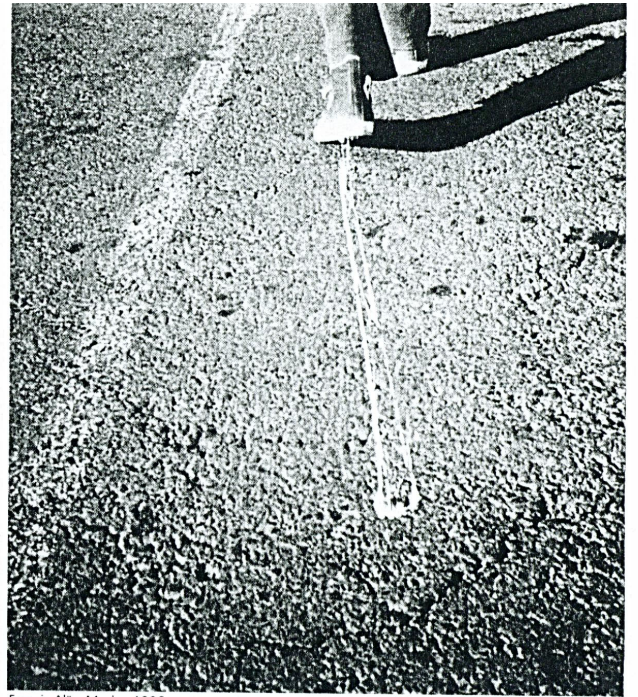
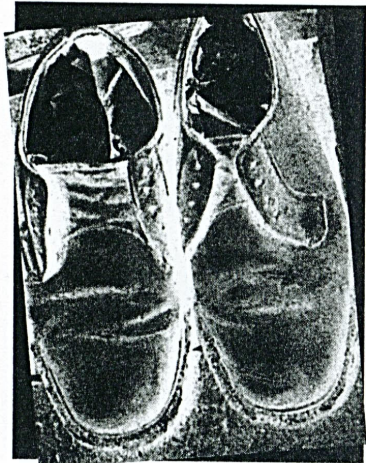


the loop

Francis Alÿs



Francis Alÿs: Mexico 1996



Francis Alÿs, a Belgian who lives in Mexico City, makes art by moving through the world and leaving or picking up traces, however slight, in the places he finds himself; a blue thread unravels from a sweater, pieces of metal stick to magnetic shoes. His work can be seen in *Loose Threads*, an international group show at the Serpentine Gallery, from 22nd August to 20th September.

In 1997 Alÿs proposed the following journey:

"In order to go from Tijuana to San Diego without crossing the Mexico/USA border, I will follow a perpendicular route away from the fence and circumnavigate the globe heading 67 degrees SE, NE and SE until meeting my departure point.

The items generated by the journey will attest to the fulfillment of the task. The project will remain free and clear of all critical implications beyond the physical displacement of the artist."

Santiago Airport/ Chile/ 11 June 1997

6.00am.

It's raining outside and I'm not ready to leave the airport yet.

7.20am.

Still raining but I'm feeling more prepared. I am now walking outside, following the main building. Taxis are on the other side of the street. A couple of drivers are waving at me. I keep going.

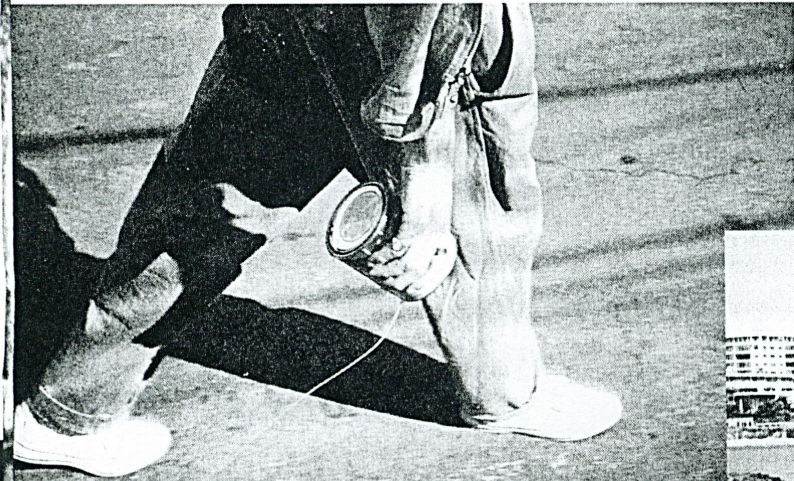
My side is protected from the rain. Their side is not.

I make a left and start crossing the road. A car drives by and splashes me. My left sock is soaking. I'm listening to the splashing water in my shoe. The visit is starting.



Francis Alys: *The Loser/The Winner*, Stockholm 1998

Francis Alys: *The Leak*, Sao Paulo 1995



Santiago/ 12 June

...still concentrating on slowing down: walk at a tourist pace, eat three meals a day, watch time's disintegration, resist the temptation to nap all day in the hotel room. I am not yet able to get interested in the city. Maybe it's still too familiar, too Latin. Although it reminds me more of Switzerland.

Rain helps in a way; it provides an excuse to hang around coffee places. Sex and coffee seem to be closely associated here, an exception to the general puritan atmosphere. The center's numerous galleries allow me to slip from one coffee bar to another, without feeling exposed to daylight. Still somewhere in limbo...



Francis Alys: *Magnetic Shoes*, Havana 1994

Tahiti/ 13 June

I am woken up and asked to leave the plane for a couple of hours for hygienic reasons.

Very warm night. I order a Pernod in a bamboo bar from a fake Vahina waitress. She's a native from Tourcoing, from the North. I've been there. I invite her to a drink.

Back on the plane, back to sleep. I enjoyed the visit. The journey defines itself.

International Date Line/ 14 June

The plane crosses the International Date Line while I am sleeping. It costs me a day of life: a Friday 13.

Sydney/ 15 June

Very pleasant but unexciting. Still warming up. Began playing a new game: "Exponential Tourism." On arriving in a city:

1. Find out where the major tourist attractions are located.
2. Visit as many sites as possible (the Aquarium, the Opera House etc.)
3. Once on location, stand at the "Kodak Point" and smile.
4. When tourists and cameras arrive figure within the frame of as many shots as possible.
5. Attempt to synchronise the flashing camera of the tourist facing you with your own flashing camera.

This game exponentially transports my image from the site to wherever the photographers will return to.

Bangkok/ 18 June

A wave of nostalgia takes over as I inhale the city's foul smells. Getting off the airconditioned airport bus my eyeglasses are instantly coated with vapour.

I spend my first morning trying to recall an English word, it causes me to gradually slow down. I am walking slower every day, entering a tourist pace. Even dogs pass me now.

The word is "puddle".

The flux of visual information is too intense.

If I walk back and forth on the same street I fail to recognise it as such, it becomes two different walks. Hardly drawing at all. It is too slow, too selective. I don't have the courage or conviction to choose a single image.

Moving to words, notes seem less exclusive, but then, words can be precise.

At least, it's faster.

Singapore/ 16 June

Singapore is nothing but a large shopping center. Everyone knows that; well I didn't. It just tells how unprepared I am for this trip. Beyond the aura of the next city's name, I don't know. I have no expectations. No demands. No goals.

When arriving, the more disoriented I feel, the more I walk. And faster, too. The same process happens with my thoughts. By the end of the day, I'm going through a chaotic succession of frozen thoughts. Peaks usually happen during sunsets.

As for the itineraries, they're guided by a couple of postcard images, the general flux of the crowd, or by arbitrary criteria, such as walking on the sunny side of the street which, if systematic, might lead to a perfect circle by the end of the day. I also find it difficult not to make eye contact while walking. The problem is, since I make regular pauses along the way to frenetically write down thoughts, it often occurs that I repeatedly pass by the same person over a short distance. In such situations, eye contact becomes unavoidable and sometimes leads to blushing.

Rangoon/ 21 June

I have been longing to lose myself. Five hours here and I'm dissolved. The journey is shifting from a vain arty joke to a sentimental quest for redemption.

The original reasons for being here are fading away. A very sweet homosexuality is pervasive... with Tearooms, the tricky part is not so much entering but leaving with dignity, as 15 pairs of eyes follow me. I asked the young lady at the Hotel reception desk to wake me up in the morning. She blushed. At night, the locals don't notice my otherness until close range. The surprise in their eyes is worth many smiles.

Hong Kong/ 25 June

Arriving in time to join the last UK rave party. People from all over have made the journey to watch a colony change hands. In fact there isn't much to see. Just declarations at street corners claiming "no effective change will occur." Rumours are spreading quickly and are the most tangible sign of the coming handover. China beckons: "Long for Hong Kong." "Back to Origin."

Endlessly watched myself walking away in storefront TV screens. Prostitutes are hanging around coffee shops in the 7-elevens in downtown Kowloon.

China will put the noose around the goose's neck and will expect the goose to lay the golden egg.

Shanghai/ 29 June

Not much to do with the Tintinesque Shanghai of my childhood, but exoticism still flourishes. Insignificant details transport me. Is it just a matter of geography?

At this point, whether I travel east or west, it would take me a week to reach a homeland. As I become progressively unable to read the local codes, I'm happily losing knowledge of myself. At night I crash, emptied. I don't even dare resist the vain romanticism which disguises the crude reality of a mutating Shanghai. Pure present.

Hardly any dogs around. The few I saw are discreetly being walked at night. Most have been killed during a cleansing of the city. They are the advance victims of a three year plan of "modernization" of the whole downtown area. After a methodical packing ceremony, the morning's next ritual is the quest for coffee.

Miniskirts are flying high in Shanghai. The girls are sexy, but genuinely, I cannot detect any seduction game going on.

Seoul/ 1 July

Every urban situation I have been deferring is evident here. If I was to stay too long, I believe I might become violent.

It took me the whole morning to find the pedestrians, they were under my very feet. Below the smart city lies a second class mall. Sitting on a subway bench I maliciously understand the sentiment of superiority I feel. Because I'm able to keep moving. I don't have to stay anywhere.

McDonalds/ 2 July

The local price of a cheese burger, medium coke and french fries is the quickest way to estimate the cost of living in each country. While travelling abroad always balance every second meal with a McDonalds or KFC meal to keep one's stomach happy. When feeling nostalgic for airplane food have a chicken burger or a fish burger. Ask if you can keep the tray.

Anchorage in transit/ 2 July

No idea what time it is. Guessing from the fogged up windows it might be dusk or dawn. A thought for Beuys crossing New York City in his ambulance. This is the first art souvenir in a while. I am beginning to return.



Francis Alys: Mexico 1997

Airports & Planes/ 3 July

7% of the total travelling time has been spent in 17 airports in 16 countries. The airport, upon arrival, functions as a decompression chamber. 8% of the journey occurred in airplanes. I like flying. The airline contract induces the infantile state I enjoy.

Smoking regulations in airports and planes are directly proportional to the degree of westernisation of the host country.

Why is it that red wine is always too cold on planes?

Vancouver/ 4 July

Touching down on "known land". Feedback. When did the journey really start? While mapping the route back in Mexico City? (you were gone before you departed, she said.) While I was forcing myself into the tourist condition?

When I accepted to be contemplative only? When my original scepticism was absolved by the genuineness of Rangoon?

When a mock project shifted into a sentimental quest for redemption?

Somewhere along the loop the "doing it" simply evacuated thinking.

And later on the doing became pure living.

Rumour of a little old lady who walks around at night followed by a "fully dressed" duck. Discovered the art of "rock balancing" on the downtown beaches.

I want to walk sipping my cappuccino like everybody else.