

*I Lose Myself in Bicilogues, I Lose Myself in Mexico City:  
Bicilogues in Dialogue with the works of Francis Alÿs*

Kyle McKinley  
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Prof. Christina Mc Phee  
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The carefully measured stroll of the museum goer betrays a gestural excess that has been over-determined by the very architecture of the museum itself. Fairly well trained in the contemplative and reverential composure that the viewer should maintain, I walk slowly to a corner of one of the echoing concrete halls that make up the exhibition space at the Walker Art Center. In this corner I encounter an artwork about an entirely different kind of walking: a walking that, unlike the slightly affected gate that the museum institution has brought out in me, actively produces the space its walker traverses. On a video screen in this corner is footage of a man pushing a large block of ice through a city street; the street is unidentified, and the man is non-descript, but through the action of pushing the ice through this urban environment, of its slow melting and the tiny evaporating traces it leaves on the sidewalk, the cityscape loses its otherwise mundane character and is transformed into a complex set of relations—relations that exist only in the imagination of the viewer.



Francis Alÿs calls his performance art actions simply “walks.” In *Paradox of Praxis 1*, the work described above, Alÿs pushed a block of ice through the streets of Mexico City for nine hours.<sup>1</sup> In the process the block, which began its journey roughly the size of Alÿs himself, melts into something like a snowball, which the artist dribbles in front of himself like a soccer player, and eventually, into merely a damp spot on the ground. The block of ice is the only material that Alÿs’s artistic gesture has acted upon. If the kicks and scrapes it suffers at the artist’s hand or by the friction of asphalt and concrete are akin to the

chiseling and polishing of a sculptor, it is by an inverse relationship. Alÿs says of such actions that he is interested in “doing nothing while producing something.”<sup>2</sup> Yet here Alÿs has done something while producing nothing—destroying, in fact, the only “thing” in the piece. When the work is done there is nothing left of the sculptural object. The piece is incomplete, by definition, until the ice block has completely evaporated. The sculptural object is lost in the process of the art making.

To read *Paradox of Praxis*

1 in terms of the loss of the object is to situate the work firmly within the tradition of conceptual art.

As Andria Hickey writes about the piece, “while the deterioration of the work’s apparent object recalls much conceptual art of the 1960s and 1970s—which often did nothing but insist that it was



something—Alÿs has inverted this paradigm while nevertheless ending in a similar place.”<sup>3</sup> Seen in this context, Alÿs losing the sculptural object is not merely nothing new, it is the core premise around which conceptual art was built.

But the loss of object is only one of the overlapping concerns of *Paradox of Praxis* 1. Alÿs, in writing about his “walks,” explains that these activities come from an interest in cartography and in narration. “Each of my interventions is another fragment of the story I am inventing, of the city that I am mapping.”<sup>4</sup> Taking Alÿs at face value might suggest that his oeuvre taken as a whole will add up to a novel or an atlas, yet nothing about the action itself is legible as a narrative or a map. The five minutes of video that the museum visitor encounters as documentation of Alÿs’ nine hour “walk” is similarly minimalist in its refusal of story telling and cartographic conventions. If this is a part of a story it is maybe only one sentence (“Walk until there’s nothing left.”); if this is mapping a city it is maybe only one line on the map (the snail-trail left behind by the melting ice). As curator Nicholas Baume writes of this work, “As

a storyteller, Alÿs is ultimately concerned with the space of memory and imagination; to this extent, his fabled city is a virtual one.”<sup>5</sup>

Literary theorists point out that the novel is a form that asks the reader to imagine him or her self within the grand narratives of the western tradition.<sup>6</sup> Geographers note the analogous effect a map has of situating the viewing subject within a cartographic abstraction.<sup>7</sup> Storytellers who wish to subvert the logics of the Western tradition, or mapmakers who hope to invite viewers to actively participate in the production of space, are inclined to lose the trappings of novels and maps in favor of less determinate forms. These are the greatest successes of *Paradox of Praxis 1*: it loses not only the sculptural object but also the trappings of stories and maps. It is a sculpture that has lost its materiality, a story that has lost narration, and a map that has lost abstraction.

*Bicilogues* is similarly interested in storytelling and in mapping and is similarly wary of the narrative arc and the omniscient view of the world map. In *Bicilogues* I seek to lose the cartographer’s ambition to completeness. I lose the documentarian’s impulse to verisimilitude and the historian’s desire for objectivity. Unlike *Paradox of Praxis 1*, however, *Bicilogues*, has no interest in tracing a map of solitary travel through space. I lose the figure of the individual artist or the flaneur (which Alÿs’ “walks” rely upon as an organizing principle) and replace it with a dialogue between cyclists as they cooperate to produce the space that they travel through.



Alÿs’s “walks” are structured around a particular and particularly simple gesture. In *Zapatos Magnéticos* (1994), Alÿs wears magnetic shoes in order to “map” the city via its residue.<sup>8</sup> Bits of nails and metal shavings adhere to these shoes as Alÿs walks the streets of Havana (his contribution to the 1994 Havana Bienal); that which is stuck to them at the end of the walk tells the story of the city they have tread upon.

Just as in *Paradox of Praxis 1* we witness as the artist's movements produce and are produced by the ice that he pushes and kicks before him, in *Zapatos Magnéticos* the artist's gestures are meaningful only through the (low) technology of his magnetic shoes.

In *Bicilogues* movement is determined by the technology of the bicycle—the cyclist as storyteller and cartographer. Cycling, as a gesture, lacks the poetic simplicity of Alÿs' actions. The stories I encounter about the places that cycling produces lack the brevity of wit that Alÿs' implied narratives invoke. This leaves me asking myself how to pare down the bodily activity of riding a bike and how to simplify the stories. What are the gestures of cycling that are key to the particular version of space that cycling co-produces?



How can these gestures be most simply rendered? Narrated? How can I lose the mechanical clutter of bicycle technology, and the techno-clutter of new media, without losing the particular manner that subjects produce themselves, and produce their geography, through these technologies?

- 1 As presented at Walker Art Center, April-September 2009. Documentation of *Paradox of Praxis 1* viewable at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZedESyQEnMA> (retrieved from the web 11/11/2009).
- 2 Russell Ferguson, *Francis Alÿs: The Politics of Rehearsal* (Los Angeles: Hammer Museum, 2007), 63.
- 3 Peter Eleey, *The Quick and The Dead* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2009), 176.
- 4 Francis Alÿs *Walks/Paseos* (Mexico City: Museo de Arte Moderno, 1997), 15.
- 5 Nicholas Baume, Listen carefully, as our menu has changed ([http://www.postmedia.net/alys/freematrix.htm#\\_edn7](http://www.postmedia.net/alys/freematrix.htm#_edn7) retrieved from the web 11/11/2009).
- 6 In *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983) Benedict Anderson demonstrates how the nineteenth century novel and the daily newspaper allowed for the formation of an imagined community that takes the shape of national boundaries. In *An Atlas of the European Novel 1800-1900* (London: Verso, 1998) Franco Moretti covers similar ground but extends his analysis to show how the novel form was deployed for the territorialization of spaces (notably spaces contested by wars for independence), thereby suggesting further connections between narration and geography.
- 7 SITUATION NEEDED! Lize Mogel and Alexis Bhagat (eds.) *An Atlas of Radical Cartography* (Los Angeles: The Journal of Aesthetics and Protest Press, 2008)???? Others?
- 8 See documentation at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Azap6lJezI&feature=related> (retrieved from the web 11/11/2009).