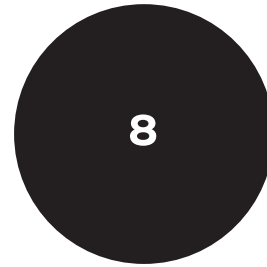




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## **View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture.**

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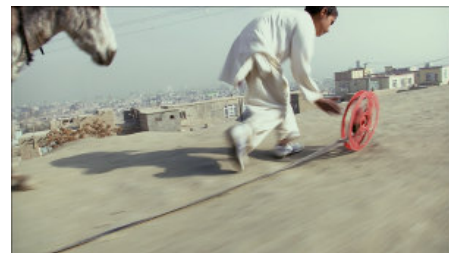
## The Games We Play

### Francis Alÿs in Conversation with Magda Szczęśniak<sup>1</sup>

**Magda Szczęśniak:** Your projects often employ surprising or marginal points of view – understood in the literal sense, as the place from which you look. For example in *Sleepers*, where you crouch to capture a sleeping person or animal. In one of your more recent films *Reel-Unreel*, you focalize several ways of looking in a city: the point of view of a child running along a street, eyes focused on an object, in this case a film reel, which he uses as a toy; the city as a typical landscape; and then you also raise your eyes up, towards the sky, which here is unsettled by the fact that besides a blissful blue we also see people and objects looking at the inhabitants of Kabul: helicopters, drones, etc. What is the significance of the re-enactments of these varied points of view in your projects made in Afghanistan?

**Francis Alÿs:** The point of entrance into this environment was actually not a particular point of view, but a particular practice, a children's game – the game with the hoop and the stick – mostly because it allowed me to materialize a scenario, which preceded my visit to Kabul. That's often the case with work created in response to rather awkward invitations, like the one to Kabul... Not so much because of the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan, but rather because of my pretty much absolute ignorance about the local cultural context. I'm a Belgian, living and working in Mexico, who's being invited to Kabul to work on an artistic project. One could question the relevance of my comment, my intervention or reading of the place. My way of proceeding in such circumstances is to hang on to my own narrative, to develop a new episode of my own narrative in that particular context.

Before traveling to Kabul, I was concerned with my relation to film. The same way as I have been questioning my relation to sculpture and painting, I was going through what you could call a cyclical repositioning of myself in relation to media.



Francis Alÿs, *Reel-Unreel* (Afghan projects, 2010 – 2014), video documentation of the action, film still, Kabul, Afghanistan, 2011. In collaboration Julien Devaux and Ajmal Maiwandi. Courtesy of the artist and David Zwirner Gallery, New York, London

I was consumed by the transition from analog to digital, but also by the proliferation of moving images. I needed to understand for myself where I was standing in relation to that medium. The desire to further explore film and the mechanics of action – the interest in rewinding and unwinding – were both already there before I went to Kabul. So when I arrived in Kabul and saw kids playing hoop and stick and I visited the Afghan Film Archive and found out about the Taliban burning the positives from the film archive and then finally learnt about the complex relationship of Middle Eastern culture with image and representation. On top of that, I was also feeling dissatisfied with the mainstream media coverage of daily life in Kabul: a tragic and sensationalist manner of representing the environment. All this made me feel that it was the right context to materialize that particular scenario. What I'm saying is that very rarely does one go to a place and just come up with a project – most of the time you already have various scenarios before arrival and the encounter with the place itself suddenly triggers a mode of materialization. This might sound slightly opportunist, but it's also a way of protecting myself in the situation of a kind of artistic blind date – a situation with no parameters, in which so many things can go wrong. As an artist you only have this much time and this many ideas, so for me it's about finding something both relevant to the local cultural context and relevant in my own narrative.

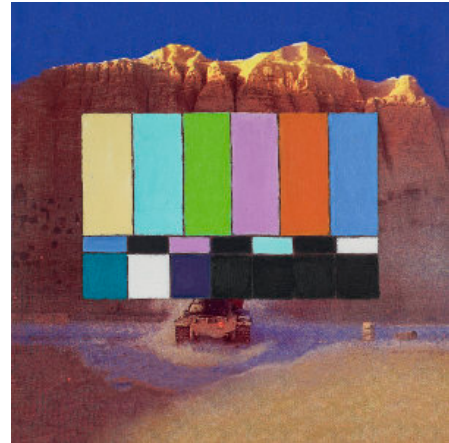
In this case, it was a children's game that provided the entry point: such practices have been an important source of inspiration for my work from early on. In terms of the process, it was very quick. Two days after my arrival, I realized that 'hoop-and-stick' was in fact one of the most popular games and then, having visited the Afghan Film Archive, I thought we could substitute the reel for the hoop. Five days later we were doing tests with kids.

There were still many doubts, and many logistical aspects to be determined, but the scenario was in place. Only after that, when I was preparing for my next trip to Afghanistan, I started reading more about different cultural contexts and I felt I was moving in the right direction.

It's always quite a long process – the production stage – and then filming is so short; it is maybe five percent of the total time you spend on the whole project. Perhaps that's why I tend to present – sometimes in a slightly exaggerated manner – all the evidence of the natural processes, everything that amounted to the making

of five or twenty-five minutes of the final image.

**MSz:** Let's talk about these surplus images, which came out of the Afghani project. First of all, you present documentation of the project, which shows your investment in other media like painting and drawing. Second of all – and I think this is a new element of your practice – you introduce images, which disrupt certain representational regimes: in this case Western mainstream media representation of Afghanistan. I'm referring here in particular to the 'test pattern' paintings and the little 'camouflage' paintings. Could you please comment on these a little?



Francis Alÿs, *Untitled, Study for Reel-Unreel*, oil on print, 2012. Courtesy of the artist

**FA:** Back then it seemed like the right thing to do, and now, some years later, I'm clueless about why they came about. I knew from the beginning that it would be pretty much impossible to represent what I was seeing in Afghanistan, to give an objective portrait of the place. So, I started thinking about the "test patterns," as you called them, the color bars, for two reasons. In my memory, in my culture, they used to be introduced in the absence of invention, they were an interlude. On the other hand, because they are electronically produced, it is virtually impossible to reproduce them. It's something that can only exist when it is electronically reproduced, it can't be physically reproduced. The intention behind these paintings was to get as close as possible to the reality of something electronically produced with the awareness that it's impossible. Which was a little bit of what I felt in my attempts at portraying the city of Kabul. I knew that whatever I was trying to do, I would never achieve satisfactory results. This was also how I felt in relation to film at that time. They also helped me to stay in touch with the project, in the quite long gaps between the visits to Afghanistan.

I think each project I have done in the past ten or fifteen years has been accompanied by a series of images, which more or less directly relate to the project itself. They have different functions – in the case of the project I did in Gibraltar, the images are pretty much everything that I could not achieve in real life, they became very allegorical. In the case of *Tornado*, the paintings were imagined as phenomenological images that seem to somehow encompass my intentions and

frustrations that were part of the process of the project's making.

**MSz:** Maybe the images from the Afghani project stood out for me precisely because when you speak of the Afghan projects you emphasize the fact that it was difficult to represent this experience, and that you somehow felt out of place. I thought this led you to a different aesthetic.

**FA:** I mean, in reality it wasn't that difficult. What was difficult was the fact that from early on I knew that it was not going to be possible to represent what it's like to be operating in a place going through a stage of conflict. I was not able to express violence. However, there were other ways of interfering, intervening in this place and this is what I'm offering. I meant these images to be a kind of cautionary introduction – a way of saying: "This is what you're looking at, but you have to take the context into account." Beyond that, once I had knowledge about the cultural context, operating in Afghanistan was relatively easy and quite a smooth process. Easier than in many other places I have worked in: in terms of collaborations and permits, in terms of communication even – strangely, because the language was an absolute barrier. But it was very spontaneous.

The filming process was also very spontaneous. We had a clear set of rules to start with, but we didn't have a finished scenario when we started filming. It kind of just developed itself in the making, largely through the input of the kids, who took on the role of directors – they told us where to go and what to do. They also expressed the desire for the film to lead to some kind of outcome.

Julien, the cameraman, and I were deliberating about constructing the film as a kind of a loop – a story with no beginning and no end to it, of two kids just chasing each other endlessly. And only midway through the filming, we got the idea that it could actually be a story, not only with an end, but also with a climax – the moment when the two kids race to the top of the hill. This brought questions and quite intense discussions with Julien about fictionalizing – at one point we moved from improvising to planning scenes, which I was very skeptical about. The last third of the scenes – from the moment when one of the kids goes on the truck –



Francis Alÿs, *Reel-Unreel* (Afghan projects, 2010 – 2014), video documentation of the action, film still, Kabul, Afghanistan, 2011. In collaboration Julien Devaux and Ajmal Maiwandi. Courtesy of the artist and David Zwirner Gallery, New York, London

are much more planned. I resisted, but it was the kids and Julien, who finally decided that we needed a plan and we also needed the viewer to achieve some kind of closure while watching the film.

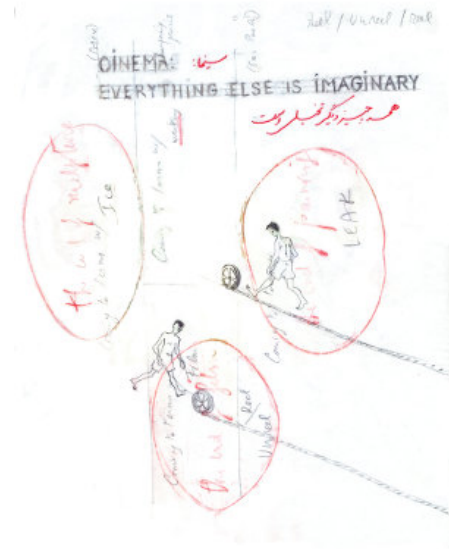
**MSz:** In a way, this conflict mirrors the doubleness of every game as such – on the one hand, every game is based on repetition, which would be addressed by the loop construction. But on the other, it seems that games require an effect, an ending – someone wins, someone loses.

**FA:** That's true. I'm pleased it happened, because it twisted my mechanics, my way of doing things. It was an interesting moment for me. Although I do miss the spontaneity, which is more typical of the way I usually work, when I set some initial rules, but then whatever happens, happens.

**MSz:** But then you also have pieces where the end point was be planned. For example in the walking pieces – *Duett* (1999) or *Guards* (2004–2005) – in which two or more people would walk through a city for an unlimited amount of time until they encountered each other.

**FA:** Yes, that was a choreography. Here the unknown, spontaneous element, was in the process itself – in Venice it could have taken something like ten days, or maybe we would have never met. And I would have been dead. Whereas in London, the sixty-four Coldstream Guards, dressed in traditional British military attire, were much more likely to meet. But there was still a chance factor involved. It really is a huge change in the process once you add an element like a storyboard – once you make a storyboard, you're moving from what was originally registered naturally to a fiction. I have very ambiguous feelings about that.

**MSz:** Would you say that the way you feel also derives from the fact that you prefer some kind of poetic statement over a narrative? Many critics have noted that your projects can be easily described by these surprising, often touching, one-liners: "A group of people moves a mountain," "Man jumps into tornado," "A car drives up and slides down a hill," and so on... Implementing a narrative, guided by a storyboard,



Francis Alÿs, *Untitled, Study for Reel-Unreel*, pen and pencil on paper, 2011–2012. Courtesy of the artist

deprives you of that – you're forced to build sentences with subordinate clauses.

**FA:** I think it's partly that, but also it's something more. Yes, I would lose that kind of lightness. By moving into fiction, not only do you need to see the document, but also the information brought in by the context becomes so important that you absolutely have to see the film to get a sense of what it was about. For as much as I can narrate the action of *Reel-Unreel*, you get much more by seeing the whole film. Which, I'm not necessarily sure is the case with, for example, the ice piece [*Sometimes Making Something Leads to Nothing*, 1997]. It's interesting to see the document of the action, but it fundamentally doesn't give you much more than listening about the action. I feel similarly about the dune in Lima [*When Faith Moves Mountains*, 2002]. Reading about the action will give you an idea of what it looked like and what it was about. That's something, which would be difficult to do with the Afghanistan piece and I probably should investigate that turn in my own work, I'm not necessarily sure if that's the direction I want to take. Another difference critics have written about in relation to *Reel-Unreel* is that the handling of the camera is much more professional than in earlier movies. Yes, it's true. But, after making twenty five films I can't pretend that I have the same genuine relationship to the camera as in the 1990's. My only hope is that what you lose is compensated by something else. What do you think?

**MSz:** Of course, I think there is a noticeable difference between the way you worked with images in the beginning of your practice and now. To take the ice piece as an example – there are always a couple of things that strike one in it. First of all, the temporality of “making something” – we are aware of how lengthy the process must be, of melting a huge and heavy block of ice – palpable even though, or maybe precisely because, the process becomes condensed into a video of five minutes. But you do feel the kind of material process of the ice melting. Another thing, which I feel is well captured in the early pieces is the tenderness with which you approach the objects. The film really seems to be about a relationship, more than about the beauty of a natural process. You can push a block of ice in many different ways and I feel you kind of pushed it as if it was, well, something that you were really involved with. And I think that way of handling your immediate surroundings did actually have something to do with the poetic structure of your pieces, the one-liner quality developed in a time-based piece.

**FA:** Yeah. I miss it. This essential quality is the most difficult to achieve. It's something you can't entirely plan. Only after a while you see that an action had that kind of grace. You always try to kind of get close to that kind of space, but it's an ongoing struggle, to reach a moment where you suddenly transcend the action itself. I guess that's what keeps you in game, gives you a kick to continue.

**MSz:** I also wanted to ask you about something that feels particularly relevant in Eastern Europe and Poland. I am thinking of your works, in which you deal with processes of modernization and development. Although your work is very much embedded in the local contexts of Latin America, especially Mexico, I feel that many of your artistic tactics could also be applied here. They seem to speak to a similar kind of disillusionment with the promises of modernization. In the case of Poland, we may think of the period of the post-communist transition, a process, which was supposed to successfully catapult the whole country into a mature modernity, modeled on the West. In the past few years, there have been a lot of voices saying that this process never actually happened – or rather didn't happen for everyone, and that the very concept of the transition was flawed in many ways, that a full transition from one state to the other was impossible to begin with, that we'll never actually “catch up” with the West. I feel that this is what you also address in your films *Rehearsal I* and *Rehearsal II* – a never ending trial, like the situation where the old Volkswagen beetle keeps driving up the hill, but then slides back down, but one which nevertheless has palpable results.

**FA:** I think what I was trying to say is that more happens in the process, in an attempt, than in the actual achievement. I tried to work on the notion of progress measured not by the moment of final achievement, for example better society, but by the nature of the struggle itself. For me, the most interesting theme is struggle. It's much more fascinating and important to look at struggle than to judge by achievements. But it's probably important to say that we're talking about narratives, which are in a sense already gone, because to talk about modernity today means something entirely different than two decades ago. The rules of the game have changed – for Mexico, the Middle East, Latin America, I don't know but Poland, but I assume it's



Francis Alÿs, Lada Kopeika Project, Brussels–St Petersburg, April 16 – 21, 2014. In collaboration with my brother Frédéric and Constantin Felker, Commissioned by Manifesta 10. Image by: Francis Alÿs. Courtesy of the artist



similar. Probably my best work that addresses these modernization narratives is the chase of the mirage, in which each time you felt you were about to achieve your goal, it vanished. This kind of endless chase, without ever reaching the destination, was probably the best illustration I could give of these complicated issues. But they say Poland seems to be doing quite well? At least it seems so from the outside – I was just reading an article in the *Financial Times* about how well Poland is doing...

**MSz:** I think it depends on which “Poland” you look at. There are immense inequalities, which can be traced out both geographically, regionally, as well as in terms of class structure. Of course, there is this image of Poland as a “green island” on a dark map of crisis, but to me, and not only to me, this seems like a very false image, one which has been produced through the use of certain rigid economic categories, which tend to obscure finer differences.

**FA:** Yeah, I understand – the same mechanism happens in relation to Mexico. I mean, when I hear this narrative about Mexico and other Latin American countries as the “fastest growing economies,” I always think “what is this place they're talking about, where does it exist”?

**MSz:** You mentioned that this older rhetoric of modernization no longer operates in Mexico, that we've entered a different phase. Could you say a little more about that?

**FA:** I think the concept of modernization has given way to the concept of globalization. Which of course doesn't mean, as we've already said, that modernization was actually achieved. We're dealing much more with this imposition of the global system, global economy, which has some positive effects, but also has many devastating drawbacks for the local cultures. I am also thinking here of smaller industries, which have been almost entirely overtaken by global chains of production. It's shocking to see how quickly, mostly through the commodities imported from Asia, a whole culture has been wiped out. That's something I see everyday, when I go to a market in Mexico and compare the products that are sold now to the ones that were being sold ten years ago. We're talking about entirely different products. What's more, there's no memory of that transition, it's something that has happened in a snap, in a very brutal way. So for me the *Rehearsal* pieces seem like the most dated projects that I have done so far – ones which frame a particular moment of Mexican or Latin American history. Even the ice

piece or *The Leak* haven't dated in the same way, they've maintained certain a-temporality. That's partly why, when I'm asked about the *Rehearsals*, I really have to go back, in my mind, to how things were in 1997, 1998, 1999. They are testimonies to that time.

**MSz:** Speaking of timeliness and dating – how do those concepts of a piece having its own time relate to the fact that you often perform “re-enactments”? Or to frame it without referring to an art historical term – you apply the same tactic to different cultural contexts. I'm thinking in particular about such projects as *The Leak* (Paris, 2003) and *The Green Line* (Jerusalem, 2004), *Bridge/Puente* (Havana, Cuba and Key West, Florida, 2006) and *Don't Cross the Bridge Before You Get to the River* (Strait of Gibraltar, Morocco and Spain, 2008) and maybe especially the pair *Game Over* (Culiacán, Mexico 2011) and the recent project for Manifesta 10 – *Lada Kopeika Project* (St. Petersburg, 2014). In *Game Over*, you travelled by car from Mexico City to Culiacán (approx. 1200 km) and crashed it into a tree at your final destination. You repeated this action in Europe, when you travelled with your brother from Belgium to St. Petersburg.

**FA:** With the two last projects – *Game Over* and the Lada project – there were completely different reasons for why the same solution – crashing a car into a tree – seemed the right solution. But the growing frustration in these two cultural contexts is nearly identical. In both cases, I felt the same need to exercise a performative gesture in order to animate something in a situation of complete apathy.

For Manifesta I had an entirely different idea. I went for much more experimental project, a massive opera to be performed in the courtyard of the festival venue. This had been completely blocked, so I proposed the Lada project, which I knew Kasper König, the curator, would accept. It was a very joyful venture, in many ways. The trip with my brother was fantastic, performing of the crash, with all the explosion of anger in front of the Hermitage, it all worked well. It justified the project. But at first, I had a lot of resistance towards repeating something that had already been done in Culiacán a couple of years earlier. In the case of *The Leak* it was different, because I was literally quoting myself and I needed to quote myself in order to make this performance in Jerusalem. What I was interested in was comparing the different perceptions of the same action – in the context of art for

the sake of art and in the context heavily marked by the political and military situation.

**MSz:** The difference between the primary action and repetition seems to be in their density as well – the second action always envelops the first one within it. But also you seem to be adding more contexts to the repetitions, as if they couldn't exist on their own. So with *The Green Line* we witness your walk with a leaking can of paint, but it's performed in the actual space of the border agreed upon after the Arab-Israeli war of 1948; the film itself is also much more complex as it gives voice to historians and activists. In the *Lada Kopeika Project*, the backdrop is the story of a voyage with your brother, which you had planned when you were young, but which you actually never completed. By the way – what's striking from the Eastern European perspective is that you're driving in the wrong direction. You're driving your Lada West to East, whereas we in the East we would always dream of driving our Ladas from the East to West.

**FA:** It's true (laughs). It was actually one of the questions we were asked in St. Petersburg. People would come up to me and say: "It's really strange, you actually wanted to come to Russia in the 1980's? What the heck are you talking about?" It was hard for the local people to understand there was a whole generation of Westerners fascinated – in an absolutely naïve way – with communism. Those who asked me about this were unaware that a parallel fascination to the one they had with the West, existed on the other side of the Iron Curtain

**MSz:** In the reviews of *Manifesta*, your piece was often singled out as the only project actually interesting for the local audience.

**FA:** I think it was mostly interesting for the kids, because kids love it. Kids were dragged to the exhibition and the crashed Lada became the site where the parents would leave them and say: "We'll be back in two hours. Play with the car" (laughs).

**MSz:** Will it stay there?

**FA:** No. It will end up in a scrap yard.

**MSz:** And the one in Culiacán?

**FA:** The one in Culiacán is staying. The idea behind that project was to have it slowly decaying and sinking into the landscape. And it's slowly happening, surprisingly

slowly, it's actually a much more sturdy a car than one would have imagined. The windows are gone and there's animals living in it, rats or foxes, and it's become completely inhabited by plants. It looks great. It's my only piece where I managed to construct some kind of monument, a tropical monument maybe.

**MSz:** Because you don't really leave objects behind.

**FA:** No, not really. In St. Petersburg someone wanted to buy the car and leave it in a nearby park, but I didn't feel it made any sense in that situation, after the exhibition. The relation to the residue becomes fetishistic very quickly, it's very shaky ground. Not many artists have managed to walk that thin line, Chris Burden sometimes has managed to deal with residues in an interesting way. I think, in the case of Joseph Beuys it was a complete disaster. As much as I admire his performative practices, I find his installations sordid.

The images I leave behind are autonomous, I think they can be disconnected from the actual event. I hope they can survive independently from the performance. They are part of my methodology – I need to prepare drawings and paintings in order to progress with the performance... Once the performance has happened, the paintings actually survive for a few months and then they either die naturally or they begin their independent lives. It's obvious also that in the mechanism of my production, without the paintings and the drawings, I wouldn't be able to make films. They're the main and only financial motor for the performances. They grant me freedom of operation. If something fails, I can retreat... It's a bit of a luxury.



Francis Alÿs. *The Loop*, Tijuana-San Diego 1997. Ephemera of an action.  
Courtesy of the artist

To return to landscapes, which you mentioned in the beginning. I'm preparing a show about the particular negotiations between the paintings and the performances, and I realized that the main genre for those three projects – the *Tornado* and the projects made in Gibraltar and Afghanistan – are actually landscapes. The first stage of each three projects was to make landscapes, defined in the nineteenth century traditional manner; besides the size, which I kept very small.

**MSz:** That's very interesting, because the second step of all of these projects is

putting yourself...

**FA:** ...in the landscape.

**MSz:** Yes, and through that visualizing the safety of the traditional landscape genre, of this mode of representation. This is especially visible in *Tornado*, where, by jumping into the tornado with your camera, you literally lose control of the process of producing the image. But I also see that in *The Green Line*. Even if you didn't begin with a landscape, you began with an image – a map – another supposedly secure and rational form of representing space, which you stepped into.

Another landscape form I wanted to ask you about was the single image, a postcard, which you present as an effect of the project titled *The Loop*, which was produced for an exhibition made in the border region of San Diego, USA and Tijuana, Mexico. You used your commission fee to travel from Tijuana to San Diego, but in a way that wouldn't force you to cross the Mexico-USA border. The only image left from the project is a postcard, which pictures the sea.

**FA:** The curve of the sea. Partly because, if you think of it, what I did really was going around the Pacific Rim. If you look at the world from the Eastern point of view, what you look at mostly is the sea, enormous and intense presence of water. I needed that image to suggest that the curve of the globe was what made "the loop" possible. The image was supposed to help the viewer understand the mechanics of the displacement. I was making paintings, drawings, and sketches along the way, but in the end they just seemed too anecdotal and personal. They were bringing little to the method of, what you called one-liners.

They weren't anything interesting from that point of view. Even worse, they distracted from the simplicity of the scenario.

## Footnotes

1 The conversation took place on the occasion of the artist's exhibition entitled *Reel-Unreel*, curated by Ewa Gorzqdek at the Centre for Contemporary Art., Ujazdowski Castle in Warsaw. We owe our gratitude to the curator and the artist's studio for facilitating the meeting with the artist.