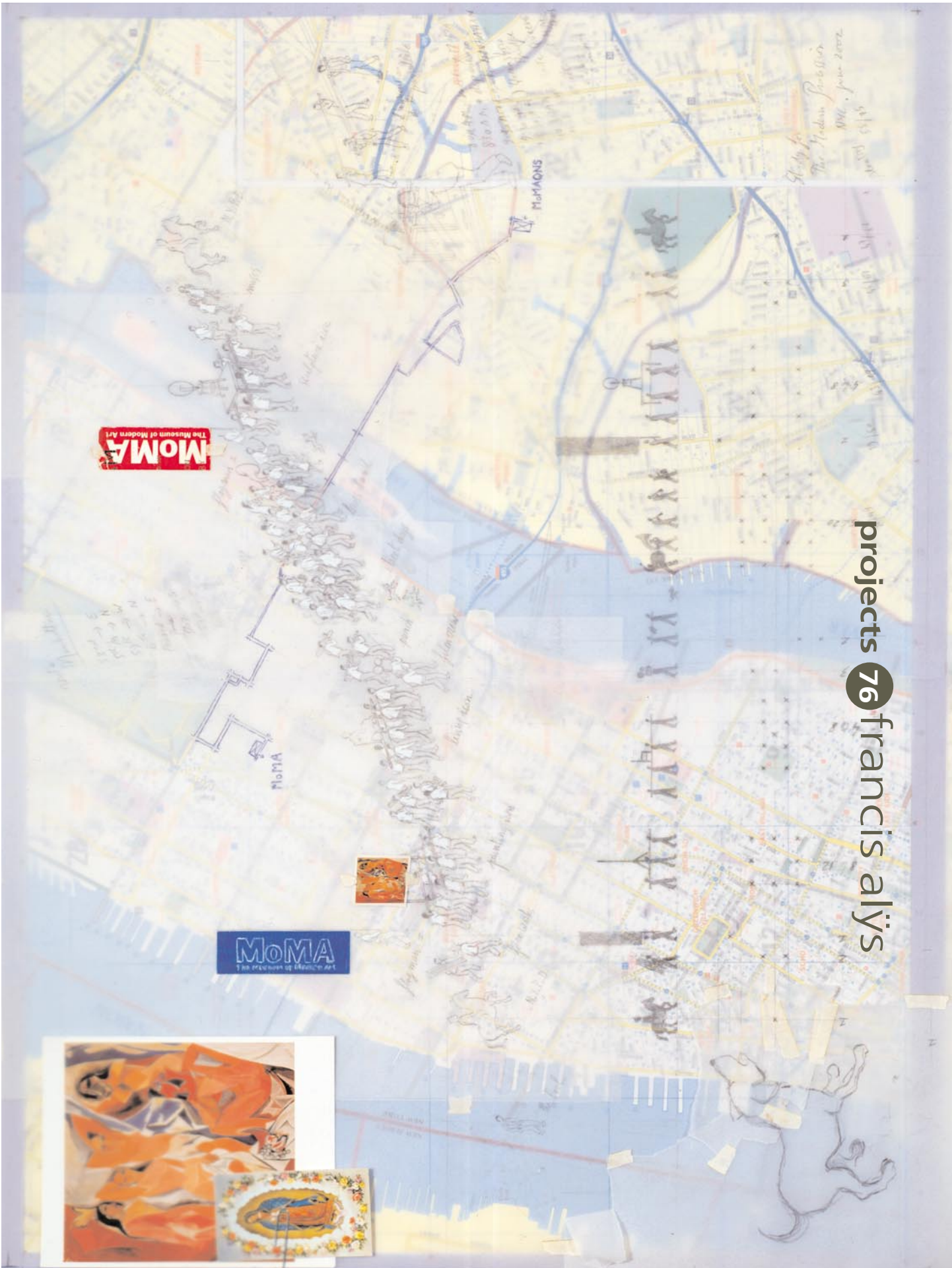


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*The Collector, Mexico City, 1991–92*

### Francis Alÿs's *Modern Procession*

Imagine a sunny Sunday morning in late June, 2002. A teenage girl from Elmhurst is dragging her mother to Manhattan to shop for bathing suits at Bloomingdale's. They exit the subway station at Lexington and 51st Street, and suddenly find themselves surrounded by a throng of people carrying palanquins and slowly marching to the rhythm of a brass band. The girl wants to escape up Park Avenue, but her mother is intrigued by the spectacle because it reminds her of the religious pageants of her youth. They follow the procession—the young girl reluctantly, her mother enthusiastically—until it reaches the Queensboro Bridge, and then return to their original purpose: shopping for bathing suits. Francis Alÿs would probably be encouraged by their disparate responses, and he would not mind that they hadn't tagged along all the way to the procession's destination, MoMA QNS; others would join in where they left off.

For Alÿs, the street is a site of invigorating possibility and confluence, a space where the complexity of popular life collides and interacts with the practice of making art. Since 1991, going on *paseos* (walks) has been the centerpiece of Alÿs's artistic practice, and the urban streets, especially those of Mexico City, have been his primary context. Alÿs's paintings, drawings, videos, animations, and photographs are all born out of these walks, during which he often carries a prop and adheres to a whimsical route or pattern of behavior. He records his path and the results

of his walk, collects artifacts, and stores away images (that often assume the character of enigmas or revelations), all of which he later uses in his drawings and paintings.

There is always an ambivalent play between poetic failure and the promise of success in his walks. For instance, for *Paradox of Praxis* (1997–) he pushes a block of ice through the streets of Mexico City until it melts away into a small puddle, simply because, in his words, "Sometimes making something leads to nothing." And for *Re-enactments* (2000), Alÿs's prescript was the following: "Walk for as long as you can holding a 9mm Beretta in your right hand." For *The Collector* (1991–92) Alÿs walked through the Centro Histórico neighborhood of Mexico City pulling a magnetized toy dog on a string behind him, repeating the walk until his pet was covered in scrap metal and trash.

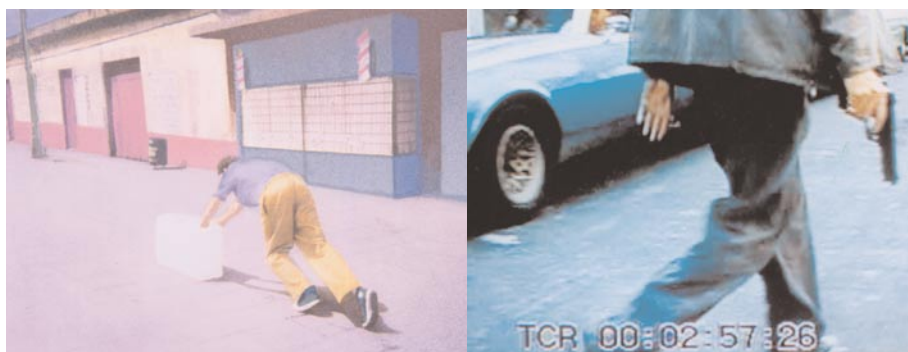
Alÿs forges relationships between artistic practice and the everyday world of the street. Beginning with a well-established tenet of conceptual art practice since the 1960s—the dematerialization of the art object—he ultimately redefines the materiality of art objects by mediating their contact with vernacular contexts, and vice versa. For *Projects 76*, Alÿs staged a procession of icons of modern art to mark The Museum of Modern Art's move to Queens. With rose petals strewn in their path and their pace set by a brass band—fanfare reminiscent of a saint's-day celebration—participants carried representations of works by

such artists as Pablo Picasso, Marcel Duchamp, and Alberto Giacometti from 11 West 53rd Street through the streets and over the bridge to MoMA QNS. With this procession of modern art icons that have been widely exhibited, beloved, and reproduced, Alÿs invokes the popular quality of art objects, inviting us to explore our relationship to the material world in all its potential richness. He encourages us to ponder the significance of modern art in our spiritual lives, and to consider these monuments—Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel*—as articles of devotion, in a setting in which the interaction between the art and the public is fundamentally different. Here in the galleries at MoMA QNS, Museum visitors view the evidence: a video of the performance, a series of intricate drawings plotting out the formation and path of the marchers, and an array of photographs.

This modern procession links Alÿs to a long and rich tradition of popular public celebrations, and his investigation of the transformative power of the procession echoes that of literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin. Championing the procession for its utopian spirit, Bakhtin called attention to its historical tenacity and its ability to reaffirm and reinvigorate spiritual faith and social values through humor, emphasizing laughter as an essential force in the rejuvenating power of popular ritual. Alÿs's appreciation of the carnivalesque qualities of processions also links him to the art of Flanders, where he was born. The Lowlands artists' long held fascination with popular spectacles of worship and celebration can be traced back through Bosch and Brueghel in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries to James Ensor at the end of the nineteenth.

For The Museum of Modern Art, Alÿs's procession visibly marks a time of change and transition, calling attention to the regenerative potential of the Museum's move to Long Island City. Alÿs is fascinated by the fact that one of the most vital art institutions in the world, situated at the center of New York City, would relocate itself and its collection to the periphery for three years. Drawing on the evocative history of the procession, Alÿs inscribes icons by the masters of modern art into the Museum's physical and logistical process of navigating its way to Queens, crossing over the East River to a distinctly new economic, demographic, architectural, social, ethnic, and cultural context. Although Alÿs's enterprise is dead serious, he executes the performance with a wink and a nod, encouraging us to look both critically and fondly at our attachment to icons, reminding us that they can take on unexpected quasi-mystical meanings in modern life.

Harper Montgomery  
Department of Prints and Illustrated Books



Left: *Paradox of Praxis*, Mexico City, 1997  
Right: *Re-enactments*, Mexico City, 2000

## biography

Born in Antwerp in 1959, Francis Alÿs lives and works in Mexico City. Alÿs's work has recently been featured in solo exhibitions at the Kunst-Werke in Berlin, Castello di Rivoli in Turin, and the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford (all 2002); the Galerie Peter Kilchmann in Zurich and the Lisson Gallery in London (both 2001 and 1999); the Contemporary Art Gallery in Vancouver (1998); and the Museo de Arte Moderno in Mexico City (1997). He has also shown in group exhibitions at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center in New York (2002); the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, the Witte de With center for contemporary art in Rotterdam, and the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London (all 2001); the Istanbul and Venice Biennials (1999 and 2000); and the Hayward Gallery in London (1999), among many others.

## acknowledgments

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The **projects** series is sponsored by Peter Norton.

This exhibition is organized in collaboration with the Public Art Fund.

Francis Alÿs: *The Modern Procession*, a project of the Public Art Fund, was presented on June 23, 2002.

Video Projectors and DVD players courtesy of Hitachi America, Ltd.

Brochure © 2002 The Museum of Modern Art, New York

*The Modern Procession* was filmed in collaboration with Raphael Ortega.

Photos: Francis Alÿs, unless otherwise noted

Cover: *Study for The Modern Procession*, New York City, 2002. Pencil, blue ink, correction fluid, and cut, pasted, and taped printed papers with paper clip on tracing paper and commercially-printed map, 21 x 25" (54 x 65.4 cm). Collection the artist. Photo: David Allison

## MoMA's Progress

*I envisioned an immobile procession not unlike the friezes on Greek temples.*

Morton Feldman, "The Rothko Chapel"

Cult icons and works of art have long been tied to their places of origin and been the object of pilgrimages. We still speak of the Avignon Pietà, though it is at the Louvre, and Pablo Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, at The Museum of Modern Art here in New York City, has become the object of a modernist cult. Communities are connected by moving artifacts. Since well before Napoleon's Italian campaigns, art has accompanied the victor home, often in "processions," whether triumphant or covert, to national treasure-houses, while the spreading of capitalist democracy has converted good old plunder into a feature of the "global" flow of goods. But what is it that truly *moves* with both cult and art objects? Certainly our capacity to be *moved by* them, in every sense of the word. Due to our inner or outer journeys to their original sites, objects *become places*, yet both saints' relics and artistic "masterpieces" acquire value every time they are transferred from one place of worship to another—as if the portent of the journey nourished and expanded the miracle of their "sanctity."

Every art object is a "relic" of sorts, "left-over" from a life of *being* and *doing* that touched a few or many. Like a relic, the work of art, when it travels, *re-replaces* its previous "burial site," creating a new destination for devotional pilgrimages. Thus relics—and to some extent "famous" works of art—"sanctify" the bond between the place where they dwell (at any given time) and that of their origin, through the communion of worship. The museum too, in this sense, is a "church"—a gathering place, or *ecclesia*, where instead of the quintessential "presence" of the saint (as skeletal remains), we make do with the "absence" of the artist (from the works): while we do not pray to works of art to obtain blessings, both relics and artifacts carry the aura of past states of being, and the trace of deeds. We are speaking of a power *in* death and a power *beyond* death—sainthood, like artistic reputation, is relatively secure only once it is out of the world's

Mexico City, 2002



reach: it flows from inside the relic through its container, as the conception of the art object flows through its form. There is an invisible attraction emanating from both the relic and the art object that is based on the *idea* of their "authenticity." Yet in the way religious relics were broken up and scattered, and in the reproduction of icons of any sort (as in Francis Alÿs's 2002 version of Marcel Duchamp's 1951 replica of his 1913 *Bicycle Wheel*), *doubles* can become the "emissaries" of a powerful object. The Colombian aphorist Nicolás Gómez Dávila has said that "the work of art has no meaning as such but power. Its presumed meaning is the historical form of its hold on the spectators of a given time."

The processions in which this devotional power of images is apparent originated as staged visitations of a community's forebears through which the recently deceased would gradually acquire the status of full-fledged ancestors. In a way, all processions, including parades, deal with both an absence and a presence, with the exorcism of a loss and the glorification of continuity and "rebirth": as Vladimir Nabokov wrote in *Ada, or Ardor*, "Remembrance, like Rembrandt, is dark but festive." This ambivalence lingers even over our ethnic parades in New York City: they glorify the New World while evoking the Old in a nostalgia of paradise and loss eerily reminiscent of Hamlet's "undiscovered country from which no traveler returns." Without even thinking of Greek orphic cults or of the Latin Luperalia, we can easily see that there is something subtly subversive, perhaps even "deviant," in processions and parades—acts of ritualized defiance that can go so far as to display bloody self-mortification and ecstatic celebration within the same event. The pilgrimage-processions that periodically filed through medieval Rome, with picnic banquets often taking place along the way, violated the boundaries between normally discrete neighborhoods. Processional revelries are also akin to funerals and weddings, in the course of which different groups are connected and united, exorcising, for a time at least, the "close distance" and "distant closeness" between communities that always threatens to break out into war. "Marry out or die out" is a famous anthropological dictum.

Pilgrimages to saints' relics and images, and the processions in which such relics are carried, can be seen as journeys to the "other world." The congregation moves across geographical and human territories while prayers and fireworks rise up to the heavens. Everyday inhibitions are lifted, and the concerted movement of *objects-endowed-with-power* (fetishes, of sorts, as they stand for a larger whole) creates a special order of perception. Immanuel Kant said, "When obstacles to spiritual intuition are removed, this is called the other world: which is not another reality, but the same reality, only intuited differently"; and the philosopher Giorgio Agamben refers to "the movement described by Plato as erotic re-cognition (anamnesis), which transfers an object not toward another place or thing, but toward its own 'taking-place'—toward the Idea." That movement may be related to the idea of Francis Alÿs's processional performance from MoMA-Manhattan to MoMA-Queens.

Francesco Pellizzi

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*To celebrate the moving of The Museum of Modern Art from its midtown Manhattan location to MoMA QNS, to welcome MoMA's most sacred icons to the Periphery, come and revere the Modern Procession on its journey to Queens on June 23. For they bring us pleasure, peace, and sometimes redemption. . . .*

Francis Alÿs, New York City, 2002