FRANCIS ALÝS
MATRIX 145

OCTOBER 6, 2001 – JANUARY 6, 2002
WADSWORTH ATHENEUM
MUSEUM OF ART
HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT
Listen carefully, as our menu has changed...

The electronic ether is not always a happy place. What normally even-tempered telephone caller has not been driven to slam down the receiver in sheer frustration having never emerged from a seemingly interminable labyrinth of automated instructions, menus and options? An experience of this kind, banal in its ubiquity, set Francisco Alÿs on a train of thought that would lead to the present Matrix exhibition.

Alÿs’s epiphany followed an abortive telephone call to a leading art museum. Failing to make contact with a human being, Alÿs experienced “that feeling of loss and slight humiliation of talking only to a machine.” In a gesture of reversal typical of Alÿs’s approach to art, he undertook to “re-enact” this experience of alienation through an intervention that matches creativity and subversion in equal parts. 1-866-FREE-MATRIX marks a departure in Francis Alÿs’s art as it charts new territory in both media and content. Nevertheless, it clearly emerges from earlier work, which includes paintings, drawings, videos, animations and, in particular, walks, which are his most conceptual pieces.

Alÿs, who trained as an architect, has long been concerned with how we inhabit spaces. More particularly, his work over the past decade has taken urban spaces in the Americas and Europe, from São Paulo to Venice, as the tableaux for his
Interventions. His home since 1987, Mexico City, that sprawling anarchic megalopolis, has been the site for numerous works that reflect on place, subjectivity and the nature of artistic practice.

Walks are one of Álýs’s chief creative activities, each one following a simple narrative. The Collector (Mexico City, 1991-92) involved a small toy on wheels made from a magnet: “For an indeterminate period of time, the magnetized collector takes a daily walk through the streets and gradually builds up a coat made of any metallic residue lying in its path.” Álýs’s walks are generally solitary affairs, documented by photographs, notes or occasionally video. The discontinuity we often feel between physical and mental space is investigated in Narcotourism (Copenhagen, 1996): “I will walk in the city over the course of seven days, under the influence of a different drug each day.” While the city may be a place for anonymous and introspective wanderings, it is also a locus for social gatherings and interaction. This is nowhere truer than in a city square, which in Mexico City is the ancient plaza known as the Zócalo. What came to fascinate Álýs about this vast open space in the midst of an extraordinarily crowded city was the flagpole at its center. Like a giant sundial, the flagpole affords a narrow strip of slowly shifting shade that Mexicans find a pleasant place to pass - quite literally - the time of day. Álýs recorded this changing scene for a full day in the twelve-hour video Zócalo (Mexico City, 1999).

Playfulness and a touch of whimsy are always present in Álýs’s work. Invited to participate in the prestigious Venice Biennale this year, he sent The Ambassador instead. During the opening festivities one could see the artist’s representative, a preening peacock, strutting between the international pavilions. Even at its most “philosophical,” Álýs’s work has a lightness of touch. Paradox of Praxis (Mexico City, 1997) is a meditation on the observation that “sometimes making something leads to nothing.” In this work, the artist pushes a gigantic block of ice through the city streets until it has melted completely, leaving nothing but a small patch of moist footpath at the end of the day. As we begin to see, displacement, ambiguity, metaphor and paradox are among the recurring motifs of Álýs’s art. He has commented, “Each of my interventions is another fragment of the story I am inventing, of the city that I am mapping.” As a storyteller, Álýs is ultimately concerned with the space of memory and imagination; to this extent, his fabled city is a virtual one.

Narcotourism, Copenhagen, 1996
top: Zócalo, Mexico City, May 20, 1999 (video still)
bottom: The Ambassador, Venice, 2001
In this era of high-tech global networks, the telephone remains the most ubiquitous and democratized form of electronic communication in the world. For this reason perhaps, the telephone in some ways belongs to an earlier period. What technophobe is intimidated by the conventional telephone? Nevertheless, telephone technology has been transformed by the digital age in which, for example, the touch-tone phone has opened a new world of interactive possibilities. Which returns us to where we began, with Álýs’s epiphany borne of frustration.

Álýs came to realize that the digital technology of automated interactive attendant telephone systems could provide him with the means to create “a virtual walk into virtual space.” What had been up to this point a strictly terrestrial investigation could have its virtual counterpart. As with his other walks, the artist could construct an itinerary that calls for the repetition of certain actions within a given system. Different, however, is the status of the “walker,” who is no longer the artist, but has become the participant. The caller leads the narrative, choosing to move through the given options at will. Of course it is the artist, via the technology, who is ultimately in control of the possibilities. This experience of a simultaneous sense of the freedom to make multiple choices and the restriction of those choices within a circumscribed range of possibilities is analogous, it seems to me, to our relation to new technology and to the very experience of contemporary urban life.
Toll-free calling, first introduced in the 1960s, has become synonymous with successful telemarketing. Since 1996, when the original block of 800 numbers was exhausted, new toll-free prefixes have been introduced, 866 most recently. Last year more than 20 billion toll-free calls were made in the United States.

In a subversive twist, rather than trying to sell something, Alyš's toll-free number is all about giving something away. While museums across the United States implement new programs to promote access and outreach, Alyš has actually devised a way to give art away to anybody who can make a phone call. The paradox of this 1-866-FREE-MATRIX praxis is, of course, the irrelevance of the museum as a physical site. Like the melted ice cube, there is no there, there.

With this exhibition, Francis Alyš invokes the radical innovations of conceptual art of the 1960s. 1-866-FREE-MATRIX is the perfectly dematerialized art object, existing only in virtual space, resisting the logic of commodity capitalism. In its democratic deployment of new technology and advanced mass-marketing strategies, 1-866-FREE-MATRIX is a twenty-first century parallel to early conceptualist works like the exhibition-as-publication Xerox Book.\(^a\)

For Francis Alyš, the Wadsworth Atheneum's Matrix program – the oldest of its type and one of the most respected in the country – was the ideal occasion on which to realize this work. The very title “Matrix” already suggested to Alyš a kind of intercellular network. Alyš also noted that while the program is known nationally, many people are yet to make the trip to Hartford to see a Matrix exhibition. With 1-866-FREE-MATRIX Alyš has made both a free exhibition and an exhibition free of geographical limitations.

Nicholas Baume
Emily Hall Tremaine Curator
of Contemporary Art

Francis Alyš in conversation with the author, August 2001.

*Francis Alyš in Walks/Paseos, Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico, 1997, p.15.
*Francis Alyš in conversation with the author, August 2001.
*Alyš had, in 1999, made a foray into the Internet with The Thief, a screensaver web page project for DIA Center for the Arts, New York.

See Lucy Lippard, Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972 (New York: Praeger), 1973. The telephone was used as a method of distancing the hand of the artist from the work of art in an exhibition titled Art by Telephone held at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, in 1969. Organized by Jan van der Mark, forty-one artists from the United States and Europe were invited to phone in to the museum ideas to be executed on their behalf. Thanks to Mel Buchner, a participant in Art by Telephone, for this recollection.

* Seth Siegelaub published the Xerox Book in 1968. It featured projects made for the publication by seven artists using the photocopy machine, a then new technology that made it possible to easily produce inexpensive reproductions in large volume.
FRANCIS ALYS
1959
BORN IN ANTWERP, BELGIUM
LIVES AND WORKS IN MEXICO CITY

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS
2001
Peter Kilchmann Galerie, Zurich
Musée Picasso, Antibes

2000
“The Last Clown,” Sala Moncada, La Caixa
Foundation, Catalonia; travelling to Gallerie
D’Art de l’Université Québec, Montréal

1999
“Stand-by,” Lisson Gallery, London
Peter Kilchmann Galerie, Zurich
Web Site Project, Dia Center For the Arts,
New York

1998
“Le temps du sommeil,” Contemporary Art
Gallery, Vancouver

1997
Jack Tilton Gallery, New York
“The Liar, The Copy of the Liar,” Museo de
Arte Moderno, Mexico City

1996
Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Oaxaca,
Oaxaca

1995
Galeria Camargo Vilaça, São Paulo
Jack Tilton Gallery, New York
Opus Operandi, Ghent

1994
Curare, Mexico City
Galería Ramís Barquet, Monterrey

1992
Galería Arte Contemporàneo, Mexico City

1991
Salón des Aztecas, Mexico City

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS
2001
“Squatters #1,” Witte de With, Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam &
Museu de Serralves, Porto

“Francis Alÿs, Pierre Huyghe, Beat Streuli,
and Gillian Wearing,” Ikon Gallery, Birmingham

“Monitor: Volume 1,” Gagosian Gallery,
New York

“Da Adversidade Vivemos,” ARC/Musée d’Art
Moderne de la Ville de Paris

“The Whitechapel Centenary,” Whitechapel
Gallery, London

“Subject Plural: Crowds in Contemporary
Art,” Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston

“Painting at the Edge of the World,” Walker
Art Center, Minneapolis

2000
“Cinema without Walls,” Rotterdam 2000,
Rotterdam

“Out of Space,” Kölnischer Kunstverein,
Cologne

“Residue,” Kunsthalle Exnergasse, Vienna

“Un siecle d’arpenteurs, les figures
de la marche,” Musée Picasso, Antibes
(exh. cat.); touring to Koldo Mitxelena
Kulturunea, San Sebastian

“Film/Video Works - Lisson Gallery at 9
Keane Street,” Lisson Gallery, London

“Making Time,” Palm Beach ICA, Florida
and touring to UCLA Hammer Museum,
Los Angeles

“Age of Influence: Reflections in the Mirror
of American Culture,” MCA Chicago

“Dream Machines,” curated by Susan Hiller,
Dundee Contemporary Arts, Scotland;
touring to Mappin Art Gallery, Sheffield
and Camden Arts Centre

“Stimuli,” Witte de With, Rotterdam

1999
“The Passion and the Wave, 6th Istanbul
Biennial,” Istanbul

“Reality and Desire,” Fundacion Joan Miro,
Barcelona

“48 Biennale di Venezia,” Venice

“Mirror’s Edge,” Bild Museet, Umeå,
Sweden, curated by Okwui Enwezor;
touring to Vancouver Art Gallery; Castello di
Rivoli, Torino; Tramway, Glasgow
“Signs of Life,” 1st International Melbourne Biennial

“Drawn By,” Metro Pictures, New York

“Thinking Aloud,” a touring exhibition curated by Richard Wentworth and organized by the Hayward Gallery, London

“Go Away,” Royal College of Art, London

1998

“Loose Threads,” Serpentine Gallery, London

“Roteiros,” XXIV São Paulo

“1st Salon Internacional de Pintura,” Museo de la Ciudad, Mexico City

“Insertions,” Arkipelag, Stockholm

“III Biennial Barro de America,” Caracas

“Imaginarios Mexicanos,” Quebec

Galeria Camargo Vilaça, São Paulo

1997

“In Site 97,” Tijuana / San Diego

“Adenda,” Dhomt Laethem Museum, Belgium


“Primera Biennial Tridimensional,” Mexico City

“2nd. Biennial of Saarema,” Estonia

“Asi está la cosa,” Centro Cultural Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico City

1996

“NowHere,” Louisiana Museum, Copenhagen

“The Counterfeit Subject,” Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art, Boulder Museo de Arte Contemporaneo, Oaxa, Mexico

“Inclusion/Exclusion,” Steirischer Herbst ’96, Graz

“Pittura Figurativa,” Castello di Rivoli, Torino

“Interiors,” LACE, Los Angeles

1995

“Longing and Belonging,” Site

Santa Fe, New Mexico Galeria Camargo Vilaça, São Paolo

Jack Tilton Gallery, New York

Opus Operandi, Ghent

1994

“V Biennial de la Habana,” Havana

Galeria Ramis Barquet, Monterey

Mexico Curare, Mexico City

1993

“Lessa Natura,” Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City

1992

“México Hoy,” Casa de las Américas, Madrid, Spain

1991

Galeria Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico City

Blue Star Art Space, San Antonio

Latitude 53 Gallery, Edmonton

1990

Quiñonera, Mexico City

WORK IN THE EXHIBITION

1-866-FREE-MATRIX, 2001

Automated interactive call attendant system, toll-free telephone number

Matrix installation: digital telephones, wall mounted in wooden cubicles

For invaluable technical assistance, thanks to Michael LeBlanc and Mike Blank of LeBlanc Communications.

MATRIX LECTURE

2 pm, Sunday October 7, 2001

Francis Alÿs delivers an informal talk on his work in The Hartford Courant Room.

GALLERY TALK

12 noon, Tuesday, October 9, 2001

“Living Systems”

Nicholas Baume, Emily Hall Tremaine Curator of Contemporary Art

MATRIX 145 HAS BEEN MADE POSSIBLE
BY HOWARD AND SANDRA FROMSON.

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