

Francis Alÿs *The Gibraltar Projects*

November 7–December 14, 2024
519 and 525 West 19th Street, New York



Francis Alÿs (in collaboration with Rafael Ortega, Julien Devaux, Felix Blume, Ivan Boccara, Abbas Benheim, Fundación Montenmedio Arte, and children of Tangier and Tarifa), *Don't Cross the Bridge Before You Get to the River (Strait of Gibraltar, Morocco-Spain)*, 2008. © Francis Alÿs. Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner

David Zwirner is pleased to present an exhibition by Francis Alÿs at the gallery's 519 and 525 West 19th Street locations in New York. Featuring the artist's acclaimed *The Gibraltar Projects: Don't Cross the Bridge Before You Get to the River*—an expansive group of works made from 2005 onward that derive from his yearslong efforts to create the illusion of a bridge spanning the Strait of Gibraltar—it will be Alÿs's first solo show in New York in more than ten years. This presentation marks the New York debut of this foundational body of work, which has previously been exhibited at museums across Europe, Asia, the Middle East, North America, and South America, and also features several related video works that further demonstrate Alÿs's distinctive and poetic approach to art making as a means of creating understanding around some of the most pressing issues of our time.

Alÿs's sprawling installation includes a two-channel video projection documenting an action that took place simultaneously on opposite shores of the Strait of Gibraltar—in Tangier, Morocco, and Tarifa, Spain—alongside an important group of paintings, drawings, sculptures, ephemera, and objects that were created and compiled over the course of the event's production and post-production. Made on-site as well as in the studio, they allow the artist to experiment with similar ideas and themes—ranging from lyrical to contemplative—in a more solitary and introspective way. The phrase *Don't Cross the Bridge Before You Get to the River* refers to a proverb that he heard during the planning phase of the project, which was beset by more logistical issues and holdups than he had encountered with past actions, that resonated both with this experience and his endeavor to create a metaphorical bridge.

Beginning in 1997, and for the ensuing two decades, Alÿs completed a number of projects that took as their point of departure the inherent sociopolitical conflict in border regions, making works in interstitial locales such as the US-Mexico border, the Green Line in Jerusalem, the Turkish-Armenian border, and the Panama Canal Zone. In early 2006, he had attempted an action titled *Bridge/Puente*, in which he recruited local fishermen to create the illusion of a continuous chain of boats that would span the open waters separating Havana and Key West, Florida. On the appointed day, however, far more participants materialized in Cuba than in the United States, creating an imbalance and leading to, in the artist's mind, an unsuccessful resolution of the project.

Having temporarily moved to Europe, Alÿs pivoted his concept to the Strait of Gibraltar, a mythological site of passage that would occupy his thoughts for many years to come. As he wrote in September 2006, "According to the myth, the Strait of Gibraltar is the place where Hercules separated Europe from Africa and opened the Mediterranean Sea to the Atlantic Ocean. The Strait seemed like the obvious place to illustrate this contradiction of our times: how can one promote global economy and at the same time limit the global flow of people across continents?"¹ Just shy of nine miles apart, the beaches of Tangier, and Tarifa could be joined by a line of seventy-two cargo ships, Alÿs estimated, but that would "turn the whole project into an engineering enterprise or a military operation." He continued, "The difference between a military operation and an artistic gesture lies precisely in the missing fragment of the bridge: the gap that has to be filled by our imagination. That's what triggers the poetry and makes the artistic operation happen, that's what opens a moment of suspension."²

Alÿs spent the next several years plotting out ways to bring the project to fruition, creating in parallel paintings, drawings, and other works as an outlet for his ideas. Disappointed by the response to his project by the fisherman on both sides of the Strait and in response to a rumor that had spread of a floating line of boats connecting the two cities, Alÿs hit upon the notion of involving children in the action—a decision that would simultaneously reignite his ongoing *Children's Games* project. In 2007, he filmed the second work in the series, *Ricochets*—also on view in the present exhibition—in Tangier, which shows three boys laughing and skipping stones in the Strait of Gibraltar.

Alÿs was finally able to proceed with the action on August 12, 2008. On this day, a line of local children, each holding a small boat fashioned from a shoe, assembled on the beach in Tarifa, while a counterpart line of children holding shoe-boats gathered on the beach in Tangier. Attempting to bridge cultures as well as continents, the two lines of giggling children waded into the lapping waves, trying to move toward each other, while the tide relentlessly pulled them back to the shore. From the outset, it was clear that the meeting of the two lines was an impossibility; instead, Alÿs asked the participants on both sides to hold their shoe-boats aloft, as though they were sailing across the horizon, calling on viewers to engage in an act of imagination to make the final connection.

Also on view at David Zwirner New York will be *Miradores*, a two-channel video that likewise was shot simultaneously in Tarifa and Tangier in 2008. Each screen features footage from a single camera trained on a scenic viewpoint overlooking the Strait in each city, creating a further point of similarity and connection between the two.

Seen together, these interrelated projects are prime examples of Alÿs's tenet that the poetic and the political are intimately connected, foregrounding geographical and philosophical notions of borders as well as larger issues concerning freedom of movement and ideas.

Belgian-born Francis Alÿs (b. 1959) is known for his in-depth projects in a wide range of media, including documentary film, painting, drawing, performance, two-dimensional animation, and video. Through his practice, Alÿs consistently directs his distinct poetic and imaginative sensibility toward anthropological and geopolitical concerns centered around observations of, and engagements with, everyday life. The artist himself has described his work as "a sort of discursive argument composed of episodes, metaphors, or parables."

¹ Francis Alÿs, "The Logbook of Gibraltar (2005–2009)," in *Francis Alÿs: Relato de una negociación/A Story of a Negotiation*. Exh. cat. (Mexico City and Buenos Aires: Museo Tamayo Arte Contemporáneo and MALBA, Museum de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires, 2015), 108, 112.

² *Ibid.*, 112.

Born in Antwerp, Alÿs originally trained as an architect. He moved to Mexico City in 1986, where he continues to live and work, and it was the confrontation with issues of urbanization and social unrest in

his country of adoption that inspired his decision to become a visual artist. Since 2004, the artist's work has been represented by David Zwirner, where he has had two solo exhibitions at the gallery's New York location, in 2007 and 2013. In 2016, *Ciudad Juárez projects* marked his first solo presentation at David Zwirner London, and in 2021, the solo exhibition *Don't Cross the Bridge Before You Get to the River* was on view at the gallery's Paris location.

In summer 2024, the Barbican Art Centre, London, presented *Francis Alÿs: Ricochets*, marking the United Kingdom premiere of the artist's series *Children's Games* (1999–). The exhibition will open at the Serralves Foundation – Museum of Contemporary Art, Porto in October 2024. Alÿs was the recipient of the 2023 Wolfgang Hahn Prize, awarded by the Museum Ludwig, Cologne, and he received a solo exhibition at the museum in November of that year. The artist's 2013 film *Paradox of Praxis 5* was presented at the Cleveland Museum of Art in 2023. *Francis Alÿs: Children's Games, 1999–2022*, was on view at the Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico City, earlier in the same year. A solo exhibition of the artist's work was on view at Copenhagen Contemporary from 2022 to 2023. In 2022, Alÿs represented Belgium at the 59th Venice Biennale with the solo presentation, *Francis Alÿs: The Nature of the Game*. At the Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts, Lausanne, Switzerland, *Francis Alÿs: As Long As I'm Walking*, was on view in 2021. Also that year, *Francis Alÿs: Salam Tristesse* was on view at Fragmentos, Espacio de Arte y Memoria, Bogotá. In 2019 to 2020, solo shows by the artist were on view at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal (part of the 16th edition of the MOMENTA | Biennale de l'image) and the Eye Filmmuseum in Amsterdam.

In 2018, solo exhibitions of Alÿs's work were held at the Art Sonje Center in Seoul; KANAL–Centre Pompidou in Brussels; and Rockbund Art Museum in Shanghai. In 2017, the artist unveiled new work at the Iraqi Pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale, made following his trips to the country. Additionally, a major solo museum exhibition, *A Story of Negotiation*, featuring the artist's three projects *Don't Cross the Bridge Before You Get to the River*, *Tornado*, and *REEL-UNREEL*, was presented at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto. The show was first exhibited at the Museo Tamayo Arte Contemporáneo in Mexico City in 2015, followed by the Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires (MALBA)—Fundación Costantini and the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes de la Habana in Havana.

In 2014, Alÿs's video *REEL-UNREEL*, which depicts a street game played by local children in Kabul, was on view alongside related drawings, paintings, and research materials at Museo d'Arte Contemporanea Donna Regina Napoli, Naples. The exhibition traveled later that year to Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art, Warsaw. *REEL-UNREEL* was originally produced in 2012 for documenta 13, where a selection of paintings was installed in a former bakery in Kassel's city center and the video was screened at a satellite venue in Kabul.

The artist's work was the subject of a major survey, *A Story of Deception*, which was on view from 2010 to 2011 at Tate Modern, London; Wiels Centre d'Art Contemporain, Brussels; and The Museum of Modern Art and MoMA PS1, both New York. Over the past decade, Alÿs has had several solo exhibitions at prominent venues including the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo (2013; traveled to the Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art); Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin (2010); The Renaissance Society, University of Chicago (2008); Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2007); Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC (2006); and Portikus, Frankfurt (2006).

Work by the artist is held in public collections worldwide, including the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa, Japan; Art Institute of Chicago; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris; Musée d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean, Luxembourg; The Museum of

Modern Art, New York; Philadelphia Museum of Art; Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; and Tate, United Kingdom.

For all press inquiries, contact
Julia Lukacher jlukacher@davidzwirner.com
Erin Pinover epinover@davidzwirner.com