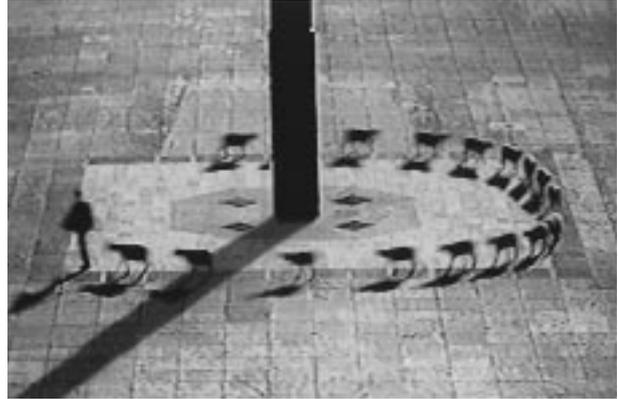


FRANCIS ALÿS

Parkett 69 – 2004

ROBERT STORR



STRANGE

Compose a graph. Label axis X movement, and the other, axis Y, stasis. Now choose two colors for dots of two distinctive sizes. On the key to the graph, identify the first as referring to groups, or rather members of a group in the appropriate number. The second will refer to individuals, though in reality the plural is a bit misleading since in all cases we will be dealing with the same individual pursuing different regimens. Mindful of the uncertain linkage between signifier and signified, as well as of the dialectical interchangeability of all terms, we will then “fold” and repeat this diagram in the space below the original and inscribe the inverse X axis with the designation non-movement, and the inverse Y axis with the designation non-stasis, thus underscoring the fact that in temporal situations walking is immanent in standing and standing is immanent in walking.

We will call this diagram, “The Expanded Field of Sculpture,” or would if the name had not already been branded by another school of post-structuralist criticism. In keeping with the spirit of advanced opinion on such matters, we might alternatively title it “Debord’s Delight,” or “Delineations of *la Dérive*,”

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in recognition of Situationism’s chief theoretician, and the man who transformed meandering into a medium. It is a medium that, to borrow from the current lingo, nicely conflates absolutes of horizontality and verticality, the ground and the person who traverses it on foot or, as may happen, on hands and knees. However, in honor of the patron saint/demon of urban wanderers whose alertness to the interpenetrations of the ephemeral and the essential, the whimsical and rigorous, the splendid and the strange undergirds our appreciation of the ever-widening mesh of Modern art, we will instead call this exercise in nonsensical schematic rendering “Baudelaire’s Boardgame.” Within this field—which has been overlaid onto a reality characterized by labyrinthine streets and dusty paths more so than by the hard even grid of utopian-planners—you may plot a series of events, divided into the categories cited above.

For example, using the symbols for groups, chart the progressive gathering of a flock of sheep trouping in a perfect oval around the flagstaff at the center of a grand plaza. The actual location is the Zócalo in the heart of Mexico City, which, despite its “folkloric” aspects, is not where you expect to find someone choreographing a geometrical strict livestock ballet. The shepherd is the Belgian-born artist Francis Alÿs,

FRANCIS ALÿS, CUENTOS PATRIOTICOS / PATRIOTIC TALES (MULTIPLICATION OF SHEEP), Mexico
D.F., 1997, videogram / PATRIOTISCHE GESCHICHTEN (VERMEHRUNG DER SCHAFE), Videogramm.

who is the organizer of every sequence mapped on the graph and often its protagonist.

Given that time is a factor in MULTIPLICATION OF SHEEP (*LA MULTIPLICACIÓN DE LOS BORREGOS*, Mexico, D.F., 1997) from the series *Patriotic Tales* (*Cuentos Patrióticos*, Mexico, D.F., 1997), as it is in all the others, we must refine our system and further color-code our dots to record the staggered entrance of the sheep into this ring. To that end, we will modulate the tone of the dots from dark to light to indicate which ones have been there longest. In similar fashion, we must take account of the gradual assem-

nation with Nazca Lines and other pre-Columbian precedents. Moreover, although Alÿs's project was executed by volunteers—most of them students—it was undertaken in a place where on a perennial basis “labor is cheap” because unemployment is perpetually high. Thus, along with its positive communitarian dimension, the express futility of the enterprise assumes an explicitly economic and ambiguously political dimension. Moreover, where great temples were once raised by multitudes, the uncanny visual correlation between the hill and the memory of ancient pyramids stirs disconcerting thoughts of em-

ATTRACTOR

bling of people in the lengthening shadow of the same flagpole in ZÓCALO (1999), another video-performance work from the series *Patriotic Tales*. Here the action is spontaneous rather than staged; in this vast expanse of pavement, people seeking protection from the raking sunlight routinely line up in the protective shade of this landmark at the top of which waves a huge banner. Hence, the slyly mocking reference to patriotism since these citizens are not standing proudly to attention under a national emblem but rather pragmatically marshalling themselves to escape the glare.

Now add another long line made up of hundreds of dots that snake irregularly in a contracting crescent. They represent men shoveling sand as they climb a barren hill. Their combined effort displaced a fraction of the mass of the hill by an immeasurably small unit of space. WHEN FAITH MOVES MOUNTAINS (Lima, 2002) is a group enterprise that measures collaboration in spade-fulls of dusty earth. By the same token, it is also an exercise in futility which affirms the status of labor in relation to earthworks. In considering the cultural specificities of movements and styles, remember that in North America the concept of labor was essentially left out of the equation in the seventies (and after) despite a fasci-

pires past and present, of industrious—and expendable—masses then and now.

Finally, shifting our grid to a modern environment of more or less consistent verticals and horizontals, we can trace the path of a quasi-religious parade from midtown Manhattan over the East River to Queens. The participating members of the cult consist of art lovers and art professionals. The objects of their devotion are copies of paintings and sculptures by Picasso, Giacometti, and Duchamp, with Kiki Smith, a high priestess of the contemporary scene appearing in person on a sedan chair born aloft by her acolytes. To the sound of a traditional marching band drilled in such ceremonies, THE MODERN PROCESSION (New York City, 2002) simultaneously celebrated and lampooned the migration of the holy icons of Modernism from the Mother Church to its temporary home in exile.

Turning to the second symbol category, we may begin with the simplest proposition, even as we return to the site of our initial mapping of the shepherd and his flock. This time around, and in all that follow, whether in a crowd or on an empty thoroughfare, Alÿs is alone. In this instance, he is standing, or rather leaning, against a fence with other men on either side of him. He is tall and pale. In general, they

are shorter and darker skinned. In front of them are toolboxes and hand-lettered cards advertising skills such as plumber and painter. The setting then is an open-air job market in the Zócalo next to the National Cathedral and near other stretches of sidewalk where other men sell effigies of Commandante Zero (Subcomandante Marcos), leader of the popular Zapatista revolt in the Southern province of Chiapas, as well as caricature dolls of the “forward-looking,” notoriously corrupt, and widely-despised former President Carlos Salinas de Gortari. In front of Alÿs is a small shoulder bag and a card saying “tourist.” They are looking for work; he is there to look. Or so his sign seems to indicate, except that instead of blending in and “going native” as romantic travelers from Richard Burton, T.E. Lawrence, and John Reed have traditionally attempted to do, he has jarringly included himself in the “picturesque” reality of his unemployed cohort, in effect becoming the mirror image to other tourists embedded in the sights they have come to see. Their idleness is detached pleasure; the plumber’s and painter’s idleness is anxious anticipation, and Alÿs’s idleness accents both. The point on the graph that “stands for” *TURISTA* (Tourist, Mexico City, 1996) is unique and fixed but begs for reiteration within its confines to mark prolonged and uneasy duration.

The incidents devoted to the actions of an individual that remain to be registered on this graph hew to the axis of movement rather than that of stasis. They include: the trajectory of a man walking down the street pulling a boxy steel model of a dog that magnetically picks up bottle caps, nails, and metal scraps in its vicinity (*THE COLLECTOR*, Mexico City, 1991–1992); that of a man strolling down the street wearing magnetized shoes to much the same effect, (*MAGNETIC SHOES*, La Habana, 1994); that of a man walking down the street with a paint can that drizzles a liquid thread of violet (*THE LEAK*, São Paulo, 1995); that of a man trailing a strand of blue yarn from the sleeve of his unraveling sweater (*FAIRY TALES*, Mexico City, 1992 & Stockholm, 1998); and that of a man pushing a block of ice down the same hot streets until the ice melts away, *PARADOX OF PRAXIS (SOMETIMES MAKING SOMETHING LEADS TO NOTHING)*, part one (Mexico, D.F., 1997). Finally, for *RE-ENACT-*

MENTS (Mexico City, 2000), Alÿs performed the same walk twice, starting in a Mexico City gun shop where he purchased a heavy automatic pistol. Proceeding through a congested commercial district, he openly carried the pistol with muzzle aimed toward the ground until one of the many, sometimes oblivious sometimes intimidated, people he passed by reported him and the police arrived, sirens screaming, to arrest him and bundle him into their car. At considerable risk to himself, and implied risk to others, Alÿs set off on the first walk without warning anyone. The second he repeated with police cooperation, but the sense of casual recklessness and unspecified menace heading toward a possibly abrupt *A Bout de Souffle* (*Breathless*) denouement with Alÿs in the Belmondo role is undiminished.

Each of Alÿs’s disturbances in the normal traffic patterns of everyday life spans a portion of the city, most involve a process of accumulation or depletion, all are willful, deadpan, understated, and efficient with regard to their apparent aimlessness. And, whether documented in videos or photos, all are visually memorable. One of them, *PARADOX OF PRAXIS*, presages the Sisyphean dynamics of *WHEN FAITH MOVES MOUNTAINS*. As a solo performance the former aligns the idea of futility with the frustrations of Beckett’s existential clowns, but taken together with the latter and its “pointless” expenditure of human resources both may plausibly be viewed through the distorting prism of Georges Bataille’s anti-capitalist logic of potlatch ritual and ecstatic, gratuitous waste. Or, as seems more satisfying, the slightly displaced hill may be read as a perversely conceived anti-monument to collective endeavor in a society without appropriate vocations or rewards for which the disappearing block of ice is the anti-sculptural equivalent in the realm of solitary endeavor.

Overall, Alÿs operates in the world by simultaneously drawing attention to and away from himself in order to focus on situations whose latent characteristics he brackets by presence and absence or underlines by his passage. In corresponding polarities between working assumptions and their contextual impact, *THE COLLECTOR* and *MAGNETIC SHOES* cast the artist in the role of a benign anarchist—a social particle for which we might borrow the physics-based

nomenclature of “strange attractor.” However, in REENACTMENTS, Alÿs becomes that anarchic particle’s sinister opposite, not so much a “strange repeller” but a potentially violent being who generates fear and draws to itself the force of official violence.

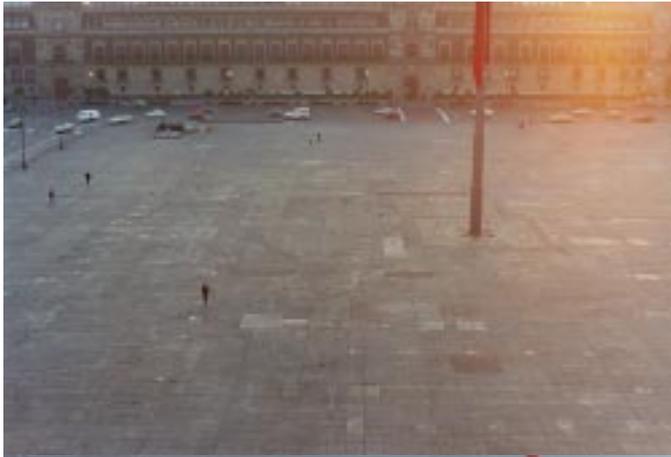
By now, of course, the graph proposed has been covered in points and loops, and lines and zigzagging rays that tend towards mobility or immobility and represent in various codes the artist himself, those he enlists to his purposeless purpose, or those whose curious behavior he observes from his shifting position as an unflappable, undeterrable odd-man-out. The analytic device suggested mimics the rule-bound conceits we have inherited from late formalism. A by-product of the attempt to reconcile prescribed models of the expanding field of sculpture with the actual diversification of sculptural practices epitomized by Alÿs’s evolving body of performance work—is he an ambulatory monument or is he ain’t?—the parameters set by “Baudelaire’s Boardgame” are patently ab-

surd. So too are the pseudo-scientific prototypes that inspired it.

Charming—like his faux-naïf paintings—superficially capricious but also deftly disruptive and not infrequently saturnine Alÿs’s art is absurd as well, but in a disciplined and revealing way. If you remove the diagram upon which his activities have been configured and resist the temptation to impose another one with better academic credentials, you can readily see that all along he has been overlapping premises and procedures while connecting the dots between the quotidian poetics of the supercharged urban environment—a sleeping dog, a broken window patched with plastic—and the social and cultural tensions that condition whatever freedom the Baudelairean “flâneur” or contemporary nomad still has. There may not be much, but within the tightening coordinates of “global” reality as well as within the rigidifying theoretical matrices of conceptually oriented practice, Alÿs has found room for maneuver.

FRANCIS ALÿS, *MAGNETIC SHOES*, 1994, 5th Havana Biennale, postcard / *MAGNETISCHE SCHUHE*, Postkarte.







FRANCIS ALÿS, ZOCALO, Mexico D. F., 1999.
A 12-hours documentary time lapse beginning at dawn
with the flagraising ceremony and ending at dusk with the
descending of the flag. The camera follows the progression
of the shadow of the flagpole over the course of a day. /
12-stündige Dokumentation im Zeitraffer, von der
Fahnenzeremonie im Morgengrauen bis zum Einholen der
Fahne in der Abenddämmerung. Die Kamera verfolgt, wie die
Fahnenstange im Lauf des Tages über den Platz wandert.