

TIJUANA/SAN DIEGO

"INSITE 97"

For the third installment of "inSITE," a bi-nationally organized triennial of art from the Americas, forty-two site-specific projects dotted the decidedly unidentical twin cities of Tijuana and San Diego with just about any kind of work post-Conceptual appetites might fancy—that is, anything except painting. Multicultural chic gone continental, "inSITE 97" was further proof that it no longer matters whether you're in Buenos Aires, Tijuana, or Vancouver: wherever you are, you can just as easily drink Coca-Cola, watch *The Simpsons*, and enjoy pretty much the same generic contemporary art.

Even though most of the participating artists aren't yet major-league players, together their work represented a panorama of the maneuvers favored by today's avant-garde establishment, much like more celebrated mega-shows. Moreover, quality here had little to do with stature—an indication that these days prominence is proof of an artist's strategic smarts, and not necessarily his or her artistic skills. (This was confirmed by Gary Simmons' sky-writing piece, misshapen asterisks that were supposed to look like snowflakes, but didn't. No one seemed to mind.)

As a matter of course, the glaring contrasts between TJ and SD paved the way for the aestheticized exploitation of socioeconomic problems. A photomontage labeling the hometowns of Tijuana's dwellers (according to the catalogue it was intended to show "the lack of identity of a people that desires to be the Other"); a set of pictures of Baja's dump yards; and a speech that sought to deconstruct the power structures underlying "inSITE" (by, respectively, Rosângela Rennó, Allan Sekula, and Andrea Fraser) were as enlightening as a sermon on the perils of land mines would be to Bosnians.



Lorna Simpson, *Call Waiting*, 1997, black-and-white film in 16 mm, ca. 25 minutes. From "inSITE 97."

At least the multinational curatorial team let the artists themselves do all the talking. So, didactics aside, there was room for a good number of works to justify many an art pilgrim's journey. Some of these belonged to the genre of public intervention that has become a staple of many contemporary-art events. Melanie Smith's mock tourist-information office in downtown San Diego promoted rather ordinary urban "sights" with brochures, posters, and souvenirs; while the monitors typically used for infomercials in the city's International Information Center were hijacked by Thomas Glassford to present a portion of his golf pseudo-thriller *City of Greens*, (all works 1997). If these intrusions served as additional bridges over the good old art/life divide, then Eduardo Abaroa's "Black Star" *Border Capsule Ritual* actually let you carry away some soul-engaging art—that is, if you were willing to collect a complete set of his bittersweet, somewhat deranged-looking satanic figurines from vending machines around town.

But not all the gratification was found on the streets. Although for the most part local museums did not supply space, art shelters were set up to house works in need of room and board, or more accurately, a darkroom and a screen. In Miguel Rio Branco's digs, his lyrical *Between the eyes, the desert* entranced the audience with endlessly dissolving slide-sequences of indigenous faces and landscapes, causing one to forget the worldly goings-on outside. In turn, the clatter of the two cities was recorded and digitally altered by Judith Barry in her piece *Consigned to Border*, video projections showing tides of urban becoming that liquefied the sides of two freestanding walls, yielding a hypnotically beautiful virtual continuum.

More analytical than lyrical, *Call Waiting*, Lorna Simpson's video-puzzle formed of interwoven fragments of personal phone conversations in similarly overlapping tongues—which invited the viewer to rescue the disjointed narrative by bringing into play his or her own assumptions and inferences—was an effective and enticing investigation into the symbiotic workings of communication. Symbiosis was also an important element in *Alien Toy UCO (Unidentified Cruising Object)*, in which Rubén Ortiz Torres appropriated an unfolding low-rider modified by all-time "radical bed dancing" champion Chava Muñoz, and served it up with a video clip that juxtaposed the car with UFOs. Beyond a political message and readymade intricacies, the cubistic *Alien Toy* was formally intriguing, allowing low-riding quality codes to resonate along with those of "classic" art. This unassuming close encounter between art and popular culture pointed to a fertile territory where site-specificity might still hold some ground.

—Yishai Jusidman



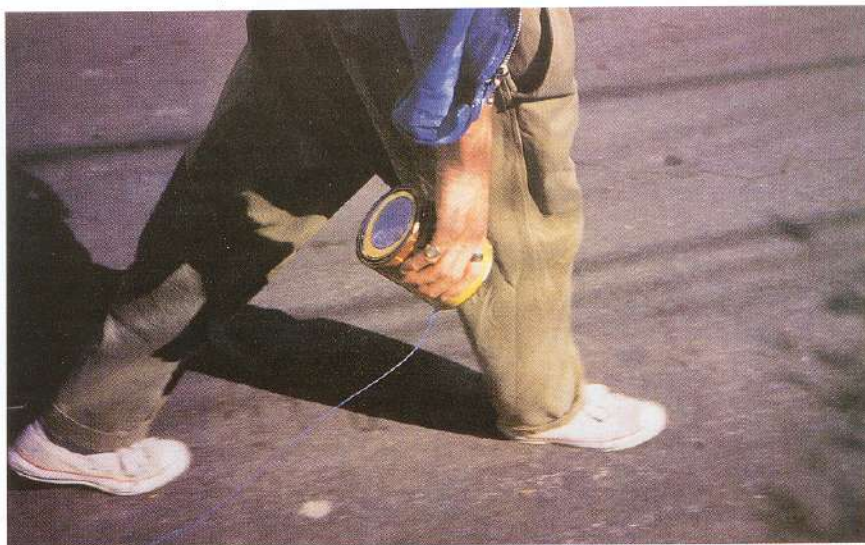
HEAD TO TOES

FRANCIS ALÿS'S PATHS OF RESISTANCE

This page: Francis Alÿs, *Fairy Tales, Archive*, 1998, wool thread, photo documentation, map, framed text, and postcard. Installation view. Opposite page, left: Francis Alÿs, *the loser/the winner*, Stockholm, 1994–98, photo documentation. From the "Paseos" (Strolls) series, 1991–. Right: Francis Alÿs, *The Leak*, São Paulo and Ghent, 1995, photo documentation. From the "Paseos" (Strolls) series, 1991–.



CARLOS BASUALDO



[As] the highly rational societies of the Renaissance felt the need to create Utopias, we of our times must create fables. — Francis Alÿs, *the loser/the winner*, 1998

My epigraph was easy enough to find. It was typewritten by Francis Alÿs on the lower left corner of a tourist map of Stockholm, which had been spread out on a simple antique wooden table complete with a matching chair in a room inside the Swedish city's Nordic Museum. Together with other writings and a postcard, the installation was one component of the artist's *the loser/the winner*, 1998, itself part of an ongoing series of projects the artist calls *paseos* (strolls). Generally carried out with various props in tow, the *paseos* have been

century neo-romantic structure recalling in turn the palaces of a century before; today it is home to the Nordic Museum, a curious visual encyclopedia embracing everything from ethnographic displays of Laplander culture to a recent show concerning the relationship of Swedes to their cars. Alÿs's hike had taken him through the parks that lie between the museums. At both sites, viewers had at their disposal (in racks located at the entrance of the two rooms where the exhibition took place) postcards printed with the artist's image, his back turned to us, clad in an electric

THE HYPNOTIC FASCINATION THAT THE DAZZLING SHOP WINDOWS EXERTED ON THE FLANEUR FINDS IN ALÿS AN INFINITELY MORE CYNICAL AND INCREDULOUS RESPONSE.

enacted in any number of diverse locales: Alÿs strolled the avenues of Havana while wearing magnetic shoes; he traversed the working-class neighborhood of Pinheiros in São Paulo carrying a punctured can of paint that left a fine, colored line tracing the artist's path; and, in the case of *the loser/the winner*, he walked from one end of Stockholm to the other clad in a sweater that unraveled with every step.

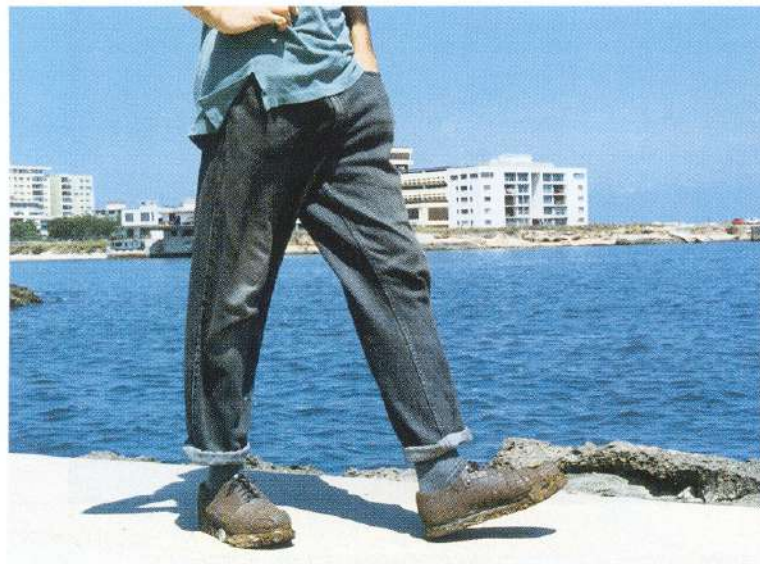
In *the loser/the winner*, Alÿs's work—his walking—connected two sites separated in space and time: The point of departure was the modern, rationalist building, very much in the Bauhaus style, that houses Stockholm's Museum of Science and Technology. The destination was a nineteenth-

century neo-romantic structure recalling in turn the palaces of a century before; today it is home to the Nordic Museum, a curious visual encyclopedia embracing everything from ethnographic displays of Laplander culture to a recent show concerning the relationship of Swedes to their cars. Alÿs's hike had taken him through the parks that lie between the museums. At both sites, viewers had at their disposal (in racks located at the entrance of the two rooms where the exhibition took place) postcards printed with the artist's image, his back turned to us, clad in an electric

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.

Two small paintings, one per venue, rounded out the installation. Each represented a tall, anonymous individual, wearing the blue sweater, strolling through a dark forest, an appropriate





Left: Francis Alÿs, *Magnetic Shoes*, Havana, 1994, photo documentation. From the "Paseos" (Strolls) series, 1991-. Right: Francis Alÿs, *Magnetic Shoes*, Havana, 1994, postcard. From the "Paseos" (Strolls) series, 1991-.

Durante la V Bienal de la Habana, Francis Alÿs calza sus zapatos magnéticos y a través de sus paseos por las calles, recoge cualquier residuo metálico encontrado sobre su camino. Por esta recolección diaria va ampliándose su nuevo territorio, y asímala los barrios que va descubriendo.

During the fifth Havana Biennial, Francis Alÿs puts on his magnetic shoes & takes daily walks through the streets, collecting scraps of metal lying in his path. With each trip he incorporates the newly-discovered neighbourhood.

enough setting for a fairy tale. The image, painstakingly rendered on a canvas partially covered with a torn piece of translucent paper, was the only document in which the audience could actually see the determined walker in his idealized setting. By contrast, in the fifteen photos strewn across the table at the historical museum, the blue thread meandering in the grass or between the somber trees was the only trace of the absent stroller. The fact that the artist was missing raised a number of questions. Had the action actually taken place? Or better, is it beside the point whether it took place or not? For Alÿs's *paseo* is a fable—a journey that is also already a story of a journey—and fables are nothing but a curious mix of reality and fiction, a truth half told in a world of half-truths, that questions the truthfulness of reality itself.

Alÿs's personal history might itself be a fable extracted from his work. Once upon a time—actually, at the end of 1987—the Belgian architect arrived in Mexico as part of a French assistance program to that country's government (participation seemingly allowed our protagonist to avoid military service in Europe). With no knowledge of Spanish, the young Alÿs, who had studied engineering in Belgium and architectural history in Venice, quickly found himself working on the aqueducts of La Mixteca (Oaxaca), several hours south of Mexico City. On one of his days off, walking through the streets of the capital's historic center,

an activity that had developed into a routine of his visits to the city, he happened to meet curator Guillermo Santamarina, a tireless promoter of contemporary art in that country. The setting was the Salón de los Aztecas café, a space that housed art shows and a bookstore, not far from the Zócalo, the magnificent square in front of Mexico City's baroque cathedral. Their initial conversation may have been about streets and books, but we can surely guess that before long the difficulties facing contemporary art in Mexico came up. Around that time, the Salón de los Aztecas was the meeting place for a whole new generation of artists. Almost by coincidence, Alÿs would encounter there those with whom he would soon begin to show his work on a regular basis: the British artist Melanie Smith and the American Thomas Glassford; and the locals Pablo Vargas Lugo, Gabriel Orozco, Diego Toledo, and Abraham Cruz Villegas. From the very beginning, Alÿs's work responded intimately to the environs in which it was realized, incorporating local materials and reflecting on the conditions of production in Mexico. One of his earliest works would be a poignant critique of the idealization of the Mexican pictorial tradition: three pieces of chewing gum, red, white, and green, like the colors of the Mexican flag, attached to a wall. It was in Mexico City that Alÿs, toward the end of 1991, would complete his first *paseo*, walking through the city's streets, dragging along a little magnetic

dog mounted on wheels. From that point on, the fables would replace the aqueducts.

Naturally, the genealogy of Alÿs's perambulations is bulky. The nineteenth-century flâneur appears among the antecedents, but the hypnotic fascination that the dazzling shop windows famously exerted on the Baudelairean figure finds in Alÿs an infinitely more cynical and incredulous response. If Alÿs's strolls are fables of sorts, they are painfully crystalline ones, like the hyperreal perceptions that follow a hangover. In 1997, for example, he was invited to contribute a work to the annual edition of the InSite show, and he decided to carry out a *paseo* between the two host cities, Tijuana and San Diego. But he chose a path such that the border dividing Mexico and the United States would never be crossed. Over the course of thirty-five days, he traveled from Tijuana to San Diego, with short layovers in Mexico City, Panama City, Santiago, Auckland, Sydney, Singapore, Bangkok, Rangoon, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Seoul, Anchorage, Vancouver, and Los Angeles. During his furious five-week itinerary, this alienated tourist stayed in touch with one of the show's curators via e-mail. Together with the documentation relating to the journey, this correspondence—itsself a sort of harried, poetic diary—was presented as an archive open to the public at the CICUT library in Tijuana.

The Loop articulates, on one hand, a critique of the tragic absurdity that marks the extensive

border between the United States and Mexico, two countries that have signed mutual cooperation pacts yet remain divided by a barrier that can only bring to mind the Berlin Wall. All the more remarkable, then, that Alÿs could do so without directly commenting on the piece's obvious subtext, indeed refraining from "all critical content beyond the physical displacement of the artist" (as stated on the postcard printed for this project)—an affirmation that, paradoxically, only reinforces the work's political implications.

From a different perspective, *The Loop* is marked by the double-edged attitude toward the commissioning institution. The artist, after all, has seen to it that for all practical purposes InSite has footed the bill for an all-expenses-paid world tour, foregrounding and thus parodying the contractual aspect of the project.

The relationship between artists and institutions is paradoxical in other *paseos* as well. In *Narcoturismo* (Narcotourism), realized from May 6 to May 12, 1996, for a group show at the Louisiana Museum outside Copenhagen, Alÿs wrote: "I will walk in the city over the course of seven days, under the influence of a different drug each day. My trip will be recorded through photographs, notes, or any other media that become relevant." The piece proved to be an

exhausting exercise that left Alÿs physically drained. The *paseo* was a test of resistance for both the artist and the institution. In this case, the irony of a museum officially authorizing the artist to consume drugs is not difficult to miss. *Narcoturismo* is the perfect complement to *The Loop*; in both, lost time is transformed into its

the winner, openly exhibit the vestiges of the romantic ideology that animated the attitudes of the situationists. Others, such as *Narcoturismo*, seem to be conceived and executed as the nightmarish underside of the situationist project, erratic wanderings through the peripheral streets of a sleepless Paris. In Alÿs's strolls, an astrin-

INVITED TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE INSITE SHOW, ALÿS DECIDED TO STROLL BETWEEN THE HOST CITIES, TIJUANA AND SAN DIEGO. BUT HE CHOSE A PATH SUCH THAT THE BORDER DIVIDING MEXICO AND THE U.S. WOULD NEVER BE CROSSED.

contemporary version: time "wasted."

Rather than the shadow of the flâneur, then, Alÿs's strolls violently conjure another figure at the margins of modernity: the subject of the situationist drift. Situationists, halfway through the century, turned to "the drift"—a "fleet-footed technique through diverse environments," according to Guy Debord—as an antiurban critique of the modern city's rationalism. It was a question of mapping out, against the grain, the urban fabric, of discovering its personal underside, of unearthing the true experience underneath the layer of spectacle that would cover it up, like a thick layer of grime, in the contemporary city. At the end of the century, Alÿs's *paseos* are a parodic, indeed tragic, version of that situationist vision. Some, like *the loser*,

gent criticism harmonizes with flights of the imagination, but there is no chance for situationist melancholy. The "original experience," a longing for some uncontaminated and pure access to reality that still motivated Debord and appeared as a leitmotif in his restless invectives, has completely disappeared, as has the very possibility of conceiving a willful and autonomous subject or the notion of a pure and undisputable "truth." We, Alÿs's contemporaries, are left with nothing more than a world of white lies and half-truths. A world of fables, and the space that separates them is a distance to be traveled without the illusion of final destination. A perfect distance for a stroll. □

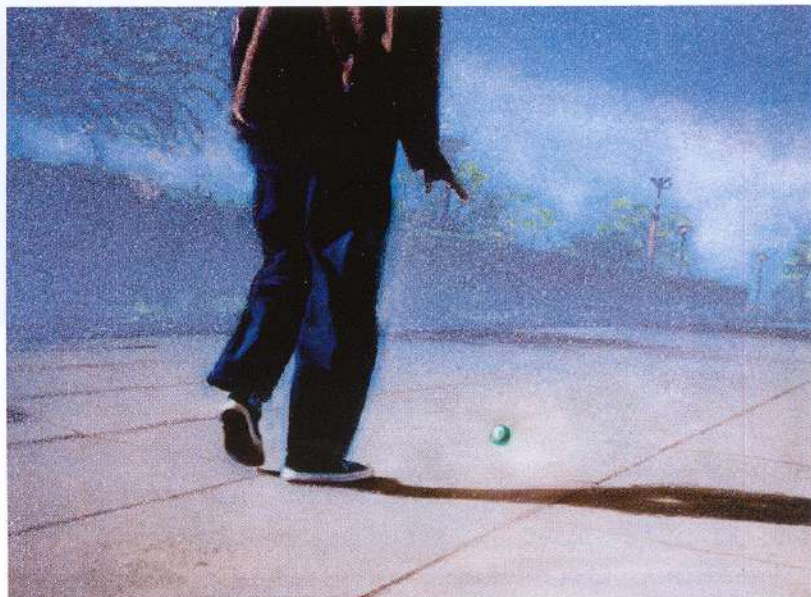
Carlos Basualdo is a frequent contributor to *Artforum*.

Translated from Spanish by Vincent Martin.

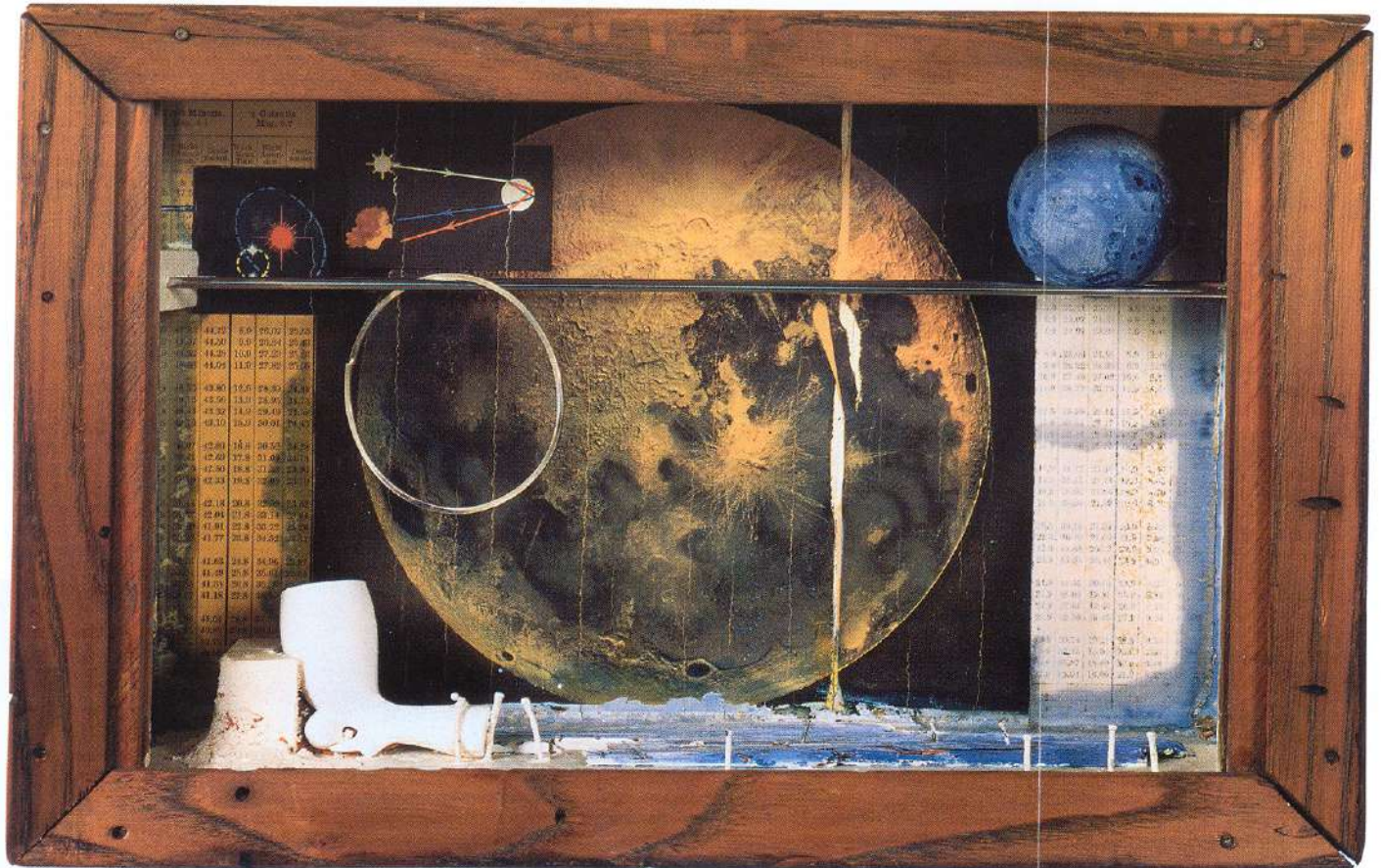


Jeg vil gå rundt i byen i syv dage under påvirkning af et nyt narkotisk stof hver dag. Min tur vil blive dokumenteret i form af bl.a. fotografier, notater og andre medier, som synes relevante.

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Left: Francis Alÿs, with Laureana Toledo, *Narcoturismo*, Copenhagen, 1996, postcard. From the "Paseos" (Strolls) series, 1991-. Right: Francis Alÿs, with Laureana Toledo, *Narcoturismo*, Copenhagen, 1996, retouched photo documentation. From the "Paseos" (Strolls) series, 1991-.



Joseph Cornell, *Soap Bubble Set (Lunar Rainbow, Space Object)*, ca. 1950s, box construction, 9 1/2 x 14 1/2 x 3 1/2". © The Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation.