

le temps du sommeil  
Francis Allys

*Exhibition curated by Catherine Lampert*



The Irish Museum of Modern Art is proud to present an exhibition by Francis Alÿs titled *le temps du sommeil*. The exhibition has two parts: an ongoing series of 111 paintings that began in 1996 which are aligned with texts that describe performances and actions that have taken place, or instructions for possible future interventions or disruptions in the social landscape.

Francis Alÿs was born in Antwerp in 1959. Between 1978 and 1983, Alÿs studied architecture at the Institut d'Architecture de Tournai, before going on to undertake postgraduate studies at the Instituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia from 1983 to 1986. In 1987, rather than undertake national service with the Belgian army, he joined a project led by a non-governmental organization working in southern Mexico. After moving to Mexico City, Alÿs began to engage in an artistic practice that extends to drawing, painting, performance, photography, film and what he calls 'street installations'. Many projects are collaborative, and have as their basis a questioning of the modern notion of city life, in which, as Cuauhtémoc Medina put it, 'Mexico City stood as a sort of allegory for the failure of modernism'.<sup>i</sup> The intention often is to provoke social conscience and awareness by calling into question the rational design of a city and how we inhabit that space.

Several critics have drawn parallels to the legacy of the Situationist International who were a revolutionary avant-garde movement founded in Paris in 1957. They advocated an alternative form of living outside of the dominant advanced capitalist system. It was the first major movement since the discourse surrounding the flâneur (as defined by Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin as a person who makes social and aesthetic observation while walking) that engaged with the city as the site and conceptual framework for aesthetic practice. Guy Debord's theory of *dérive*, associated with this movement, involved a playful-constructive behaviour and an alertness of psycho-geographical effects; movements and actions tended to be intuitive to the surroundings and allowed for random social interactions<sup>ii</sup>.

*The Collector* (1990-92) was an early piece that involved the artist walking a magnetized dog through the streets (of Mexico City, Havana, and elsewhere), collecting scraps of metal like bottle caps and wire), an activity associated with the refuse collector or the stray dog acting opportunistically. By transferring material onto the 'coat' or second skin of this toy-object he was subverting the traditional notion of the architect or artist who adds to the cityscape and the multitude of objects in the world. By disrupting the everyday and drawing attention to and away from himself, Alÿs highlights both presence and absence. Another aspect of this piece and integral to Alÿs's methodology is the inserting of myths and how rumours are spread; the artist asks, 'Can an artistic intervention translate social tensions into narratives that in turn intervene in the imaginary landscape of a place? And finally, can those kinds of artistic acts bring about the possibility of change?'<sup>iii</sup>

Sometimes doing is undoing  
and  
sometimes undoing is doing.



Myth according to Roland Barthes is a system of communication and since myth is a type of speech, everything can be a myth provided it is conveyed by a discourse<sup>iv</sup>; Alÿs conjures his myth making through film, photography, performances and texts. *When Faith Moves Mountains*. *A Project for Geological Displacement* (2002) was a collaborative project involving Rafael Ortega and Cuahtémoc Medina. 500 hundred volunteers equipped with shovels were asked to move by 10 centimetres a sand dune on the periphery of Lima where squatters were settling by. This absurd gesture was not only a commentary on the social and political state of Peru at that time, but its intention was to infiltrate and insert itself as part of the social/political mythology and artistic history of Peruvian society, its axiom, 'maximum effort, minimum result'. Robert Storr, when writing about the piece, referred to George Bataille's anti-capitalistic logic of potlatch ritual (an indigenous practice that was banned in America and Canada of gift giving, re-distribution and reciprocity of wealth) and exercise in futility<sup>v</sup>, reminding us of the work by Alÿs, *The Swap* 1995, the text displayed in this exhibition, 'In the beginning, there is a given situation where many people cross paths...'

*Le temps du sommeil* serves as an inventory of the artist's notations or projections of ideas that have yet to be manifested or will remain as images. Initially elements are realized on tracing paper and may be transferred to the painting surface. The paintings can be regarded as a storyboard and employ the mise-en-scène of cinema. Through the microscopic staging of events and interactions in the paintings, Alÿs depicts generic archetypes interacting with a multitude of objects; boxes, sticks, trees, etc. Embedded in the landscape is a suited generic figure or figures, which are engaged in actions that are experiential in nature. The actions range from the ridiculous to the mundane. In one we see man with a box over his head while a dog jumps at him from behind. The word 'L'Oracle' is placed outside the scene perhaps alluding to the satirical nature of the work. The white line drawings that occur in the paintings sometimes depict disembodied hands, suspended architecture, figures in action.

Each painting is rubber stamped with the title and the date of a particular stage, as new imaginings are added, a new date is added accentuating the palimpsestic nature of the work. The Venetian red background varies from violet to russet brown and the luminous green/yellow area the artist compares to a veduta, the detailed scene inserted into paintings associated with the 16th century Dutch painters such as Vermeer's *View of Delft* and Renaissance painters such as Panini's *View of Rome*.

The Collector

1991

Magnets, metal & rubber wheels





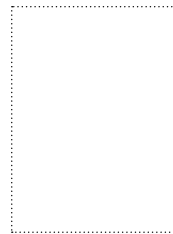
When writing about his paintings Alÿs highlights the extensive possibilities that painting has, not only with its audience but as a means of suspending one's imagination, it offers a space of meditation on activities that are both probable and un-probable.

'What justifies my recourse to painting is that it's the shortest way – or the only way – to translate certain scenarios or situations that cannot be said, that cannot be filmed or performed. It's about entering a situation that could not exist elsewhere, only on the paper or canvas. They are images, and I want for them to live as such. Like in a children's book.' (Francis Alÿs, c. 2004)

The texts which accompany the paintings, described as legends, vary in their context: some relate to past actions/performances and the texts used on the postcards that document these events, whilst some are simple axioms and others read as instructions, like that to the newly arrived traveler, *Doppelgänger, Istanbul 1993*

When arriving in --- (new city), wander,  
Looking for someone who could be you.  
If the meeting happens, walk beside  
Your doppelgänger until your pace  
Adjusts to his/hers.

When Faith Moves Mountains. A Project  
for Geological Displacement  
2002



The texts are juxtaposed to the paintings and form a poetic sequence that allows one to employ one's own visual imaginings. There is a humour and generosity in these works. They are intent on creating a new hypothesis of social behaviour through a number of propositions and conceptual devices, supplanting our traditional way of occupying urban spaces.

When Henri Lefebvre writes about revolution it is not limited to economic transformations but extends as far as everyday life – creating a way of living that emphasizes the social. Alÿs's practice draws parallels to Lefebvre's revolutionary romanticism in that it critiques the current globalised, neo-conservative foundations of our society, and posits a unique combination of a subjective and post-utopian view of how one can enhance it.

MARY CREMIN  
Curatorial Co-Ordinator

- i *Cuauhtemoc Median*, Russell Ferguson, Jean Fisher, Francis Alÿs, (2007, pp 64) Phaidon, London.
- ii Amelia Jones, *Practicing Space: The Artist as Urban Wanderer, The Artist As..* Edited by Matthia Michalka (2007, pp82-83). MUMOK, Wien.
- iii IBID
- iv Barthes, Roland, *Mythologies*, (2000, pg109), Vintage, London.
- v Robert Storr, *Francis Alÿs*, Parkett (2004, P22).



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Friday 2 April: Closed



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