash”, we could say, yet in its tenuous fragility just right, meaning more than right, making you stare at the painting and then back again to the statement, your mind never still, oscillating, like playing badminton.

There is another “childish” aspect to this and that lies with the very character of the drawings, deceptively simple, petite, sketchy, impish and wistful. As for the gift in this back and forth, it kickstarts the process of exchange and circulation wherein one side — the image, for instance — offers itself as a gift to the other, meaning the text, for instance. And then there is the return gift, the fruit or reward of the interchange, creation that surplus which perforce becomes metamorphic of the text-image mix. Bataille’s notion of dépense or unproductive expenditure comes to mind, dépense itself being indispensable to gaming.

Are children’s games dying out, like a threatened species? Are the streets the world over ever more empty of kids playing — except for the poor parts of town and poor parts of the world, like Afghanistan? Have our cityscapes become ever more denuded and less sonorous with the cries of children replaced by cars and trucks? I look back at my own childhood in Sidney and certainly see this evolution, which sets me to wonder about the history of children’s games and toys.

In his Centuries of Childhood, for instance, Philippe Aries argues that childhood in western Europe is an invention of the late seventeenth century and that before then children were little adults, as testified by Velasquez’Las Meninas, which is what I observe in rural Columbia also. But what does that imply of our understanding of toys and play? “Little adults” were surely not averse to play even if the “cult” of childhood had not been invented.

Walter Benjamin, for example, whose work — like that of Francis Alÿs — can be seen as one big toy of theory, was entranced by children’s toys which he saw as in continuous negotiation with the world of adults, including adults’ notion of play and of childhood! Above all, he insisted that the locus of joy and fascination with toys lays in the child’s love of mimesis and the body more than in the toy itself, as when he wrote that “a child wants to pull something, and so he becomes a horse; he wants to play with sand, and so he turns into a baker; he wants to hide, and so he turns into a robber or a policeman.”(1)

I cannot but think of Francis pushing his block of ice through Mexico City.

And as regards to the age and origin of toys, Benjamin suggests that the baby rattle has its origin in the need to ward off evil spirits and that hoops, kites, balls, and spinning tops were once what he calls cult objects. The spinning top is the main “character” in Jose Marie Arguedas’s novel, Los ríos profundos, set in the highlands of Peru in the mid twentieth century. The spinning top that the children play with become not only animated, it becomes human-like, and more than that, a spirit that coordinates the narrative and unfolding events. In his book on play, Roger Caillois states that hopscotch, commonly played in the street or in the schoolyard, derives from the labyrinth in which one pushed a stone — meaning one’s soul — towards the exit. With Christianity, the labyrinth took the form of the basilica and the exit was heaven.(2)

So where does that put Francis’s ice-block pushed into nothingness through the labyrinth of the third world city? What does this latest manifestation of the labyrinth say about our long-forgotten connections to ancient mythology and to forgetting?

To invoke history and pre-history is to also ask if Francis’s work is inspired not so much by children’s games as by their world historical loss? I myself think this is so. As Benjamin says in relation to the art of the storyteller, it would be fatuous to see it merely as a symptom of decay and of modernization. Instead this loss is a symptom of the secular forces of economic production combined with the loss of narrative from the realm of living speech, “making it possible to see a new beauty in what is vanishing.”(3)

Is it therefore all that surprising that our architect-artist from western Europe who has chosen to live in Mexico City would be sensitive to this “new beauty that is vanishing?”

But what about screens? What about kids glued to video games and computers the world over? Is this not a sign that gaming is alive and well, at least electronically? In which case, what do you make of the elimination of the body from such games?

Bodily involvement is starkly obvious in all Francis’s movies of children’s games, especially and gut wrenchingly so in Papalote (4:10 minutes) set in Balkh, Afghanistan, featuring a ten year old
boy flying a kite. The involvement of the body is overwhelming, yet as finely wrought as a mirage. Against a dune-colored adobe wall, standing under a powder blue sky, the boy wears a pinkish trouser suit. He is gesticulating like crazy, emitting frenzied gesture language, conversing in stops and starts with the heaven or at least with the gusting wind because you never see the kite and because the string is so fine you can’t see that either. All you see — what you see — is the 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. The body is all the more obvious because it is connected like this to the coursing wind by in an invisible string. This is not only the body of the boy but the body of the world in a deft mimesis of each other, amounting to what I call the “mastery of non-mastery” which, after all, is one — for dealing with man’s domination of nature (including human nature).

An analogous trick — or should we call it a game? — makes mesmerizing magic out of the game “Rock, Paper, Scissors” (2:51 minutes). In this film we see not the hands themselves but their shadows on a whitish background as the two antagonists play with that tremendous skill that only kids can muster in what seems impossibly fast motion; the clenched fist of “rock”, the two open fingers of “scissors,” and the flat hand of “paper.” “Conceptual art”, you say, the kind you could watch for hours, the hands as synecdoche not of the body but of the two bodies in a controlled frenzy of elegant interaction and dissolution.

I wonder what Taliban thinks of children’s games like this one, let alone towards videos thereof? But as we quickly learned once we got to Afghanistan in 2010, there is more than one “Taliban”, and the ban on images is hardly uniform or coherent. But then, what is an “image”?

The Director of the National Museum in Kabul, elegant in a fawn linen suit and golden tie, explained how in 1996 a restorer has used watercolor to paint flowers and trees over those paintings in the museum with human and animal figures to protect them before the Taliban came and smashed all statues. Someone else ventured that the ban on image-making meant you couldn’t image animate beings and suggested breathing as the criterion of such animatedness. I was also told that the Taliban forbade photography and xeroxing — except for those things indispensable for state control, IDs and passports.

In the longest and most ambitious of the Afghan videos, REEL-UNREEL, the notion of animate is really put to the Taliban test, as well as testing, in ways delightful and exploratory, western notions of what animate might encompass. Thanks to the skill and derring-do of two boys spinning film reels like hoops as fast as they can, the pixilated multitude that is Kabul springs to life as the camera follows the boys’ will-o’-the wisp chase, aimless — completely aimless — except for the mad intensity with which the boy behind races to keep up with the boy some twenty feet in front, and the boy in front races to keep ahead of the one twenty feet behind. Could this be an allegory for that which today called “Afghanistan,” meaning the continuous state of siege constituting that game in which the more you know, the less you know? The game “Blind Man’s Buff” also comes to mind. One is tempted to invoke the “cult objects” idea of hoops and kites, let alone rattles.

Like earlier works by Francis, including his magnetic shoes and the magnetic “horse” he set perambulating the streets of Havana andMexico City attracting all manner of metallic debris, REEL-UNREEL similarly attracts all manner of “debris.” In these and many, if not most, of his artwork, Francis seems to have set into motion Michel de Certeau’s principle of “walking the city” and Benjamin’s idea of colportage — by which is meant the art that combines walking the city with filmic montage and with taking hashish.

The two boys and their two reels are bound together. The boy in front has his reel unwinding its load of celluloid film while the one behind winds it on to his reel at pretty much the same frenzied pace. It seems like this is film that has been developed and has frames with pictures, as we see when a boy holds up a segment made in this work of the destruction of the film and its picking up scratches and dirt as it slithers, snake-like, along the rough ground. This is above all a sonic phenomenon with scratching, screeching, sound, matter-in-torment, at once playful and sinister, at other times a whirl at the boy in front races to keep ahead of the one twenty feet in front, and the one behind races to keep up with the boy some twenty feet in front, and the one behind races to keep up with the boy some twenty feet in front, and the one behind races to keep up with the boy some twenty feet behind. Could this be an allegory for that which today called “Afghanistan,” meaning the continuous state of siege constituting that game in which the more you know, the less you know? The game “Blind Man’s Buff” also comes to mind. One is tempted to invoke the “cult objects” idea of hoops and kites, let alone rattles.

Certainly REEL-UNREEL offers an unusual perspective on reality for not only does it animate the landscapes through which the reels pass, but if often does this at knee-height, the height of the boys and the height of the reels bouncing their ways precariously though thick and thin. This is political filmmaking in a new key, the perspective from the ground up with wheels in motion. It is up to you, the viewer, to decide whether this be the wheels of Nietzsche’s Eternal Return Marx’s locomotive of history, or a Deleuzian post-Nietzschean “becoming intense, becoming animal...”, the baby stroller tumbling down Odessa’s stairs in Sergei Eisenstein’s Battleship Potemkin (1925) or — heaven forbid — something you make up yourself.
In The Accursed Share, Bataille makes a big point about war in the twentieth century being the privileged instance of dépense — of spending the surplus in orgies of waste displacing by far Roman Carnival with its bread and circuses and Aztec sacrifice with its thousands of victims offered to the gods. Now entering its thirteenth year, that gargantuan spending spree of life and treasure (not money but “treasure”, as they say repeatedly in the US Senate) the US led war in Afghanistan surely qualifies as The Great Dépense as much as The Great Game.

In Kim, Kipling narrated this game through a young boy, Kimball O’Hara, just as Francis Alÿs has two boys chasing each other over the mountains and choked streets of Kabul, only his game and the boys’ game auto-cannibalize narration. It is, as Bataille would have it in his essay on Van Gogh and the sacred dimension of auto-mutilation, the practice of self-sacrifice of narration of of the very idea of a purpose — which is, after all, what you need to make sense. A sense of purpose, that is. There is no beginning and no end to REEL-UNREEL, just this mad breathless chase to no purpose other than itself. After all, the very title cleverly expresses just this. One would also like to say that the tension is not only intense but continuous. Yet like the state of exception/emergency it is not so much continuous, not so much like the river flowing, as it is staggered and chaotic, with each “moment” a world on its own and unpredictable from what was before and what comes after. Differential calculus on mescaline, what I elsewhere call “the nervous system.” But yes !, there is and end, when the leading reel plunges to its destruction of a cliff. That is sacrifice. But this end is totally unexpected, more a nervous system collapse than an ending. Game Over.

May 3, 2014.


A Crowd Art
Cuauhtémoc Medina
In A Story of Negotiation, March 2015, pp.23-57

Through her writing, Cuauhtémoc Medina provides a detailed encounter with Francis Alÿs’ practice and multiple works. Her work, entitled “A Crowd Art”, not only introduces the diversity of Alÿs’ experimentations and mediums, it also sheds light on the criticality of their process; how he takes into consideration a questioning and revisiting of medium specificity as well as socio-political context for the sake of site specificity.

Beginning with revisiting of painting, she goes through the development and progression of his practice leading to the point where two significant inquiries are brought to light: what is the relationship of the viewer to the pieces displayed and more importantly what is the relationship of each piece to the other and to itself? Simultaneously read as individual works and parts of a whole, both physically and in time, Alÿs work can be seen as one elongated artistic process as well as a series of single artworks, Medina’s text showcases this and juxtaposes it to the number of contexts he addresses.

Project after project, along a sinuous but unmistakable line, Francis Alÿs has brought together a history of histories that takes on a variety of conditions of the contemporary world as well as the ethical and aesthetic dilemmas posed by making art in this turbulent time in order to roll them up and unroll them, to run them forward and backward. Although his work bears a set of marks and signs that have made it distinguishable a posteriori (the linkage between act and fable, the critique of the temporalities of capitalist modernization, and the poetics of a certain precariousness of the phenomenology of the city), one of its main thrusts is rooted in his ability to reinvent himself, in his refusal to routinize his production, Alÿs’s oeuvre follows a poetically logical development, rather than appearing as a single set connected to a plan. Its unity lies elsewhere. In addition to the way in which his works occur in relation to groups, geographies, and social representations that are extremely diverse in terms of an always-localized specificity, they act as a coordinated reflection. Regarded together, along with the variants of their social referents and their methodologies, they operate as a diagram of ideas.

Thus far in the twenty-first century, several of Alÿs’s projects have come together in interrogating the relationship between the staging and documentation of artistic actions on the one hand, and the labor of imagination and physical creation that is painting on the other. Challenging the dichotomy that attributes a solipsistic condition and a merely self-referential ethos to painting, and a simple and immediate range of intervention to action, Alÿs has woven a variety of poetic-political-pictorial in which painting operates as one medium among many, within a practice that occurs in relation to a specific mobilization of social and contextual agents, diverse forms of imagination, and spaces endowed with an exemplary signification. Superimposed in time, but distributed across three continents, these projects offer complementary perspectives that are nevertheless impossible to subsume under a unified principle. They are offered, consequently, as an essay in practice on the possibilities of articulating the binomial of painting and action.

Alÿs accompanied the production of paintings and drawings with his pursuit of whirlwinds in southern Mexico City (Tornado, 2000-2010), his mythological intervention in the drama of the crossing of the border between Africa and Europe at the Strait of Gibraltar (Don’t Cross the Bridge Before You Get to the River, 2008) and the variety of works that he realized with regard to the war of images taking place in Afghanistan (REEL-UNREEL, 2011, though some of its products were completed as late as 2014). In a certain sense, these three series pose very distinctive modalities of how to formulate a “beyond” of usual pictorial practice, in order to glimpse the ways in which the imagination and works on canvas and paper can serve broader sets of imagination and reflection. Seen properly, those projects were occasions to charge painting with tasks that both accompanied and exceeded the political impulse of their reference projects.

Surely, one of the main thrusts of Francis Alÿs’s actions since the early 1990s has been to establish a methodology of “action-fiction” in order to activate the sensuous and political dimensions of urban existence (1). Several of his early collaborative projects interrogate painting as part of complex economic and cultural circuits because of its intersubjective plot, challenging the imaginary of the painter as a solitary hero of post-work. Nevertheless, in general terms, painting appeared those episodes as an object of study unto itself,impelling the artist to invent strictly pictorial socio-artistic collaborations or investigations. The novelty of Alÿs’s recent series is their integration of those two planes in an amalgamation of sensations and media, where painting ends up being a moment that both collaborates in and is separated from
the task of intervening in a specific site. The result is painting’s contribution to a tightly woven but always-decomposable fabric of elements. Video, action, testimony, publications, documents and objects interact with the paintings in order to project a polyhedral view of a variety of scenarios that have become key precisely because of their borderline, peripheral condition, paradigmatic of our conflicts.

Maintained in a discrete format and beneath a figurative or abstract guise of a treacherous innocence, Alÿs’s paintings are not his action-stories, but rather a parallel thought process that occurs when the artist imagines, plans or reflects on the creation of one of his projects. Alÿs’s paintings are both autonomous and accessories to the project that emits them. On the one hand, they appear as a parallel space of intervention that concentrates the forces of desire to which his collaborative actions allude, and on the other hand, as a travelogue that keeps ideas beyond action, projecting them toward an indefinite future. Alÿs’s actions, and the multiplicity of videos and documents that they generate, are never the realization of his pictorial ideas. Neither are the paintings the direct representation of the actions, but rather an equivalent artistic process submitted to a variety of figures and tropes. Perhaps it would be apposite to suggest that for Francis Alÿs, paintings are the shadows of his acts.

Beyond (and Before) the Picture

One facet that blurs the pantomiming of the “death or resurrection of painting”, which the art world recurrently produces as a simultaneously paranoiac and commercial discourse, is the way in which determined practices of painting, such as Francis Alÿs’s, charge painting with a radically anti-modernist task: to offer itself to a constant interlocution and articulation with other forms of artistic practice. The sensationalism of painting’s fate, and the hysteria with which it is meant to force us to restore it to a virtual monarchy over artistic media, tend to distract us from considering, instead, the changes of its function and the possibilities opened by its new articulation with other forms of visuality. Once one withdraws the mythology of an apocalyptic end or a glorious restoration in order to judge pictorial production, there opens the possible experience of a painting that is reinserted in the social circuits from which the autonomy of modern artistic practice aspired to liberate it.

Seen from this perspective, it is possible to understand the guise – at least double – under which Francis Alÿs’s pictorial investigation has occurred. In the first place, his pre-eminently unprofessional study of painting emphasizes the ways in which it continues to be an agent that constructs the fabric of our societies. Hence the artist emphasizes painting’s existence as part of economic circuits, cultural migrations, and long-term, long-distance historical processes. Secondly, Alÿs has opted to pursue projects in which paintings aspire to a special sociability, capable of resonating and interacting with and commenting upon other areas of his labor. Hence they are also frequently presented, on a formal plane, in ensembles or temporary combinations that, unlike their antecedents in the art of collage, admit the possibility of being dispersed without any of their components thereby being diminished. Alÿs’s pictorial groupings are machineries in the sense that, by contrast to the art installations of the late twentieth century, they do not “aestheticize the ordinary,” but rather form amalgamations in which various languages and devices are contemplated as crowds, or as cogs in a larger whole.

A very important part of the mystification surrounding painting’s murder comes from confusing its existence with that of the apparatus that almost exclusively represented it in Western modernity; the easel painting (2). In part because modernity also constructed our referents for commerce, art history and the museum, by means of the reduction of painting to the status of the portable painting, limited by a “frame,” our discourse about pictoriality appears to be possessed by a problematic essentialism. Nevertheless, today it is increasingly apparent that the “painting” is no less dated, discursively and socially demarcated an apparatus than is the very notion of “art.”

Thomas Puttfarken has argued that the idea that the easel painting is a sort of “portable organism,” as the theorists of cubism put it, pertains only to the late power of easel painting in high modernism (3). The late condition of the easel painting as a self-sufficient material entity resulted largely from the fact that planimetric, totalizing “pictorial composition” (so called) is also a modern convention. The decisive thing at the time of the Renaissance was not the supposed internal “unity” of the work. On the contrary, the presentation of the works of Raphael or Veronese tends to produce images that are continuous with the spatiality of the observer, in terms of volume and depth; therefore, they do not follow a planimetric organization. The appearance itself of the notion of “Quadro” in criticism and art does not guarantee that the works that we see transfigured into portable objects in the museum behave as organic, autonomous, and definitive units. Quite the contrary, the pictorial work was traditionally understood as correlating to and coexisting not only with the architectural, sculptural, ritual and interior decorative elements with which it was included, but also with other bodies of painted images, as well as different technical and conceptual constructions. In that
An important number of the works that we so carefully examine in museums around the world are actually fragments extracted from the destruction of larger sets of images, such as altars, chapels, or palaces. The coordination of various images within the groupings of Christian churches made it possible to connect and superimpose not only sequences of scenes, but also heterogeneous forms of representation and divergent temporalities. The very form in which Diego Velázquez’s Las Meninas (1656) incorporates allusions to the object world to which the painting is related, such as its mirrors and curtains, indicates that even in the seventeenth century, a painting was not conceived as an orphaned soloist. As Federico Zuccaro argued in his treatise Idea of Painters, Sculptors and Architects (1607), “To our art of painting not only does the consideration of things painted on a wall or canvas belong, but also the consideration of the actual canvas or wall, matter of this form.”

It would not be until the seventeenth century, particularly with the rise of academic practices and discourses in France, that artists like Nicolas Poussin would invent the notion of painting as a philosophical activity, where such conceptions as the idea of a “composition,” “arrangement,” or distribution of the internal parts of the painting came to redirect the relationships of elements of the pictorial works toward an interplay that was fundamentally internal to the frame, which ultimately serves to translate an internal or mental image. (5) The emergence of the French idea of the “painting” or tableau in the seventeenth century appears, as Puttfarken insists on underscoring, as a “rupture with previous art and theory.” That it was immediately exposed to other languages like English, by way of the texts of Lord Shaftesbury, does not take away from the fact that the apparent unity of the “meaning and design” that would henceforth have to define the idea of the easel work depended on the exclusion of the previous conceptions of combination, relationship, or montage in painted images. (6)

In any case, the reign of the painting as a unitary, autonomous object was relatively short. If we follow the consequences of Didi–Huberman’s research on the multiplicity of apparatuses, constellations, “reading boxes,” collections, and temporary works from the early twentieth century that were opposed to the epistemological and sensuous unity of the painting, we will be able to affirm that the sets of images by artists like Francis Alÿs corresponds to a long-term epistemological change. The experience of multiplicity, mobility, provisionality, and reading of the Atlas of Images, as part of a quotation disturbance of the imagination” of the twentieth-century artistic and intellectual avant-garde (7), actually brought about the dissolution of the formalist and narrative unity of the easel painting, in order to give away, among other things, to the idea of the work as an operating “table” or a presentation of images and the “physical support for a labor that can always be corrected, modified, if not begun anew,” on “a surface of transient encounters and positions.” (8). That provisionality and ductility of elements is, of course, the transformation of the visual and cultural object into a space analogous to thought, which functions through tentative groupings and mutating ensembles (9). In this sense, the contemporary work of art rejects the idea of the unity of style and medium, in order, rather, to aspire to serve as a figure of thought.

**Proposition-expedition**

Throughout his entire original career as an architect and, subsequently, as an artist who, among other things, also paint, Francis Alÿs has had a specially trained eye for detecting, thinking about, and activating pictorial works that operate in the form of social crowds, hierarchical and reproductive sets, or circuits of use, physical displacement, or collaborative production. As a thinker who has been pondering and criticizing modernization, and its rationalist prejudices, his gaze is constantly attracted by apparently “minor” pictorial genres precisely because he has not adjusted himself to the unitary, formalist and philosophically grandiloquent idea of the easel painting. His sensibility reacts first and foremost with regard to the images that operate in relation to previous sets (or that signal their being torn apart): miniature books, popular copies that suggest a family of images, commercial sign paintings, or votive offerings and predellas that suggest, even to the most superficial observation, that they have been broken off from altars and complex visual groups. It becomes apparent that Alÿs always thinks of images as part of social wholes and provisional groupings, in which meaning appears through reiteration, variation, interruption, and transformation, rather than through formal continuity and cohesion. It also becomes apparent that Alÿs’s painting is, as it were, a painting of predellas: a production of visual “footnotes” to a greater whole (10), which, in this case, is no longer the icon of the altar, but rather the action of a specific project of intervention.

This vocation for crowd works is expressed perfectly in Alÿs’s emphasis on installing his projects as sets made up of images, films, objects, work tables and paintings, always denying the self-sufficiency of any one of those isolated materials. Since at least the year 2002, when he installed the documentation, vid-
eos and objects related to the massive action When Faith Moves Mountains at the former station of Desarnparados, in Lima, Peru, Álys has been refining a series of apparatuses for presenting his actions, involving the coordination and coexistence of a multitude of media or objects. Frequently situated around a video installation or a video that serves as a central, communicative story, Álys displays paintings, diagrams, sculptures, notes, photographs and material gestures that are the fruit or evidence of physical or symbolic actions. By contrast to the notion of the installation as a “total work,” Álys’s presentations are discontinuous, fortuitous, and mutable “texts” that are transformed and revised from one presentation to the next. The complex levity and visual and conceptual agility with which Álys relays his projects, ideas and experiences are all too-eloquent proof of the way in which each painting, annotation, or video appears as part of a provisional society of signs.

It is in this sense that Álys’s painting never appears enthroned as a queen of formalism or a fetish of artisticness. Its modest format seems to have been chosen in order to dissuade us from attributing to it the centrality of an icon. It goes from being the pendant (twin and enemy) of his filmic works to following an unknown path. His painting, in other words, is one art among others. It is a painting subordinated to a democratic order, as it were, of signs and media, where, at times it may appear as an isolated individual, only to serve later as part of a corporation.

The epistemological and rhetorical roles of Álys’s paintings and drawings are not standardized, either. In fact, in his recent projects it would seem that the artist has taken on his practice of painting as an exploration of the possibilities of a determined mode of thinking—painting in relation to his projects and films. The set of those modalities of thought in painting forms a practically structural diagram, as systematic as the algebraic operations between the poetic, ethical, aesthetic and political aspects of his social interventions, and the way in which, throughout the decades, many of his works have pursued the complex dialectic between work, art, leisure, and inactivity. They posit a catalogue of ways of relating manually created images to the wide variety of ways of thinking about images offered by the genealogy of the cinematic and photographic media.

Whether in their mythological, analogical, or profoundly ambivalent mimetic-abstract modalities, Álys’s paintings are, if the irony may be forgiven, a sort of “action painting,” not in the sense of the comparison of the pictorial gestures with moments of bodily dance as Harold Rosenberg postulated in his classic article on abstract expressionism in 1952 (11), but rather in a practice that, like his actions, we consume equally as a lived process, figure of thought, and passage in time. In addition to a body of work, they are a parallel activity that reinforces and exceeds its place as the surface and sign contained in each painting. Thus, too, their operation needs to be expressed in a range of forms of exhibition, where the presentation of each of Álys’s projects requires the presentation of a crowd of images that continuously centralizes and disperses the visual story of an experience.

The result of those modes of presentation is to offer painting as constituting a proposition-expedition within the logic that Álys, from very early on, symbolized by walking along the street while letting paint drip from a punctured can. That action, The Leak (1995−), which Álys has carried out in a variety of locations and variations, endorses in each one of its iterations a conception of painting as an act that is localized and made meaningful by its context, an idea of painting that, indeed, turns into an art which, far from being untouchable and intangible like a galaxy, becomes but one of the traces left behind by our bodies.

(1) This is an argument that I originally advanced in the text “Action/Fiction,” included in the book Francis Álys (Antibes: Musée Picasso, 2001), pp. 5-25; and also in the text “Fable Power,” in Francis Álys (London: Phaidon Press, 2007), 58-106.

(2) I want to thank my colleagues Dr. Jaime Cuadriello and Dr. Patricia Díaz Cayeros, from the Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas at UNAM, for their invaluable help in preparing the following section of my text.


(6) With regard to the condensation of the work as a “machine” produced by the ensemble or combination of many pieces in a painting, in theorists like Du Fresnoy and De Piles, see Puttfarken, Op. Cit., 280.

(8) Ibid, 18.

(9) Ibid, 177-180.

(10) This is particularly clear in relation to Alys's interest in making works that involve collecting or citing, as if he were taking into account the etymological origin of the action of colligere, that is, collecting, which is precisely the work of citing. In this regard see Stoichita, Op. Cit., 130.

Walking in the City
Michel de Certeau

The Practice of Everyday Life, a book written by Michel de Certeau in 1980, explores how the ordinary man subtracts himself silently from the conformation implemented by consumerist objects, languages, laws, and rituals.

Through the practice of everyday life, man is able to deflect objects and codes. Thus, reclaiming space and usage in a personal manner. The following text presents excerpts from Walking in the City, the 5th chapter of the book. In this chapter, De Certeau confronts the unified city to the walker. Moving in ways that are not tactical nor determined by the strategic grid of the streets, the latter resists the planned city. Therefore, the walker redirects strategies of governments and other institutional bodies. By rerouting the regulated scheme of the city, pedestrians are writing it. In doing so, each pedestrian produces a personal language, perpetually adding to the city a new layer of meaning. Walking becomes a generator of words.

“linking acts and footsteps, opening meanings and directions, these words operate in the name of an emptying-out and wearing away of their primary role. They become liberated spaces that can be occupied”. Furthermore, he argues that the city is actualized only when you step in it. He declares a “rhetoric of walking”: meaning is revealed as it is created. The city is then assimilated to Saussure’s Langue, while walking in it in a certain path becomes a Parole.

(...) The ordinary practitioners of the city live « down below », below the thresholds at which visibility begins. They walk – an elementary form of this experience of the city; they are walkers, wandersmänner, whose bodies follow the thick and thins of an urban “text” they write without being able to read it. These practitioners make use of spaces that cannot be seen; their knowledge of them is as blind as that of lovers in each other’s arms. The paths that correspond in this intertwining, unrecognized poems in which each body is an element signed by many others, elude legibility. It is as though the practices organizing a bustling city were characterized by their blindness. (1) The networks of these moving, intersecting writings compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator, shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces: in relation to representations, it remains daily and indefinitely other.

Escaping the imaginary totalizations produced by the eye, the everyday has a certain strangeness that does not surface, or whose surface is only its upper limit, outlining itself against the visible. Within this ensemble, I shall try to locate the practices that are foreign to the “geometrical” or “geographical” space of visual, panoptic, or theoretical constructions. These practices of space refer to a specific form of operations (“ways of operating”), to “another spatiality” (2) (an “anthropological”, poetic and mythic experience of space), and to an opaque and blind mobility characteristic of the bustling city. A migrational, or metaphorical, city thus slips into the clear text of the planned and readable city.

1. From the concept of the city to urban practices (...) 2. The chorus of idle footsteps

“the goddess can be recognized by her step” Virgil, Aeneid, I, 405
Their story begins on ground level, with footsteps. They are myriad, but do not compose a series. They cannot be counted because each unit has a qualitative character: a style of tactile apprehension and kinesthetic appropriation. Their swarming mass is an innumerable collection of singularities. Their intertwined paths give their shape to spaces. They weave places together. In that respect, pedestrian movements form one of these “real systems whose existence in fact makes up the city. “ (3) They are not localized; it is rather they that spatialize. They are no more inserted within a container than those Chinese characters speakers sketch out on their hands with their fingertips.

It is true that the operations of walking on can be traced on city maps in such a way as to transcribe their paths (here well-trodden, there very faint) and their trajectories (going this way and not that). But these thick or thin curves only refer, like words, to the absence of what has passed by. Surveys of routes miss what was: the act itself of passing by. The operation of walking, wandering, or “window shopping,” that is, the activity of passers-by, is transformed into points that draw a totalizing and reversible line on the map. They allow us to grasp only a relic set in the nowhen of a surface of projection. Itself visible, it has the effect of making invisible the operation that made it possible. These fixations constitute procedures for forgetting. The trace left behind is
Pedestrian speech acts

A comparison with the speech act will allow us to go further (4) and not limit ourselves to the critique of graphic representations alone, looking from the shores of legibility toward an inaccessible beyond. The act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language or to the statements uttered. (5) At the most elementary level, it has a triple “enunciative” function: it is a process of appropriation of the topo-graphical system on the part of the pedestrian (just as the speaker appropriates and takes on the language); it is a spatial acting-out of the place (just as the speech act is an acoustic acting-out of language); and it implies relations among differentiated positions, that is, among pragmatic “contracts” in the form of movements (just as verbal enunciation is an “allocation”, “posits another opposite” the speaker and puts contracts between interlocutors into action). (6) It thus seems possible to give a preliminary definition of walking as a space of enunciation.

We could moreover extend this problematic to the relations between the act of writing and the written text, and even transpose it to the relationships between the “hand” (the touch and the tale of the paint-brush [Ie et la geste du pinceau] and the finished painting (forms, colors, etc.). At first isolated in the area of verbal communication, the speech act turns out to find only one of its applications there, and its linguistic modality is merely the first determination of a much more general distinction between the forms used in a system and the ways of using this system (i.e., rules), that is, between two “different worlds,” since “the same things” are considered from two opposite formal viewpoints.

Considered from this angle, the pedestrian speech act has three characteristics which distinguish it at the outset from the spatial system: the present, the discrete, the “phatic.”

First, if it is true that a spatial order organizes an ensemble of possibilities (e.g., by a place in which one can move) and interdictions (e.g., by a wall that prevents one from going further), then the walker actualizes some of these possibilities. In that way, he makes them exist as well as emerge. But he also moves them about and he invents others, since the crossing, drifting away, or improvisation of walking privilege, transform or abandon spatial elements. Thus, Charlie Chaplin multiplies the possibilities of his cane: he does other things with the same thing and he goes beyond the limits that the determinants of the object set on its utilization. In the same way, the walker transforms each spatial signifier into something else. And if on the one hand he actualizes only a few of the possibilities fixed by the constructed order (he goes only here and not there), on the other he increases the number of possibilities (for example, by creating shortcuts and detours) and prohibitions (for example, he forbids himself to take paths generally considered accessible or even obligatory). He thus makes a selection. “The user of a city picks out certain fragments of the statement in order to actualize them in secret.” (7)

He thus creates a discreteness, whether by making choices among the signifiers of the spatial “language” or by displacing them through the use he makes of them. He condemns certain places to inertia or disappearance and composes with other spatial “turns of phrase” that are “rare,” “accidental” or illegitimate. But that already leads into a rhetoric of walking.

In the framework of enunciation, the walker constitutes, in relation to his position, both a near and a far, a here and a there. To the fact that the adverbs here and there are the indicators of the locutionary seat in verbal communication (8) – a coincidence that reinforces the parallelism between linguistic and pedestrian enunciation – we must add that this location (here-there) (necessarily implied by walking and indicative of a present appropriation of space by an “I”) also has the function of introducing an other in relation to this “I” and of thus establishing a conjunctive and disjunctive articulation of places. I would stress particularly the “phatic” aspect, by which I mean the function, isolated by Malinowski and Jakobson, of terms that initiate, maintain, or interrupt contact, such as “hello,” “well, well,” etc. (9) Walking which alternately follows a path and has followers, creates a mobile organicity in the environment, a sequence of phatic topoi. And if it is true that the phatic function, which is an effort to ensure communication, is already characteristic of the language of talking birds, just as it constitutes the “first verbal function acquired by children,” it is not surprising that it also gambols, goes on all fours, dances, and walks about, with a light or heavy step, like a series of “hellos” in an echoing labyrinth, anterior or parallel to informative speech.

The modalities of pedestrian enunciation which a plane representation on a map brings out could be analyzed. They include the kinds of relationship this enunciation entertains with particular paths (or “statements”) by according them a truth value (“alethic” modalities of the necessary, the impossible, the possible, or the contingent), an epistemological value (“epistemic” modalities of the certain, the excluded, the plausible, or the questionable) or finally an ethical or legal value (“de-ontic” modalities of the
obligatory, the forbidden, the permitted, or the optional). (10) Walking affirms, suspects, tries out, transgresses, respects, etc., the trajectories it “speaks.” All the modalities sing a part in this chorus, changing from step to step, stepping in through proportions, sequences, and intensities which vary according to the time, the path taken and the walker. These enunciatory operations are of an unlimited diversity. They therefore cannot be reduced to their graphic trail.

**Walking rhetorics**

The walking of passers-by offers a series of turns (tours) and detours that can be compared to “turns of phrase” or “stylistic figures.” There is a rhetoric of walking. The art of “turning” phrases finds an equivalent in an art of composing a path (tourner un parcours). Like ordinary language, (11) this art implies and combines styles and uses. Style specifies “a linguistic structure that manifests on the symbolic level...an individual’s fundamental way of being in the world” (12), it connotes a singular. Use defines the social phenomenon through which a system of communication manifests itself in actual fact; it refers to a norm. Style and use both have to with a “way of operating” (of speaking, walking, etc.), but style involves a peculiar processing of the symbolic, while use refers to elements of a code. They intersect to form a style of use, a way of being and a way of operating. (13)

By analyzing this “modern art of everyday expression” as it appears in accounts of spatial practices, (14) J.-F. Augoyard discerns in it two especially fundamental stylistic figures: synecdoche and asyndeton. The predominance of these two figures seems to me to indicate, in relation to two complementary poles, a formal structure of these practices. Synecdoche consists in “using a word in a sense which is part of another meaning of the same word.” (15) In essence, it names a part instead of the whole which includes it. Thus “sail” is taken for “ship” in the expression “a fleet of fifty sails”; in the same way, a brick shelter or a hill is taken for the park in the narration of a trajectory. Asyndeton is the suppression of linking words such as conjunctions and adverbs, either within a sentence or between sentences. In the same way, in walking it selects and fragments the space traversed; it skips over links and whole parts that it omits. From this point of view, every walk constantly leaps, or skips like a child, hopping on one foot. It practices the ellipsis of conjunctive loci.

In reality, these two pedestrian figures are related. Synecdoche expands a spatial element in order to make it play the role of a “more” (a totality) and take its place (the bicycle or the piece of furniture in a store window stands for a whole street or neighborhood). Asyndeton, by elision, creates a “less,” opens gaps in the spatial continuum, and retains only selected parts of it that amount almost to relics. Synecdoche re-places totalities by fragments (a less in the place of a more); asyndeton disconnects them by eliminating the conjunctive or the consecutive (nothing in place of something). Synecdoche makes more dense: it amplifies the detail and miniaturizes the whole. Asyndeton cuts out: it undoes continuity and undercuts its plausibility. A space treated in this way and shaped by practices is transformed into enlarged singularities and separate islands. (16) Through these swellings, shrinkings, and fragmentations, that is, through these rhetorical operations a spatial phrasing of an analogical (composed of juxtaposed citations) and elliptical (made of gaps, lapses, and allusions) type is created. For the technological system of a coherent and totalizing space that is “linked” and simultaneous, the figures of pedestrian rhetoric substitute trajectories that have a mythical structure, at least if one understands a “myth” a discourse relative to the place/nowhere (or origin) of concrete existence, a story jerry-built out of elements taken from common sayings, an allusive and fragmentary story whose gaps mesh with the social practices it symbolizes.

3. **Myths: what “makes things go”**

The figures of these movements (synecdoches, ellipses, etc.) characterize both a “symbolic order of the unconscious” and “certain typical processes of subjectivity manifested in discourse.” (17) The similarity between “discourse” (18) and dreams (19) has to with their use of the same “stylistic procedure”, it therefore includes pedestrian practices as well. The “ancient catalog of tropes” that from Freud to Benveniste has furnished an appropriate inventory for the rhetoric of the first two registers of expression is equally valid for the third. If there is a parallelism, it is not only because enunciation is dominant in these three areas, but also because its discursive (verbalized, dreamed, or walked) development is organized as a relation between the place from which it proceeds (an origin) and the nowhere it produces (a way of “going by”).

From this point on view, after having compared pedestrian processes to linguistic formations, we can bring them back down in the direction of oneric figuration, or at least discover on that other side what, in a spatial practice, is inseparable from the dreamed place. To walk is to lack a place. It is the indefinite process of being absent and in search of a proper. The moving about that the city multiplies and concentrates makes the city itself an immense social experience of lacking a place—an experience that is, to be sure, broken up into countless tiny deportations (displacements and walks), compensated for by the relationships and intersections...
of these exoduses that intertwine and create an urban fabric, and placed under the sign of what ought to be, ultimately, the place but is only a name, the City. The identity furnished by this place is all the more symbolic (named) because, in spite of the inequality of its citizens’ positions and profits, there is only a pullulation of passer-by, a network of residences temporarily appropriated by pedestrian traffic, a shuffling among pretenses of the proper, a universe of rented spaces haunted by a nowhere or by dreamed-of places.

Names and symbols

An indication of the relationship that spatial practices entertain with that absence is furnished precisely by their manipulations of and with “proper” names. The relationships between the direction of a walk (le sens de la marche) and the meaning of words (le sens des mots) situate two sorts of apparently contrary movements, one extrovert (to walk is to go outside), the other introvert (a mobility under the stability of the signifier). Walking is in fact determined by semantic tropisms; it is attracted and repelled by nominations whose meaning is not clear, whereas the city, for its part, is transformed for many people into a “desert” in which the meaningless, indeed the terrifying, no longer takes the form of shadows but becomes, as in Genet’s plays, an implacable light that produces this urban text without obscurities, which is created by a technocratic power everywhere and which puts the city-dweller under control (under the control of what? No one knows): “The city keeps us under its gaze, which one cannot bear without feeling dizzy,” says a resident of Rouen. (20) In the spaces brutally lit by an alien reason, proper names carve out pockets of hidden and familiar meanings. They “make sense”, in other words, they are the impetus of movements, like vocations and calls that turn or divert an itinerary by giving it a meaning (or a direction) (sens) that was previously unforeseen. These names create a nowhere in places; they change them into passages.

Linking acts and footsteps, opening meanings and directions, these words operate in the name of an emptying-out and wearing-away of their primary role. They become liberated spaces that can be occupied. A rich indetermination gives them, by means of a semantic rarefaction, the function of articulating a second, poetic geography on top of the geography of the literal, forbidden or permitted meaning. They insinuate other routes into the functionalist and historical order of movement. Walking follows them: “I fill this great empty space with a beautiful name.” (21) People are put in motion by the remaining relics of meaning, and sometimes by their waste products, the inverted remainders of great ambitions. (22) Things that amount to nothing, or almost nothing, symbolize and orient walkers’ steps: names that have ceased precisely to be “proper.”

Childhood and metaphors of places

Metaphor consists in giving the thing a name that belongs to something else. Aristotle, Poetics 1457b

The memorable is that which can be dreamed about a place. In this place that is a palimpsest, subjectivity is already linked to the absence that structures it as existence and makes it “be there,” “Dasein. But as we have seen, this being-there acts only in spatial practices, that is, in ways of moving into something different (manières de passer à l’autre). It must ultimately be seen as the repetition, in diverse metaphors, of a decisive and originary experience, that of the child’s differentiation from the mother’s body. It is through that experience that the possibility of space and of a localization (a “not everything”) of the subject is inaugurated. We need not return to the famous analysis Freud made of this matrix-experience by following the game played by his eighteen-month-old grandson, who threw a reel away from himself, crying oh-oh- oh in pleasure, fort! (i.e., “over there,” “gone,” or “no more”) and then pulled it back with the piece of string attached to it with delighted da! (i.e., “here,” “back again,,”). (23) it suffices here to remember this (perilous and satisfied) process of detachment from indifferntiation in the mother’s body, whose substitute is the spool: this departure of the mother’s body, whose substitute is the spool: this departure of the maternal object “go away” and make oneself disappear (insofar as one considers oneself identical with that object), making it possible to be there (because) without the other but in a necessary relation to what has disappeared; this manipulation is an “original spatial structure.”

No doubt one could trace this differentiation further back, as far as the naming that separates the foetus identified as masculine from his mother—but how about the female foetus, who is from this very moment introduced into another relationship to space? In the initiatory game, just as in the “joyful activity” of the child who, standing before a mirror, sees itself as one (it is she or he, seen as a whole) but another (that, an image with which the child identifies itself), 24 what counts is the process of this “spatial captation” that inscribes the passage toward the other as the law of being and the law of place. To practice space is thus to repeat the joyful and silent experience of childhood; it is, in a place, to
be other and to move toward the other. be other and to move toward the other.

Thus begins the walk that Freud compares to the trampling underfoot of the mother-land.(25) This relationship of oneself to oneself governs the internal alterations of the place (the relations among its strata) or the pedestrian unfolding of the stories accumulated in a place (moving about the city and travelling). The childhood experience that determines spatial practices later develops its effects, proliferates, floods private and public spaces, undoes their readable surfaces, and creates within the planned city a “metaphorical” or mobile city, like the one Kandinsky dreamed of: “a great city built accordingly to all the rules of architecture and then suddenly shaken by a force that defies all calculation.”(26)

(1) Descartes, in his Regulae, had already made the blind man the guarantor of knowledge of things and places against the illusions and deceptions of vision.

(2) M. Merleau-Ponty, Phénoménologie de la perception (Paris : Gallimard Tel, 1976), 332-333.


(11) See Paul Lemaire’s analyses, Les Signes sauvages. Une philosophie du langage ordinaire (Ottawa : Université d’Ottawa et Université Saint-Paul, 1981), in particular the introduction.


(14) Augoyard, Pas à pas.


(16) On this space that practices organize into « islands », see P. Bourdieu, Esquisse d’une théorie de la pratique (Genève : Droz, 1972), 215, etc.; “Le Sens pratique », 51-52.

(17) Benveniste, problèmes, I, 86-87

(18) For Benveniste, “discourse is language considered as assumed by the person who is speaking and in the condition of intersubjectivity” (ibid., 266)


(20) Ph. Dard, F. Desbons et al., La Ville, symbolique en souffrance (Paris : CEP, 1975), 200

(21) Joachim du Bellay, Regrets, 189.
(22) For example, Sarcelles, the name of a great urbanistic ambition (near Paris), has taken on a symbolic value for the inhabitants of the town by becoming in the eyes of France as a whole the example of a total failure. This extreme avatar provides its citizens with the “prestige” of an exceptional identity.

(23) See the two analyses provided by Freud in The Interpretation of Dreams and Beyond the Pleasure Principle, trans. J. Strachey (New York: Liveright, 1980); and also Sami-Ali, L’Espace Imaginaire (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), 42-64é


Perspectives on the Relation between History and Fiction
Olivia Chirobocea
University of Constanca, Romania, Philologica Jassyensia, issue XIII, nr. 2 (26), 2017, p. 191–202

Olivia Chirobocea, in “Perspectives on the Relation between History and Fiction”, sheds light on the crisis of history’s perception and study by recounting not only the intense and continuous assimilation of fictive narratives and fetishisms into historical fictions and adaptions but also how fiction has always been a part of historical narrative construction, as far back as the integration of history into mythology in ancient times.

The 20th century particularly played a strong role in romanticizing history and rendering attractive to consumers and audiences through cinema and fiction writing, yet the complexities and issues with historical studies goes far beyond the fictive fantasies of the cinematic world and spread to the entire discipline of historiography and academics, not to mention the multitude of ideologies and processes that have fragmented history into numerous “histories” that do not necessarily relate to one another, but even compete and negate each other.

1. Introduction

Up until the 19th century, history was a blend of fact and fiction, myth and reality, while the study of history was more an art than a science. History generally meant major events such as wars or revolutions and insisted on important rulers, glorifying founding legends in an attempt to instill patriotism and legitimize identity. Historians usually left out what they considered minor events, inconsequential people or unimportant social concerns. History was considered a form of art and the ornaments of the medieval history books come as evidence.

In Ancient times, the writing of history was a mixture of fact and fiction with prominent references to divine intervention. An example is the writings about the Trojan War or the founding of Rome. However, the ancient Greeks (Thucydides) were also the first to propose a historical method that looked at cause and effect rather than divine intervention. They also regarded history as cyclical, with recurring events. However, the Middle Ages and Renaissance returned to the religious perspective, with Saint Augustine as an influential promoter of this approach.

The 19th century, through the works of the German philosopher and historian Friedrich Hegel, brought a secular approach in the study of history. History became queen of the social sciences, a position justified by the strong influence of ideologies (rooted in history, in the past), which played an important role until well into the 20th century (communism, Nazism) and the emancipation and formation of the modern nations (also justified by their past). The 19th century reorganized and reformulated the concept of history which was theorized for the first time and for which a scientific method was proposed (White 2006: 25). It was also the moment when history was divorced from the literary fiction (novels) as literature became history’s other in a double sense: it pretended to have discovered a dimension of reality that historians would never recognize and it developed techniques of writing that undermined the authority of history’s favored realistic or plain style of writing (White 2006: 25).

The 20th century marked a major change of perspective on history as many historians discovered the necessity for an interdisciplinary approach in order to broaden the image, fill in the gaps and understand the past better. Thus, history ramified into various branches such as cultural history (Annales School), psychohistory, social history (or History of Everyday Life) and others. Also, history was interpreted from different points of view as the idea of multiple histories became prominent. Thus, Marxists interpreted history from the point of view of economic resources, Feminists sought to make woman visible in the past by studying the female experience, while postmodernists challenged the validity and need for the study of history based on interpretation of sources. The importance of history in the 20th century subsided considerably as people no longer felt the need to justify their identity in the past and live more in the present. This shift made theorists such as Francis Fukuyama proclaim the end of history in his 1992 book, The End of History and the Last Man.

2. What is history?

While some theorists believe that the time we live in is an ahistorical period others think we are steeped down in history (Boia 2002: 18). Whether the former or the latter theory is true, history seems to engulf us everywhere we look.
The 20th century opened a world of possibilities for traveling and tourism and thus more people than ever can go anywhere they want. They can visit the pyramids, the ruins of ancient Rome, the sites of the Second World War, countless monuments, battlefields, old castles, fortresses, temples and other relics and artifacts of ages long gone. Apparently we are constantly aware of the presence of history through tourism, movies, popular TV channels, books and other sources.

In spite of the fact that history, as a school discipline, is much maligned by students who generally find it boring, the current media have managed to bring it into the spotlight with cinematic revivals that offer fresh reinterpretations of previously considered established historical facts. Cinema and TV have apparently revived an obsolete genre: the historical film. Recent years have registered unbelievable box-office and television successes with films about ancient heroes and exploits, medieval times, colonial America and the Second World War, which is probably one of the most screen-friendly historical event, due to its complexity. How these films are produced, how accurate they are and why they appeal so much to the general public is a topic for a different debate. However, the fact remains that their subject matter is based on or inspired from what we term in one word, history.

But what is actually history? To the layman, history most likely means museums with relics, ruins, battles and events that occurred a long time ago. History thus equals the past and who, in our consumerist and over-technologized 21st century society, looks with reverence or interest to the past? To most people history is interesting as long as it is entertaining. Scholars, on the other hand, have a more complex view. This view relates to the word history itself and to what it refers. History is not just the past, it is not just events that happened two thousand or two hundred years ago. History is made every day. Any political decision that influences people’s lives, for example, is history in the making. First of all, the word history has been deconstructed and shown to have several meanings. History refers to the past, the present, the sources, the narrative, and it also refers to historiography and the school discipline. After a complex discussion and a summary of the main theories on the topic, Keith Jenkins offers the following definition of history:

History is a shifting, problematic discourse, ostensibly about an aspect of the world, the past, that is produced by a group of present-minded workers (overwhelmingly in our culture salaried historians) who go about their work in mutually recognizable ways that are epistemologically, methodologically, ideologically and practically positioned and whose products, once in circulation, are subject to a series of uses and abuses that are logically infinite but which in actuality generally correspond to a range of power bases that exist at any given moment and which structure and distribute the meanings of histories along a dominant-marginal spectrum (Jenkins 2003: 31–32).

Jenkins determines thus that history is a discourse about the past, therefore history as discourse and the past as object of this discourse are two separate things. “The past and history float free of each other” (Jenkins 2003: 7) and this is simply because an object can be read differently by different discourses.

The second problem that arises in relation to the historians and how they can put the past and history together. There are three theoretical areas that come together in this endeavor: epistemology, methodology and ideology (Jenkins 2003: 12). In terms of theories of knowledge, Keith Jenkins shows that history as construct exists because of its very “epistemological fragility” as, if it were possible to know very clearly what happened in the past, there would be no point in the many rewritings and ever new versions of a single event or personality or epoch from the past and history would stop (Jenkins 2003: 13). There are four important epistemological limits that allow history to continue. The first argument is that no historian can ever recount precisely what happened in the past as its volume is insurmountable. The second argument is that “no account can re-cover the past as it was because the past was not an account but events and situations. As the past has gone, no account can ever be checked against it but only against other accounts” (Jenkins 2003: 14). The third argument regarding the epistemological limitations of history is that, in view of the previous point, history is nothing but “personal construct, a manifestation of the historian’s perspective as a «narrator»” (Jenkins 2003: 14). This is a point where objectivity comes into question.

The first three points made by Keith Jenkins about the epistemological limitations of history indicate that the past can only be recovered in fragments, while his fourth point shows that “we in a way know more about the past than the people who lived in it” (Jenkins 2003: 15) because historians now have access to sources that had been unavailable before and they may discover things that were concealed from the people of some particular historical period. Jenkins’s conclusion, after the detailed explanations on epistemology, is “that history is a shifting discourse constructed by historians and that from the existence of the past no one reading is entailed: change the gaze, shift the perspective and new readings appear” (Jenkins 2003: 16).
Historians continue to search for the ultimate historical truth and also strive for objectivity. In view of what has been said before, it seems a futile struggle for an illusory goal. Many self-respecting historians have been considered referential and whose texts are used in schools believe that this struggle for objectivity and search for the truth is possible if it is based on a method with clear rules and procedures, like any science. This is supposed to eliminate the constant interpretation factor, as well as the ideological hindrances. The problem that arises though is the common sense question: which method is better? However, even if one manages to choose among the multitude of methods and theories (a few examples could be: Hegel, Marx, Popper, Elton, Collingwood, feminists, neo-Marxists, empiricists, structuralists or post-structuralists etc.), the next question is what criteria one uses in making their choice, or as Jenkins puts it, “How could one know which method would lead to the «truer» past?” (Jenkins 2003: 21).

All these methods are quite different but in spite of their eclecticism they do have something in common: they all share concepts, the historical concepts that are used in the process of producing history. Common concepts such as time, evidence, cause and effect, empathy, continuity and change are easily recognizable as the ones that determine our perception of history. In fact, these concepts are not as universal or as old as one might think and they are not necessarily the concepts that emerge from the historians’ methods. Actually, as Jenkins points, these concepts have been used in recent decades on educational grounds, in schools for a better understanding of the subject matter, “for what might happen if other concepts were used to organize the (dominant) field: structure-agency, over-determination, conjuncture, uneven development, centre-periphery, dominant-marginal, base-superstructure, rupture, genealogy, mentalité, hegemony, élite, paradigm, etc.?” (Jenkins 2003: 20). This is a matter of ideology, the third theoretical area that contributes alongside epistemology and methodology to putting past and history together.

Keith Jenkins also shows that the distinction between history as such and ideological history does not exist, even though the dichotomy is widely used: “History is never for itself, it is always for someone” (Jenkins 2003: 21). History is an ideological construct, which means it is constantly subjected to re-visitations according to the respective power relations. The messages are perpetually changed because both the dominant and the subordinate have their own interests and seek to exert influence on particular spheres. Given these arguments, the proper question to ask is not “what is history?” but “who is history for?” Meaning is different according to the particular group that interprets history and selects the needed elements.

Michel Foucault is one of the first theorists to initiate these views of multiple histories and power relations that determine these histories. In this regard, he starts from two famous predecessors and contests their opinions. Hegel, the first major philosopher of history in the modern times developed the theory of dialectics, according to which history is a clash of opposite forces that will eventually be resolved by a synthesis between them. Marx applies Hegel’s theory to the material condition of society concluding that the clash is in fact over economic resources and it can be resolved through a revolution. In their book Understanding Foucault, the three authors, Danaher, Schirato and Webb explain Foucault’s objections to the theories of Hegel and Marx taking colonialism as a point of reference because it corresponds to the early 19th century, the time when history writing in its modern form began. For obvious reasons, Foucault does not approve of this tradition of writing history:

[…] this is because conventional history writing regards history in terms of a single and steady progress unfolding over time. This progressive view of history (sometimes called a teleological view) tends to see the world gradually evolving into some ideal state, or utopian society. From this perspective, rather than being considered as an act of violent aggression by the colonising force, colonialism is regarded as an aspect of the evolutionary development of history into higher forms of society (Danaher, Schirato, Webb 2000: 99).

He has three objections to the dialectic theories of history. The first obvious reason is that these theories justify colonialism as a positive action from the civilized world against primitive societies. The second objection relates to the organization and explanation of history according to ideological systems that emerged from Enlightenment, such as liberalism, capitalism, socialism etc. According to the above mentioned authors, Foucault’s third problem in this matter is that dialectic theories understand history “according to a grand or totalizing vision” (Danaher, Schirato, Webb 2000: 100), while Foucault’s conception of history involves plurality and discontinuity. Thus, he challenges the traditional view of continuous, linear history where the events are fitted together and form regular patterns (Danaher, Schirato, Webb 2000: 101), and proposes instead a history seen as a chaotic structure made up of struggles between various forces, where the events do not follow one after the other in an orderly fashion, but are in conflict with each other.

“History is the way people(s) create, in part, their identities”
Lucian Boia exemplifies this view referring to ancient history where fiction prevailed over fact in many cases. This is a problem that affected history since the beginning of the discipline, forever vacillating between the concepts of fact and fiction. To categorize history as science and not art, it remains a border discipline, always challenged and never fully revealed.

Thus, in spite of all the theories and all the effort of historians to reveal the absolute truth is detrimental:

This prioritizes the original source, fetishises documents, and distorts the whole working process of making history. At root is that perpetual quest for truth, the quest also apparent in desires for empathetic understanding – to get back into the genuine minds of the original people so that their views are unaltered by ours (Jenkins 2003: 58).

In terms of sources, Jenkins suggests a problem with a paradox at its core: does the evidence of the past have a voice of its own, so strong that the historian’s only job is to record it? Or is the evidence mute and the historian has to articulate it by using their own voice, in fact silencing it in the process?

Still, leaving the problem of interpretation aside, another issue, equally important occurs: what are the sources and, more importantly, can they be trusted? In Pentru o istorie a imaginarului, Lucian Boia proposes three types of sources: written documents, images and oral history. Regarding the concept of source itself, Boia considers it the illusion of a direct and perfect correspondence between fact and its representation because the source as representation is mediated through a mental and ideological filter and therefore belongs to the register of imagination (Boia 2000: 40–41). Boia points how in the past, the historical tradition set the document as the main source of historical truth, while now, historical inquiry is based on the problem and not the document (Boia 2000: 41). A document can be read in many ways and it can be an inexhaustible source depending on what aspect one seeks. So, if the sources are not reliable and the historian is not reliable, the past remains a land of mystery, perpetually subjected to new interpretations, always challenged and never fully revealed. Thus, in spite of all the theories and all the effort of historians to categorize history as science and not art, it remains a border discipline, forever vacillating between the concepts of fact and fiction. This is a problem that affected history since the beginning of time. In fact, fiction prevailed over fact in many cases.

Lucian Boia exemplifies this view referring to ancient history where myth was incorporated into actual history on a regular basis. How much is fact of what has reached present day about the Trojan War or the foundation of Rome? As these famous events lack solid attestation and real evidence, their only proof for ever having existed being literature, we might even say they never existed. However, these ruins apparently are relics of other battles and events while the information given by Homer himself does not refer to the 12th century (the time of the Trojan War) but more to Homer’s time (Boia 2002: 22).

Another famous mixture of fact and fiction comes from the Anglo-Saxon space and it is embodied by the Arthurian legends for which evidence has always been sought and, some claim, found. There are many theories regarding the existence and most importantly, the affiliation of the famous king. Nowadays the legend lives on and thrives apparently as it is rewritten by the contemporary tradition, that is, by the film industry, which prefers either the idealized mythical view or a more realistic one devoid of all the magic and fabulous details.

The 20th century recorded many adaptations of the story of the famous king, most of them claiming to be faithful to the original story. And, since the origins of the story are so confusing, what value can this claim have? It would be fair to say that this story is a constant victim of revisionism, employing and projection of present values onto the past. The Arthurian legends are very complex, therefore open to interpretations according to needs, and that is why they continue to fascinate.

Fiction seems to be much more powerful than history as it has better access to the mainstream and it is easily popularized. If a king called Arthur really existed, no doubt his life was less interesting than the one made famous through the immortal legends. And Arthur is not the only case. Cleopatra was not as beautiful as we were led to believe out of the prejudice that seduction must unequivocally imply beauty, Richard III was not a hunchback and he also enforced some good social policies, and Vlad the Impaler was a ruthless prince among other ruthless princes that ruled in that bleak period of history but was turned into an immortal vampire that haunts the nights of young maidens and feeds on their blood. Who cares about the truth anymore when the stories are so interesting?

3. Fact and Fiction

Many theorists today analyze the concept of history and bring it closer to the concept of fiction by pointing out striking similarities. These theories, drawn from post-structuralism, deconstructivism,
and postmodernism, propose a new view on history, one that challenges the old idealism that history deals with undisputed facts grounded in reality and supported by evidence. The new voices demonstrate that, on the contrary, history and fiction share a common ground and history cannot be objective as it relies on narrative and on representation, which are both elements that distort reality being filtrated through the consciousness of their author, creator.

Michel de Certeau is one of the voices that include the term fiction in the process of making history. He explains that the practice of history is ambitious but utopian and that: “It is not content with a hidden «truth» that needs to be discovered; it produces a symbol through the very relation between a space newly designated within time and a modus operandi that fabricates «scenarios» capable of organizing practices into a currently intelligible discourse – namely, the task of «the making of history»” (de Certeau 1988: 6). De Certeau also quotes Roland Barthes who wonders whether the narration of past events under the term of «history» is really that different from the imaginary narrative found in a novel (de Certeau 1988: 41) and he also shows that historians begin from present realities when they investigate past events (de Certeau 1988: 11), a method called presentism.

Presentism (a type of historical analysis that presents the past in such a way as to reflect the ideas of the present) is viewed as a negation of history as science because it shows that the objective historical truth can never be found (Schaff 1976: 224). Hayden White is another voice that claims history cannot be a science by showing that “history differs from the sciences precisely because historians disagree, not only over what are the laws of social causation that they might invoke to explain a given sequence of events, but also over the question of the form that a «scientific» explanation ought to take” (Walder 1990: 354). And, since there is no agreement and historians do not concur, White’s conclusion is that “history remains in the state of conceptual anarchy in which the natural sciences existed during the sixteenth century, when there were as many different conceptions of «the scientific enterprise» as there were metaphysical positions” (Walder 1990: 346). Apparently there are no rules to make it a science, objectively speaking.

In regard to the same topic of historical interpretation and connection with fiction, Hayden White, a prominent new historicist, proposes a theory in his 1973 book, Metahistory (republished in 1975). The overall idea is that history cannot be presented objectively as nobody can write about the past or present as it actually happens. Instead, historians are seen as different archetypes that present the facts according to different types of narrative.

He distinguishes between chronicle and story by defining them. Thus, the chronicle represents the historical facts in a chronological order and it is open-ended, while the “transformation of chronicle into story is effected by the characterization of some events in the chronicle in terms of inaugural motifs, or others in terms of terminating motifs, and of yet others in terms of transitional motifs” (White 1975: 5). It is this very transformation that involves the subjectivity of the historian and, since a story always has a meaning, this meaning is identified by determining the kind of story, a process called emplotment (White 1975: 7). According to this theory, it is fair to say that history is what historians make of it. Since nobody can record everything exactly that way it happened in the past or present, there cannot be such a thing as objective history.

Lucian Boia reflects what new historicists are advocating through the theory of Foucault, that history is made by the ones in power, the ones that decide what is important and what needs to remain in history. Feminism, as well as other marginal groups, adheres to this theory, as the Power that wrote history was the patriarchal order that decided who stays in history and who disappears or is turned into The Other.

All the theories and opinions presented so far are only evidence that, since history starts from a text that is further turned into narrative, just like fiction, then the so-called objectivity and respect for the historical truth is yet just another story, and history and fiction are closer to each other than previously believed. This distrust, which reminds us of the one Lyotard is talking about when theorizing postmodernism and defining it as “incredulity towards metanarratives” (Natoli, Hutcheon 1993: 72), is characteristic of this age of established skepticism. History is continuously demystified in postmodern fiction, action whose purpose is to argue that history is nothing but fiction, subject to constant reviewing, correcting, revision, and victim of falsification and misunderstanding. By proposing alternative histories, postmodern authors are trying to make people aware that nothing should be taken for granted and simply accepted as fact. Everything should be questioned because sources are unreliable and that is the only fact we have. Thus, history is being re-written. However, even before the emergence of all these new theories, history had always been rewritten and scholars have been trying to find reasons why. To postmodernists, rewriting history seems like an obligation given all the changes observed throughout this paper. Adam Schaff proposes two reasons: the needs of the present impose a reinterpretation of history or “the reinterpretation of history is a function of the
emerging effects of the events of the past” (Schaff 1976: 224).
In the liberating context of postmodernism, rewriting history
from the perspective of the present seems a positive undertake
as, given the rise of minorities, writing history from the point of
view of the present seems to finally give an unbiased version of
history. Another reason that makes this theory a positive one is
that distance in time from the particular event to be interpreted
gives the historian the chance for a less biased and subjective
view. However, this version, regardless of how non-discriminatory
it may appear at a first look, is still power biased. The needs of the
present decide what should be kept in history and what should
be omitted. Besides, writing history from the present perspective
produces an even more distorted narrative. Schaff’s conclusion
is that “the changeability of the historical image is a function
of the changeability of the criteria for the selection of historical
material” (Schaff 1976: 226).

So, if history can be constantly rewritten, why is there a fear
among scholars that history is over? Theorists such as Francis
Fukuyama or Alexandru Zub have tackled this subject and written
extensive studies on the topic. Lucian Boia however, has a less
apocalyptic view (Boia 2002: 146–149). He warns the reader that
he is not making predictions, just offering a scenario and suggests
that history will not disappear or come to an end as it has been
observed by others. It is just that history’s glory days are over.
History was queen of the social sciences during the 19th century
when nations were formed and ideologies were needed for this
massive construction. Ideologies are rooted in history as they
need to rely on the past in order to shape the present. Nowadays,
ideologies are apparently obsolete as it seems that all of them
have been tried. Globalization seems to be the so-called ideology
of the present, though even this one is already beginning to fail.

4. Conclusion

Everything is subject to interpretation and this paper has attempted
to illustrate, with the help of theoretical views, that representa-
tion dominates our world since the essence cannot be known
otherwise. And since we have to deal with representation, then
we have to admit that we can never learn the absolute truth or
discover the historical fact in its purest form. We have to rely on
representations, choose the ones that seem to be closer to the
essence they represent and make our own interpretations. Fiction
does not claim to present the truth, but history does and, given
all the theories and opinions stated throughout this paper, history
fails at its purpose as it relies on the interpretation of representa-
tions and it is therefore victim of subjectivity and intentional or
unintentional distortion. History is just a narrative, like fiction.
“History” is a single word that the English language applies to a multitude of notions. The 20th century more than any other era has showcased the blurring of the line between constructed and researched history, fiction and the past. More importantly, the continuous integration of critical thought in academia and of romanticization in fields such as cinema especially for historical adaptations and fictions have impacted the studies, approaches and perceptions of historiography – the study and construction of history.

Tobby Widdicombe in his writing proposes that, in order to remove history “from a state of crisis”, fiction and fallacy should be accepted as an irreducible factor from historiography and more importantly that utopianism should be integrated into historiographical thought in that utopianism acknowledges the rupture of past from present, that fiction is an inevitable fact when writing of history and that history follows an ideology. His writing can be seen as gateway into understanding the value of alternative histories, and flexible perceptions and questionings of historical discourse.

Time present and time past are both perhaps present in time future And time future contained in time past If all time is eternally present all time is unredeemable. (Eliot 1943; 1971; ll. 1–5)

Introduction: a discipline in crisis

The study of history is in crisis – or, at least, is said by many to be so. Norman J. Wilson, in History in crisis? Recent directions in historiography (1999), talks of a ‘purported crisis’ (4). He concludes with conviction but, to my mind, unconvincingly: ‘history is not in crisis’ (138). If it were not, how is one to explain the number of books devoted (sometimes quite provocatively) to putting history back on the rails and heading in the right direction? There are Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob’s Telling the truth about history (1994), Richard Evans’ In defense of history (1997), and Keith Windschuttle’s How the discipline of history is being murdered by literary critics and social theories (1994).

So, not so much crisis, perhaps, as homicide? In recent years, the number of essays, beginning with T.C. Cochrane’s ‘History and cultural crisis’ (1973), which link history with the idea of crisis, is remarkable.1 Wilson is surely right in talking of ‘a critical tradition that grandly proclaims “crisis”’ (138), but Alun Munslow (2000) and Ernst Breisach (1994) more precisely characterize the current era in historical studies. Breisach sees the historian as called upon to ‘dispel the present doubts about history’s utility and usability’ (404); Munslow describes historiography as a ‘contested terrain’ at many levels, not least that of conflicting interpretations, but also at the level of the assumptions historians make about what constitutes particular varieties, versions, visions, re-visions, and conceptions of history’ (135).2

Before I lay out an argument that offers utopianism as an ally in the important battles which historians face over Munslow’s ‘contested terrain’, it is necessary to map the myriad ways in which history has become – rather quickly – a very complicated and disputatious field of study. For the sake of clarity, the majority of these can be covered under four heads: definition; categorization; discipline; and purpose.

The first of these concerns – definition – is among the most complex. If a subject cannot be defined and so remains amorphous, it is very hard to argue for its value. To say that history denotes ‘the study of the past’ is too vague to be useful. To conflate history with historiography (as has frequently been done since the publication of Hayden White’s Metahistory in 1973) is unhelpfully to elide form and content.

Categorization looks, deceptively, like an easy enterprise, but whatever categories are created are necessarily artificial and frequently imply a hierarchy which can degenerate into a pernicious form of question begging. Therefore, one may opt for dividing history into periods (Ancient, Medieval, Modern), or centuries, or reigns. Each, however, willfully ignores the crucial fact that such a categorization would have been unimportant or meaningless to the people whose lives are the stuff of history. In that way, periodization profoundly distorts the experience of a life lived. One may choose a focal categorization (social history, intellectual history, cultural history, institutional history, judicial history, political history, psychological history, military history, New Historicism, and so on), or one may valorize the quotidian – as Fernand Braudel does (in The structures of everyday life, 1981, and Alf Ludtke in The history of everyday life, 1995).3 Here, slippage becomes a problem, for where does one category end and the next begin. What about deciding to try cliometrics (the
use of quantification techniques in the study of history)? Again, difficulties come to mind rather readily, two in particular: first, the possible inaccuracy and misuse of the data; second, the potential irrelevance of such findings to an understanding of human reality. Many other categorizations have become possible: class and gender come to mind. Each, however, is undercut by the very nature of the human condition: our limited knowledge, our fallibility, our lack of objectivity will make any judgment suspect. Even such ‘fashionable’ categories as world history or postcolonialism are potentially vitiated by the inability of an individual, or even of a group of individuals, to be genuinely multilingual or multicultural. These categories are fashionable because they are important to us now, but importance does not correlate with effective history. Disciplinarity is as much in dispute as are definition and categorization. The increased professionalization of the subject has brought with it several questions: do men and women see the world in materially different ways? What relation does history bear to rhetoric, to literature, to creative writing, to critical theory? What merit does the work of amateur historians possess?

The second set of disciplinarity questions — broadly, how do history and English relate to each other — shows how complex the discipline of history has become in the last generation or so. The connection between rhetoric and history has been in the forefront of discussion since the publication of two landmark studies in the same year: 1988. Albert Cook’s History/writing, and Michael de Certeau’s The writing of history. The former usefully introduced the trope of synecdoche as a means of examining ‘the discrepancy between the chaotic, undifferentiated matrix of all that ever happened and the authenticity that may accompany emplotment, ‘the gist that has been extricated from some of the connections obtaining within….’ (206). The latter (Certeau) undercuts the entire operation of writing history by remarking, ‘Within the discourse in which I am putting global questions on stage, an ‘idiom’ comes forth: my way of speaking, my patois, represents my relation to a given place’ (56). Less than a decade later, Ronald H. Carpenter, in History as rhetoric (1995), notes the primacy of persuasion by historians and historical figures alike as an antidote to Certeau’s ‘idiomism.’ However, that antidote brings with it, ironically, a poison as well – of cultural reinforcement: ‘some writers of history admit they reinforce or corroborate already extant values which in turn guide behavior’ (8).

The relation between history and literature and the degree, therefore, to which history is as much a matter of narrative and fiction as event and fact are wrestled with by Lionel Gossman, in Between history and literature (1990), and by Herbert Lindemberger, in The history of literature (1990). Both choose to study an ultimately unresolvable puzzle: if history contains within it a significant element of fictionality, how can the generalizations and judgments of historians be trusted? No wonder there is all this talk of crisis in historical studies. To this puzzle of fictionality has to be added the even more disruptive elements ‘imported’ from (or read through) the discipline of English: creative nonfiction, and critical theory. The first (an oxymoron if ever there was one) suggests that human imagination is so powerful as to render the once-bright line between fiction and fact even at the level of memoir to be nugatory. Everyone is functionally mythomaniac to some degree, the argument goes. The second brings (among other theories) postmodernism and deconstruction to the work of history. Postmodernism offers fragmentation, indeterminancy, and chaos. Keith Jenkins’ The postmodern history reader (1997) includes Patrick Joyce’s apocalyptic ‘The end of social history?’ and Saul Friedlander’s provocatively titled, ‘Probing the limits of representation.’ Deconstruction gives us radically indeterminable meaning as cultural bedrock. It is against the backdrop of such a claim that Alun Munslow concludes his Deconstructing history (1997) in terms so far removed from the once-dominant, nineteenth-century positivism of Leopold von Ranke in his Theory and practice of history (1973). For von Ranke, history is factual and empirically accessible; for Munslow, history is something else entirely: ‘The idea of truth being rediscovered in the evidence is a nineteenth-century modernist conception and it has no place in contemporary writing about the past’ (178). The title of a conference held in London (under the auspices of the Women’s Library) on 17 November 2007 – ‘When fiction meets history’ – suggests that history’s inherent fictionality is winning the struggle between the old guard and the new. The opening line of the conference announcement suggests why — sexiness. ‘“It is more exciting to enter imaginary worlds than to be told what really happened,” Patricia Duncker has written.’

The final element of the tetralogy of historiographical concerns — purpose — again reveals a discipline in crisis or ‘challenge[d]’ (as Georg Iggers has put it in Historiography in the twentieth century: From scientific objectivity to the postmodern challenge, 2007). The frequent presence of academic historians offering their opinions on the continuing Iraq War (another Vietnam or not?) shows that history has a very public dimension, a dimension which Ian Tyrrell usefully traces in Historians in public (2005). However, it is unclear how much the public face of history – in a sense, its popularization – subverts the precision of a discipline which, as with every other academic field, is complicated and not infrequently arcane. What is manifest, nonetheless, is that this public face is receiving much more attention than its traditional one.
History, then, is a discipline in crisis: uncertain of its definition, unstable in its categories, amorphous in its disciplinarity, and divided as to purpose. ‘What’s Wrong with History?’ is the resonant title of the first chapter in Tyrrell’s book, and the answer may appear to be: ‘everything.’ A controlling conundrum remains, a conundrum that is best expressed, perhaps, by Constantin Fasolt in the Preface to his Limits of history (2004) (where he emphasizes his insights by laying them out in numbered, indented, format): Our attitude toward the past is governed by three principles:

1. the past is gone forever;
2. to understand the meaning of a text, you must first put it into the context of its time and place; and
3. you cannot tell where you are going unless you know where you are coming from. (ix)

Fasolt is, however, rather wide of the mark in the sense of being much too optimistic. His first principle suggests what is not true (that the past was ever here is some measurable way – other than as the present that becomes the past before one is aware of its changing); his second principle appears to suggest that context is finite and knowable; his third ignores the rather important ontological point that as a sentient species we do not know where we have come from and we don’t not know where we go. We can (and do) carve out some finite meaning, but that meaning is profoundly contingent.

The neutral etymology of crisis (from the Greek word krisis meaning ‘decision’) is accurate and may be helpful here. After all, academic historians continue on in their careers apparently unaffected by the ways in which the certitude of classics such as E.H. Carr’s What is history? (1961) and G.R. Elton’s The practice of history (1967; 2002) have been so radically undermined. Carr’s emphasis on narrative history and Elton’s on history as autonomous appear from the vantage point of the beginning of the third millennium as limited in their usefulness.

Given the state of historiography at the present time, it is surely a fair question to ask: what can or should be done? As a specialist in utopianism and a student of deconstruction, I find myself attracted to the idea that nothing need be done. Part of me feels that John Keats was surely right in advocating for the superiority of negative capability as an intellectual position. In a letter to George and Thomas Keats (his younger brothers) dated 21 December 1817, Keats defines this point of view as manifesting itself ‘when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason’ (43). Another part feels, however, that something can and should be done: history should be concerned less with fighting the sort of turf battles that Elton’s advocacy of autonomy for history as a subject of study promoted. Instead, it should reach out to other disciplines, and in this respect utopianism comes immediately to mind as a subject that offers much to those who study history. It offers new directions rather than simplistic answers; it offers multidisciplinarity rather than cognitive isolation; it offers a way of seeing history as central to the study of the human condition. It presents these at a very low cost: the giving up of a desire for certitude and the embracing of an open-ended epistemology.

The definitions of utopia

With the new millennium, the definitions have continued to come as the effort has been made to pin down a word which is itself an odd amalgam of an imaginary no place (utopos in Greek) and a good place (eutopos).

Dictionary definitions – even the venerable Oxford English dictionary’s – chart the pejorative reaction to More’s ideas in Utopia rather than presenting what More and those who have come after mean by the term. Let us look instead at what scholars and utopian theorists have said. I present several definitions chronologically, for each builds on an understanding of the ideas that came before. In his 1973 article titled ‘Defining the Literary Genre of Utopia,’ Darko Suvin termed utopia,

[T]he verbal construction of a particular quasi-human community where sociopolitical institutions, norms and individual relationships are organized according to a more perfect principle than in the author’s community, this construction being based on estrangement arising out of an alternative historical hypothesis. (132)

Seventeen years later, Ruth Levitas, in The concept of utopia (1990), took a sociological approach in her definition: Utopia is ‘the expression of the desire for a better way of being’ (8). In 1994, Lyman Sargent, in his exhaustive and exacting essay ‘The three faces of utopianism revisited,’ refined Suvin’s work from two decades earlier in his own effort at a normative, stabilizing description:

[T]he primary characteristic of the utopian place is its non-existence combined with a topos – a location in time and place – to give verisimilitude. In addition, the place must be recognizably good or bad or at least should be so recognized by a contemporary reader. All fiction describes a no place; utopian fiction generally describes good or bad places. (5)

To this, he added some wording echoing Levitas’s 1990 definition
by asserting: ‘[T]he desire [for] a better life, for order, unity, and simplicity have always been there’ (28). More recently, Roland Schaar, in his introductory essay to Utopia: The search for the ideal society (2000) titled ‘Utopia: space, time, history,’ sees the key term this way: ‘Utopia’s first prerequisite . . . is humanitas, humanity as a virtue’ (4). More recently still, the distinguished historian Jay Winter, in his Dreams of peace and freedom: Utopian moments in the 20th century (2006), creates a category he terms ‘minor utopians,’ a category which is the major focus of his book. This category comprises ‘people who configured limited and much less sanguinary plans [than the ‘major utopians’ did] for partial transformation of the world’ (3). They envision a fundamentally better world.

In addition to definition, by enumerating the characteristics of utopia and its adherents, utopists have also experimented with taxonomy. This effort was begun by Sargent in his essay from which I just quoted (‘Three faces of utopianism revisited’). There he presents a three-part taxonomy of utopia: myth (seven subcategories); fiction (11 subcategories and 10 sub-subcategories); and non-fiction (nine subcategories) (11–12). In 2005, Ulrich Oevermann, in ‘Natural utopianism in everyday life practice – An elementary theoretical model,’ asserts that ‘natural utopian thinking’ (140) exists and that it is founded on three crises (traumatisation, decision, and leisure) and on four types of experience (natural, bodily, religious, and aesthetic).

**Utopia’s value to theories of history**

It is clear from all of the definitional work discussed in the previous section that there are numerous definitions of the key term and several strategies for arriving at what, for any particular author, represents a satisfactorily condensed meaning (even if that meaning borders on the gnomic at times). That said, the definitions are more complementary than conflicting, and they do share three common elements: utopianism is about the desire or hope for a better society; utopianism is evolutionary rather than fixed; and utopianism is multidisciplinary in its application. With those elements in mind, the question arises: what value is utopianism to the myriad theories with which historians work in their professional lives. The answer is that utopianism (in some of its varieties and some of the time) makes three radical claims about the nature of history: the continuity of past with present can and sometimes should be ruptured; the experiential facts of history can be erased but never should be; the truth of history can be – and often is – overwhelmed by the imaginative power of fiction.
VI. Biography

Francis Alÿs

Born in 1959 in Antwerp, Belgium, Alÿs originally trained as an architect. He moved to Mexico City in 1986, where he continues to live and work, and it was the confrontation with issues of urbanization and social unrest in his new country of adoption that inspired his decision to become a visual artist. Since 2004, the artist’s work has been represented by David Zwirner, where he has had two solo exhibitions at the gallery in New York in 2007 and 2013. In 2016, Ciudad Juárez projects marked his first solo presentation at David Zwirner, London.

In 2015, a major solo museum exhibition, A Story of Negotiation, featuring the artist’s three projects Don’t Cross the Bridge Before You Get to the River, Tornado, and REEL-UNREEL, was held at the Museo Tamayo Arte Contemporáneo in Mexico City. It traveled through 2017 to the Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires (MALBA) – Fundación Costantini in Buenos Aires; Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes de la Habana in Havana; and Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto.

Alÿs’s ongoing project Fabiola is currently on view at The Menil Collection in Houston, Texas (through January 28, 2018).

In 2014, Alÿs’s recent video REEL-UNREEL, which depicts a street game played by local children in Kabul, Afghanistan, was on view alongside related drawings, paintings, and research materials at Museo d’Arte Contemporanea Donna Regina Napoli, Naples. The exhibition traveled later in the year to the Centre for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw. REEL-UNREEL was produced in 2012 for doc-umenta 13, where a selection of paintings was installed in a former bakery in Kassel’s city center and the video was screened at a satellite venue in Kabul.

The artist’s work was the subject of a major survey, A Story of Deception, which was on view from 2010 to 2011 at Tate Modern, London; Wiels Centre d’Art Contemporain, Brussels; and The Museum of Modern Art, New York and MoMA PS1, Long Island City, New York. Over the past decade, he has had several solo exhibitions at prominent venues, including the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo (traveled to the Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art, both 2013); Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin (2010); The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago (2008); Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2007); Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.; and Portikus, Frankfurt (both 2006).

Work by the artist is found in public collections worldwide, including the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa, Japan; Art Institute of Chicago; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris; Musée d’Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean, Luxembourg; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Philadelphia Museum of Art; Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; and Tate Gallery, London.

This exhibition is curated by Marie Muracciole and generously supported by Jan Mot, David Zwirner, Peter & Nathalie Hrechdakian, Marwan T. Assaf, Yola Noujaim and Anonymous.
Naeem Mouhaiemen