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**Francis Alys**

## Silly walks, serious concerns

Aug 7th 2003

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### The absurdist art of a Belgian-born, Mexico-based artist

FRANCIS ALYS is a peripatetic artist. Born in Antwerp in 1959, he moved to Mexico in the late 1980s, and though he has remained there ever since, he has not kept still. Trained as an engineer and an architect, Mr Alys is interested in how people move through cities, and he often makes art based on imaginative urban walks, his own or other people's. Although these peregrinations leave nothing behind besides the films and photographs that document them, they reveal Mr Alys's ambition to make art that is ephemeral in the same way that a gesture can be, and which combines a surreal sensibility with socio-political concerns.



**Moving a mountain**

Mr Alys's walks have the quality of fables, or jokes, in real settings. He once walked out of a gallery in São Paulo carrying a punctured tin of paint, lost himself in the city's myriad alleyways and found his way back by following the drops of paint. At the Venice Biennale in 1999, he entered Venice from one end of the city holding half a tuba, while someone else started from the other end carrying the other half of the instrument. After several days, they found each other, put the tuba back together and played a single note.

In his most ambitious work so far, Mr Alys invited 500 volunteers to join him at the base of a mountain of sand in the shantytowns around Lima, Peru. He equipped them with shovels, and under the midday sun asked them to walk around the mountain and dig together to move it by 10cm. They did, or at least believed they did, which is just as important to the artist. The miracle, for Mr Alys, lay less in the moving of the mountain

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Postmedia.net has information about the [work of Francis Alys](#). See also the [Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia](#) (click on "Exposiciones/ Actuales") and the [Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art](#).



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as in the social act of faith that his work of art inspired.

"When Faith Moves Mountains", organised for the Lima Bienal in April 2002, was Mr Alys's attempt to introduce what he calls a "metaphor of hope, a beau geste, at once futile and heroic, absurd and urgent" into the political crisis that had overwhelmed Peru at the time. The work existed not just in its physical enactment—which lasted about four hours—but later as an urban myth.

Mr Alys is a rising star in contemporary art. The first exhibition of the film and the documents associated with his Lima piece are part of the inaugural show of the new Rosenthal Centre for Contemporary Art in Cincinnati, a striking new building designed by Zaha Hadid. Meanwhile, a show of his paintings and drawings is at the Reina Sofia museum in Madrid, and an artist's book, co-written with the curator, Catherine Lampert, has been published to coincide with it.

The absurdist quality in Mr Alys's pedestrian performances owes something to the artist's Belgian surrealist forebears. But he finds most of his inspiration in the chaos of daily life in Mexico City, where poverty and religion, contemporary politics and indigenous traditions intermingle so easily.

Mr Alys is part of a group of young Mexican artists who have come to international prominence since the mid-1990s. All of them, in different ways, take extreme urban situations as their subject. Mr Alys has recently made a video installation called "Politics of Rehearsal" with Alejandro Gonzalez Innaritu, the director of a hit Mexican film, "Amores Perros", in which he created a montage of film cuts, rehearsals and casting. The work's stuttering effect, caused by the build-up of video passages, is, says the artist, "metaphorically reminiscent of Mexico's ambiguous affair with modernity", forever imminent yet never quite happening.

Usually, however, Mr Alys's work has a more playful, fairytale quality. His devotional-sized, pastel-toned paintings contain cartoon-like images that look like a cross between "Tintin" and "Le Petit Prince", as though the characters from these children's books have somehow lost their way and are tripping awkwardly through the world. A self-taught artist, Mr Alys learned his simplistic pictorial style from the *rotulistas*, the traditional sign painters that are so common in Mexico.

Like Mr Alys on his walks, the figures in his paintings seem to be wandering alone, constantly in search of someone or something. He is fascinated by Plato's "Symposium" in which Aristophanes cites the definition of love as finding one's other half. For Mr Alys, Plato's complex story can serve as a metaphor for art; it reflects the contradictory urges, split selves, conflicting ideas and images that permeate our lives. The creative search may be endless, but in those rare moments when the artist finds what he is seeking, art can have the same power as love.

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"Francis Alys: El Profeta y la Mosca. Obra Pictórica 1992-2003" is at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia until August 18th.

"Somewhere Better Than This Place: Alternative Social Experience in the Spaces of Contemporary Art" is at the Rosenthal Centre for Contemporary Art, Cincinnati, Ohio, until November 9th.



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