



# 'THE INVENTION OF A CITY.' THE SOCIOPOLITICAL NARRATIONS OF FRANCIS ALÿS

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## MAIN TEXT

*The invention of a language goes  
together with the invention of a city.  
Each of my interventions is another  
fragment of the story that I am  
inventing, of the city that I am mapping.  
In my city everything is temporary.  
Francis Alÿs (Godfrey 2010)*

## 1

A man, different from the others, tall, sunglasses, white, a pointed nose, hands in the pockets and one leg casually pulled up, leans against the railings along the cathedral of the capital. A sign in front of him reads *Turista* (photographic documentation of an action, Mexico City, 1994). Similar signs left and right of his, read *Plomero*, *Pintor*, *Ysero*, *Electricista*. All words are skillfully painted by a sign painter on

cardboard or a piece of wood. Here, in the heart of the historic center of the capital of his host country and among the people who keep the alternative economy of the city going, the tourist seems to have found his place.

Here he has also found his destiny as the outsider who he is and will remain and prefers to be. His tallness, thin sharp nose and sunglasses betray his otherness. He not only accepts this, he exhibits it and as an outsider he even claims the right to stand there between them as one of them, a contradiction about which no one seems to be surprised, not even he himself is. He belongs to them as one who doesn't belong to them.

A stranger is an eccentric, out of center, in the same way that an artist is eccentric, and the center of the city seems to have accepted him as the eccentric he is, probably, hypothetically,

because the center of the city is just as eccentric as he is. By placing himself outside the community he appropriates a place inside the community. In the artist's own words: '(...) because I never really belong to them, I try to invent myself a role. I attempt to insert myself as another character to gain some kind of identity in a new neighborhood.'

(Medina)

But first of all, I'd like to outline very briefly my research project where Francis Alÿs, because he is the tourist, is one of the protagonists. Then I'll go on to propose some new theoretical insights on the socio-political urbanistic interventions of the Belgian architect in the center of Mexico City. My research is about the unresolved relation between architecture and the visual arts. From this perspective I study the passage from poetry to video to architecture in the work of Vito Acconci and from architecture to action to poetry in the work of Francis Alÿs as a potential working model and method.

In 1987 the architect Francis Alÿs leaves Belgium for Mexico, in order to help as a volunteer with the rebuilding of the country after the earthquake of 1985. After his term, he decides to stay in the country and he moves to the center of Mexico City. From that moment on, he

is no longer a volunteer, but has become a stranger, a foreigner. He will also not remain an architect much longer. In the five years that follow his architectural explorations and observations in the city, still largely in ruins, transform into *paseos*, activist walks, in the historic center. Today, Francis Alÿs is consistently described as a Belgian-Mexican artist. But can he call himself a Mexican, or does he remain forever the foreigner, a tourist? Is he a native or an immigrant? Is he an artist or an architect?

By 1994, Alÿs himself seems to have stopped worrying about the issue. On the central square of Mexico City, he takes place among the plumbers, electricians, carpenters, painters and other job seekers along the sidewalk next to the Cathedral. The artisans display their skillfully painted signs, on which they advertise their services to the people walking by. 60 percent of the jobs in Mexico City are in the informal sector. Goods are sold and services are offered outside the traditional market economies, straight on the footway. It is Alÿs' first artistic intervention in the *Zócalo*. Many will follow.

The *Zócalo*, as the central square of Mexico City is called, is the city's public

space par excellence. Anything can happen there and nothing is what it seems. The square is called *zócalo*, meaning base, but it has no base and no statue. There is only a raised flag. The *zócalo* is not a base but a flagpole. The flagpole is not a pole, but looks more like a column. And the column does not support a building, but it carries a flag or it supports the air, which perhaps amounts to the same.

Just like the authorities of church, state, city and commerce turn around the *Zócalo*, the Palacio Nacional in the East, the Catedral Metropolitana de la Asunción de María in the North, the Federal District Buildings in the South, and the Hotel Majestic in the West, and just like Alÿs in his 1997 intervention *Patriotic Tales* revolves around the base with a flock of sheep, so the base circles around its significance in a perfect centripetal circular motion and so the whole 'Plaza de la Constitución', the official name of the *Zócalo*, turns around his emptiness, his lack of being. The *Zócalo* is a square in its most literal, most basic form, an open, empty space between buildings, a square that is not a square.

The *Zócalo* is so empty that you can only find shelter for the sun in the shadow of the oversized flagpole. The

square has no statues, no fountains, no banks, no trees, a few small flowerbeds, not even a market stall, while elsewhere on all sidewalks of the *centro historico*, there are hundreds and hundreds of stalls and trees and even some benches and statues. Yet everything is present on the square, the church, the state and the flag, the city trade and the tourists. Still there is nothing, just wind. The wind that pushes around the square a plastic bottle, chased by a child, kicked by a boy, observed by the passersby. Are you a typical spectator - and what else is a tourist than the preeminent typical spectator? - what you are really doing is waiting for the accident to happen. It is the title of a video by Alÿs, featuring a bottle in the wind in the *Zócalo*. It is also the wind that is setting the flag in motion. And then there are those who stand in the shadow of the flag, those who demonstrate, who are chaperoned and outnumbered by the riot police, and those who with hundreds cross the square, usually slinking around the sides, solidly hugging as closely as they can the houses under the porticos of the South and West sides.

The *Zócalo* is a place outside of all places, even though it has a location in reality. It differs from all the sites that it

reflects, and juxtaposes several places, several sites that are in themselves incompatible. Linked to slices in time, pre-Hispanic, Hispanic and Modern, individual, social and political, and presupposing a system of opening and closing that both isolates it and makes it penetrable, in fact it is a deception. That is how Michel Foucault has defined a heterotopia. It fits the Zócalo very well. We think we enter, where we are excluded by the very fact that we enter. It's also the deception of the authentic tourist or, in our case, of the authentic artist, looking in a Bruce Nauman-like fashion for mystic truths. And it's in particular *A Story of Deception*, the title of Alÿs' last exhibition in Tate Modern London, Wiels Brussels and Moma New York.

Alÿs calls the Zócalo 'a negative space of the city, a miracle of resistance against the saturation of the urban texture of the metropolis. There have been so many attempts at filling this hole, this enormous current of air within the dense colonial grid, which so easily transforms itself into an inevitable and essential platform of public expression.' (Godfrey 2010) Alÿs has found in Mexico City, particularly in the historic center, a space which Foucault in *On Other Spaces (Des Espaces Autres)*

refers to as a non-existing space, a network space and as a 'desecrated' space. Opposites as private space and public space, family space and social space, cultural space and useful space, the space of leisure and of work remained indisputable too long, he says, but they are no longer. From his first intervention on, *Placing Pillows* in 1990, Alÿs has questioned the opposition between public and private space. In 1967 Foucault proposes 'other spaces' who neutralize the traditional oppositions, and not without success, because many philosophers, historians, sociologists, anthropologists, architects and urbanists, Massimo Cacciari, Marc Augé, Paul Virilio, Manuel Castells and many others, have followed him.

The Italian philosopher Massimo Cacciari drives the 'desecration' of the space even further. As a result of the emergence of the network space the city gets going 'along the streets and axes that intersect its pattern. Streets lead to nowhere. It is as if the city has turned into an accidental event en route, a context of routes, a labyrinth without a center, an absurd labyrinth.' (Cacciari 1983) A second consequence of this desecration of the space, says Cacciari, is that every place becomes equal 'in a universal circulation and

exchange.' Space has caught up with time and has also become 'mathematically measurable, dismountable and reconstructable.' (Cacciari 1983)

At the time Massimo Cacciari occupies the chair of aesthetics at the *Department of Critical and Historical Analysis of the Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia*, Alÿs is getting a degree in architecture at the same institute in 1985. In his publication, *Architecture and Nihilism: On the Philosophy of Modern Architecture*, a collection of essays written for the most part between 1973 and 1981, Cacciari develops the idea of the 'radical uprootedness' of the architecture, 'a getting uprooted from the boundaries of the urbs, from its dominating social circles, from its form – a getting uprooted from the place (in the sense of dwelling) associated with living.' According to Cacciari, the 'architecture of nihilism' is at the root of these negative developments: 'This tragedy is the emergence over the past century of an architecture of accomplished nihilism, that has determined ever more the image of the Metropolis: it is always about producing, driving something beyond a certain point, a continuous

and indefinable overcoming.' (Cacciari 1983)

It is quite unlikely that Alÿs has not taken note of these stances. In an interview with James Lingwood he explains his work in the logic of Cacciari as an activist who operates between residues and voids: 'When I decided to step out of the field of architecture, my first impulse was not to add to the city but more to absorb what was already there, to work with the residues, or with the negative spaces, the holes, the spaces-in-between ...' Like the Belgian Francis Alÿs has accepted his outsider status as a foreigner at the time he offers the services of a *Turista* to the city, so the architect Francis Alÿs seems to have accepted his outsider status as an artist, at the moment the artist no longer wanted something to 'add.' He puts it this way: 'The invention of a language goes together with the invention of a city. Each of my interventions is another fragment of the story that I am inventing, of the city that I am mapping. In my city everything is temporary.' (Godfrey 2010)

Marc Augé also exports this theory of being 'on the way' from the city to 'our era of hyper-modernity' and he recognizes a proliferation of 'uprooting' places or 'non-places'. Non-places have

no individuality, history or meaning, do not provide insight into the relationships between its inhabitants, but are areas of transit. Rem Koolhaas links these non-places with the 'generic city', a city free from identity, place and history, the city as transit zone. 'The in-transit condition is universal,' he asserts. (Heynen 2004) In other words, the space of the city is on the run, loses its identity or at least its center; it has become a transit zone.

It seems that Alÿs has somehow internalized these theories and has experienced at first hand the truth of it in Mexico City. Even the historic center of a city like Mexico City with such a layered history of many centuries and different cultures and civilizations has lost its individuality and has become a transit zone only defined by reference and grid points, in other words by what it is not. Alÿs realizes that in the *centro historico* he ended up in a space 'without qualities'. As a result the architect Alÿs is desperately walking around in this 'universal in-transit condition' looking for solutions that are not constantly caught up or frustrated by conflicting forces and that manage to transcend the "nihilism" of Cacciari. (Cacciari 1983)

## 2

On the photograph which documents the performance *Fairy Tales* (Mexico City 1995, photograph: re-enactment in Stockholm 1998, photographic documentation of an action), we can see Alÿs on the back in a park, walking along the waterfront. A thin bright blue thread leaves from the half-unraveled right sleeve of his artificially blue pullover to the forefront of the picture toward the viewer. Clearly, an invisible hand holds the walker at the thread of his pullover revealing the course of his stroll. It appears to be a *Re-enactment* of the well-known Grimm fairy tale of Hansel and Gretel, the equally well-known myth of Theseus and Ariadne and the epic poem of Odysseus and Penelope. All three narratives deal with the issue of mapping a passage in space and time and its relationship with the art of storytelling. The question which concerns us is this: Is the invisible hand holding the walker or is the walker walking away from the invisible hand? Who is the walker or passenger, who is the storyteller? Who is the writer or author, who is the reader? Who produces the text? Who interprets it?

The work, not only documented by a photograph but also consisting of sketches and postcards, is titled *Fairy Tales / Cuentos de Hadas*. Striking and unusual is the plural. It's not one fairy tale, there are many. The plural suggests that the action has the intention of something to say about stories in general, or, about the essence of fairy tales, narratives and myths. At the same time, the title claims that it is itself a fairy tale, because that's what stories do, they start by saying that they are a story - *Once upon a time* – and that they want to tell a narrated story. In this they differ fundamentally from novels and poems that are not based on narration but on reality or imagination.

The fairy tale *Fairy Tales* appears to be very direct and simple, like the performance *Fairy Tales* and indeed like all Alÿs' performances are very direct and simple. It only needs a few words or phrases to tell it whereby the topos, the theme and the hypothesis coincide. The extracting of the thread equals the stretching of time, equals the delineating of space, or, which is the same, the mapping of the itinerary, equals the postponing of the action, equals the walking; in short, non-action transforms spatiality in temporality, so that we can conclude that the method

of walking as the essence of the performance is also the essence of the story. The telling is the method.

The title *Fairy Tales / Cuentos de Hadas* should be considered as part of the work. The title, whether of a text or of a work of art, works as a sememe, that in its inherent sememic structure involves a potential narrative program. (Eco 1989) Sememes point in the direction of an already existing content or meaning. In an interview with Larry Miller in 1978, the Fluxus artist George Maciunas talked about 'a book (...) with a title, that's all.' (Armstrong 1996) Andy Warhol published in 1968 a book entitled *A. A Novel* filled with 451 pages of nothing and in 1975 a similar book called *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol. From A to B and Back Again*. The title *Fairy Tales* aspires comparable pretensions and creates the same expectations of absence of content.

With *Fairy Tales* Alÿs wants to tell us a story. That story can be read on the back of a postcard belonging to the action. It's a verse.

Here is a fairy tale for you

Which is just as good as true

What unfolds will give you passion

Castles on hills & also treason

How, from his cape a fatal thread

To her window the villains led.

The verse is merely an extension of the title, it paradoxically confirms the plural of the title by making it singular, and so it adds nothing to the title. The verse tells no story. It says only that it is a story, but functions like a sememe.

*Fairy Tales* is not Alÿs' only art work with storytelling as a theme. Other examples are *Patriotic Tales* (1997), in which the tale becomes an allegory with a similar separation between the content and meaning of the image, *The Rumour* (1997), *Le Temps du Sommeil* (1996 - present), *Patriotic Songs* (1998 - 9), *Re-enactments* (2000), *A Story of Deception* (2003-4), *Politics of Rehearsal* (2004). Also the works *Seven Lives of Garbage* (1995), *The Leak* (1995), *The Loop* (1997) and *Song for Lupita* [Mañana] (1998) show, perhaps not as straightforward, the same interest. Alÿs also speaks in several interviews about the narrative dimension of his work, about introducing a story and creating fables in the city by means of interventions. 'What emerged was the idea to insert into the city a story rather than an object (...). It was my way of affecting a place at a very precise moment in its history and for a very short period of time. (...) This 'mythic' dimension is interesting to me. Maybe

you don't even need to see the work; you just need to hear about it.'

(Lingwood 2005)

It is clear that Alÿs considers myths, fables and stories unambiguously as synonyms. For now I'll prefer the term 'story', a term that linguistically and philosophically responds to that of poetry and novel. Because of references to the semiotic analysis, I'll also use the term 'text'.

In his studio at the Plaza de Santa Catarina Alÿs had for years a plate placed against the wall with the text *As Long As I Am Walking*, followed by a series of negations - *I am not* - of various forms of activity, such as choosing, smoking, losing, making, knowing, falling, painting, hiding, counting, adding, crying, asking, and so on, ending with the negative affirmation *I will not repeat, I will not remember*. It looks like a kind of mantra, to open up the mind as wide as possible and at the same time not to be distracted, as a meditation. The arguments to justify his practice of walking boils down to withholding him from doing something else. Walking as not acting. This fits perfectly with his decision as an architect not wanting to add anything to the city, without abandoning the urban-architectural practice of walking.

Walking is all that remains of its architectural interest and practice in the center of the city. All the rest of what an architect 'pro-duces' in the city, is omitted, repudiated, rejected, banned, in the first place adding something to the city. *As Long As I Am Walking* is a Decalogue of prohibitions, just like the Ten Commandments are also for the vast majority prohibitions. In his last exhibition, *A Story of Deception*, at Tate Modern, two panels with the written text of *As Long As I Am Walking* were standing as Biblical Tablets of Stone side by side against the wall. The work is clearly a list of outright rejection and refusal. In his interviews, Alÿs is radically opposed to any architectural intervention in the city. In practice, however, that systematic rejection is adjusted, there remains much architecture, both in the conceptualization, the method and the result of his urban interventions. With *As Long As I Am Walking* he claims and justifies the action of walking with great certainty as an artistic method by marking it to both topos, theme and hypothesis, in exactly the same way as he does with storytelling in *Fairy Tales*. In this perspective, *As Long As I Am Walking* becomes a crucial work in the passage from architect to artist in the oeuvre of Alÿs.

During the opening of the exhibition, accompanying the blueOrange Prize which Alÿs received in 2004, a hammock is suspended in the empty atrium at the Martin-Gropius-Bau in Berlin, suggesting visitors that for this artist doing nothing, killing time and boredom are important ways of action. Walking, just like boredom and being awake, shapes a complex but loose fabric of thoughts, ideas and associations whence an imaginary thread and even dozens of threads can easily be extracted by holding one end while the walking continues. The blue thread which is pulled out from the walker's pullover, is just one of the many threads of the red, blue, yellow, black and white pullovers from the artist's wardrobe. Walking is a pretext for not having to do something, a postponement of action, like boredom is a veto on any action, and being awake a compulsion to an impossible action. Walking, boredom, and being awake are denials of activity, they are all either objection and rejection of and submission to activity. Because of the symmetry, we could say that when walking is a pretext, boredom (that of the three is the closest to meditation) is an intertext, and being awake (due to its binding nature) a hypertext, and all three belong to the same hypotext. They all

produce text. The thread from Alÿs' unraveling sleeve is a text.

Walking has a temporality akin to that of the story. *As Long As I Am Walking*, as printed in the Tate Modern catalog, is a text which is written like a poem in the typography of a typewriter, the iconic instrument of the writer of the twentieth century. This would be an indication that Alÿs also considers walking as a literary discipline which is unrolling as a story in a loosened thread in the center of the city. With this work storytelling is not only a theme and a method, allowing the passage of the medium of architecture to the medium of art, but also a medium of poetics, as the result of this passage.

Roland Barthes in *The Pleasure of the Text* draws a well-known analogy between the tissue and the text. 'Text means *Tissue*; but while this tissue is taken far more as a product, a ready-made veil, behind which, more or less hidden, meaning (truth) is located, we are now emphasizing, in the tissue, the generative idea that the text is made, is worked out in a perpetual interweaving; lost in this tissue - this texture -the subject unmakes himself (...)' (Barthes 1986) Walter Benjamin in *Der Erzähler* defines the art of storytelling in a brief but unambiguous way as 'the ability to

exchange experiences' because 'experience which is passed on from mouth to mouth (is) the source from which all storytellers have drawn.' (Benjamin 1936) The storyteller takes his story from experience - his or of others - and makes it through the story the experience of the listener. In order to pass on those experiences as fluidly as possible to the other, the lack of an explanation is an essential quality of the story.

'The most extraordinary things, marvelous things, are related with the greatest accuracy, but the psychological connection of the events is not forced on the reader. It is left up to him to interpret things the way he understands them, and thus the narrative achieves an amplitude that information lacks.' (Benjamin 1936) Unlike the information, the story never wears itself out, doesn't lose its actuality. It retains its strength and is able at all times to recall it. It does this through keeping its content as compact as possible, excluding any psychological analysis. That way the story manages to fix itself effectively in the memory of the listener. 'Actually, it is half the art of storytelling to keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it.' (Benjamin 1936)

You can transfer this multi-interpretable actuality of the text also to the domain of the arts. The art historian Benjamin is not interested in the 'original' meaning of an artwork, but in the actual meaning, in the *The Now of Cognizability (Jetzt der Erkennbarkeit)*. Images from the past form a constellation, which Benjamin calls a 'dialectical image,' also 'dialectics at a standstill,' and sometimes *Überblendung*, referring to the overlapping of printed images in the photomontages of Surrealists like Man Ray. The technique of *Überblendung* is present in the work of Alÿs, especially in the frequent use of tracing paper for his studies and sketches. According to Benjamin mental relaxation is a prerequisite to assimilate the complex constellation of images transferred from the past into the present, which is the story. There is nothing as effective to reach such a state than boredom. If sleep is the pinnacle of physical relaxation, boredom is the pinnacle of mental relaxation, he claims. 'Boredom is the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience.' (Benjamin 1936) Relaxation is a state of thoughtlessness. Both boredom and walking consist of thoughtlessness. Being awake is despite the seemingly excessive presence of

thoughts as well a state of thoughtlessness.

Umberto Eco says that 'when a text is full of open spaces, of gaps to fill, (...) the one who sent him, foresaw that they would be completed, and left them open for two reasons. First, because a text is a lazy (or economic) mechanism, surviving on the added significance assigned by the receiver (...). Secondly, because a text gradually wants, where it swaps its didactic function (*of the readerly text in the words of Barthes, note of the author*) for an aesthetic one (*of the writerly text*), to leave the initiative of the interpretation to the reader. A text wants that someone helps to function it.' (Eco 1989) If the text is very open, it becomes 'a tool for generating perverse adventures,' says Eco. (Eco 1989) A text is nothing but the strategy that defines the universe of its interpretations. Any other decision to freely use a text corresponds to the decision to enlarge the discourse universe. The dynamics of the unlimited semiosis don't frustrate this, it encourages it. (Eco 1989)

Alÿs adopts this autonomy of the *writerly text*, even though he gives it a different name. 'In this sense, myth is not about the veneration of ideals--of pagan gods or political ideology--but

rather an active interpretive practice performed by the audience, who must give the work its meaning and its social value.' (Alÿs 2002) 'The story starts there,' says Alÿs. 'The interpretations of it needn't be accurate, but must be free to shape themselves along the way.' (Alÿs 2002) The meaning sets itself in motion, the subject sets himself in process.

Paul Van Beek, September 23, 2011

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