

Francis Alÿs

Children's Games

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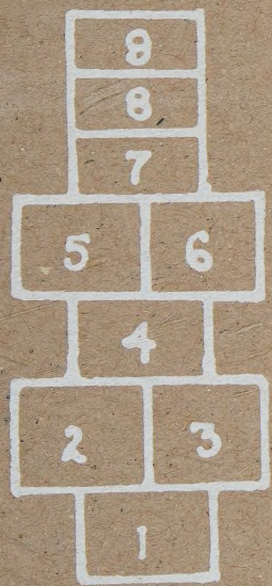
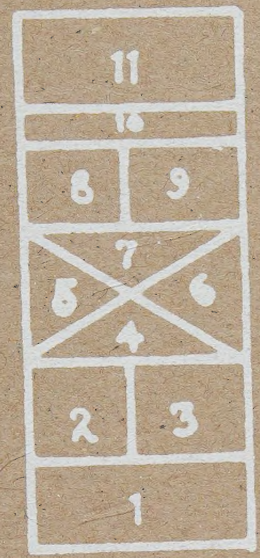
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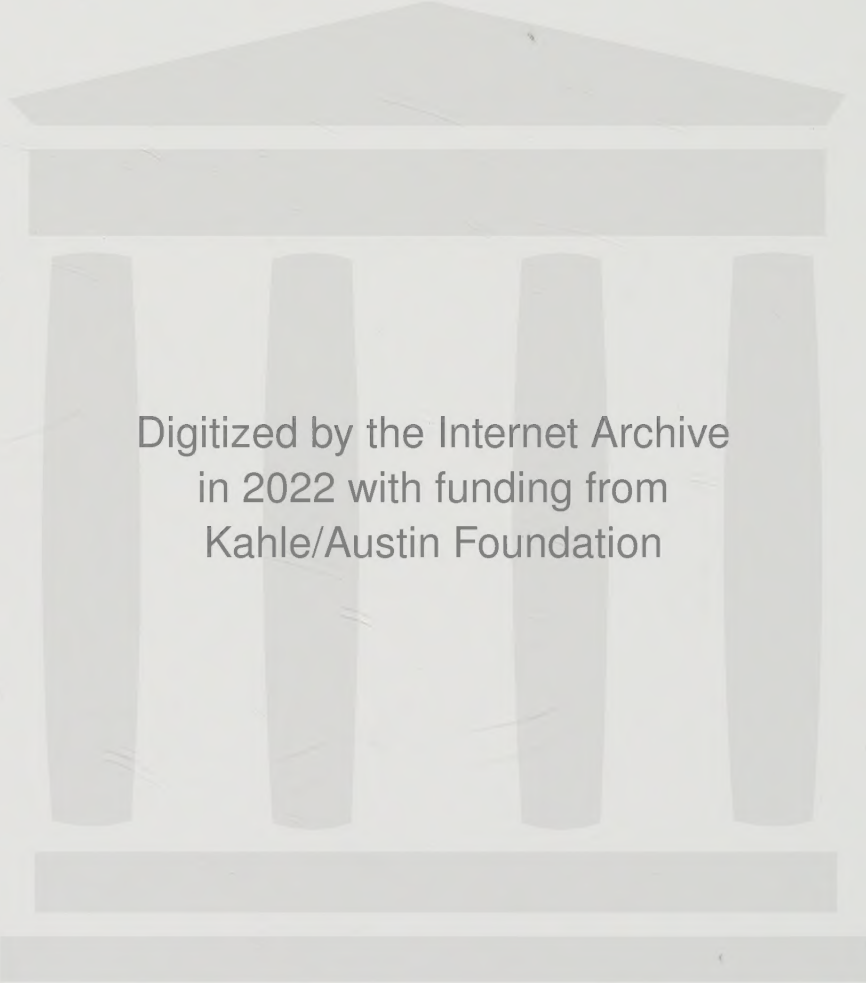
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Children's Games



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Francis Alÿs

Children's Games

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Untitled, Sharya Refugee Camp, Iraq, 2016
Oil on canvas, 13x18cm

Francis Alÿs

The Street, the Rules and
the Game

*Sometimes doing something poetic can become
political and sometimes doing something political
can become poetic.*

Francis Alÿs

When Francis Alÿs, trained as an architect, accidentally ended up in Mexico City he not only started to study the city and its composition of streets and buildings, but also and especially its people and their activities. Taking long walks across the city he gradually discovered the urban fabric of this dynamic megacity. As a Westerner, a non-Mexican, he discovered the strength and impact of the so-called informal, parallel economy: the *ambulantes*, the street vendors peddling their wares, the people publicly offering their services every day, the beggars and all of the others participating in and making up the urban fabric. As a late ally of August Sander's, Alÿs began to photograph specific groups of people. *Ambulantes* (1992-2006), *Sleepers* (1999-2006) and *Beggars* (2002-2004) are early works for which he photographed people on the basis of a clear, preconceived plan and a couple of clear rules. To photograph *Ambulantes*, for example, he always aligned the camera perpendicular to the passing subject at a distance of about five metres; he photographed *Sleepers* at a low angle, from the ground; and *Beggars* from a high viewpoint.

Alÿs's fascination with urban phenomena not only made him want to document these – from a Western point of view – almost anachronistic phenomena, but also made him carry out these simple 'urban activities' himself. He created a work called *Turista* (1994), for example, for which he joined the many other handymen offering their services on a square to offer his services, as a tourist. For another work he dragged an iron, magnetically charged toy dog through the streets, gathering all kinds of metal objects he came across on his way (*The Collector/Mexico-City*, October 1991-1992). For

Jaap Guldemond
Marente Bloemheuvel

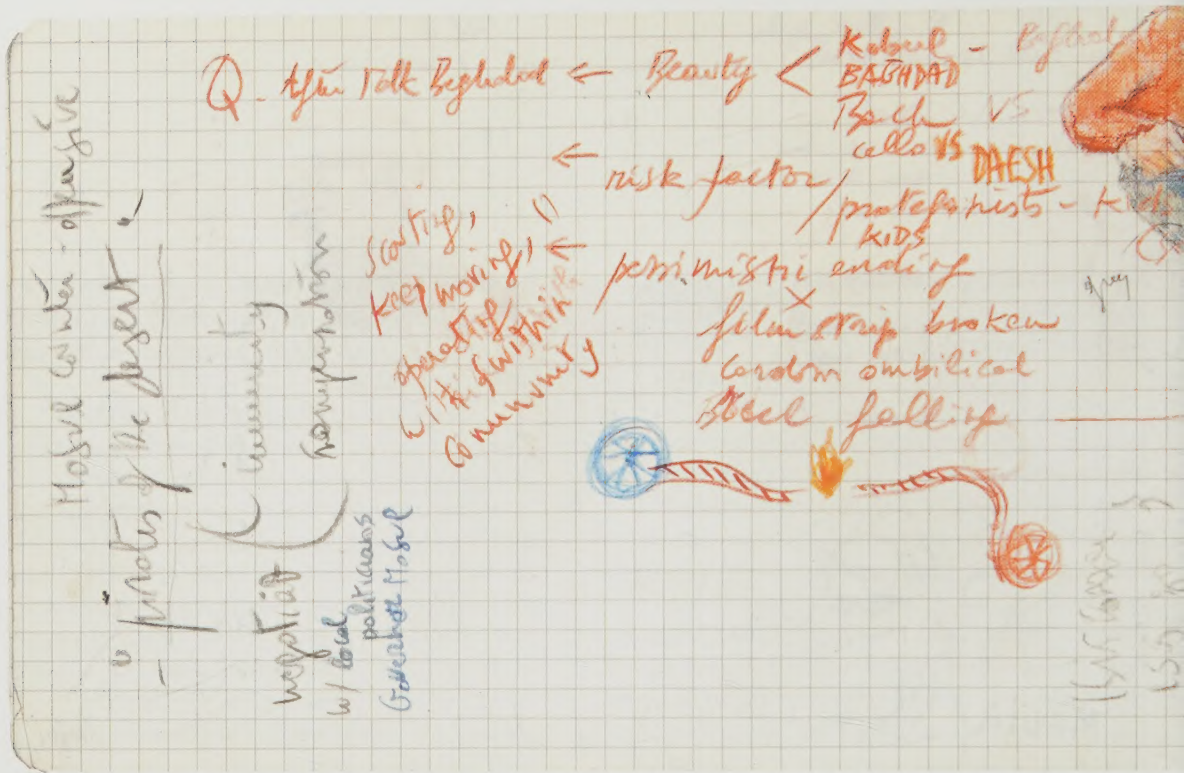
his 1989 work *Placing Pillows*, he put fresh white pillows into window frames of which the windows had been broken by the huge earthquake that had hit the city that year.

Gradually, his city walks led to small performative actions, to uncomplicated conceptual games with a clear and simple starting point. Alÿs's fascination for the city does not translate into large gestures or monumental sculptures (the city has plenty of those), but into small, seemingly useless interventions, which bring a form of poetry to the harsh everyday reality. Alÿs prefers to weave small stories, urban myths or fables, into the urban fabric. His 1997 *Paradox of Praxis: Sometimes Making Something Leads to Nothing* is a good example. This work registered the artist as he pushed a huge block of ice through the streets of the city for nine hours until, in the end, all the ice had melted and there was literally nothing left.

Alÿs soon extended his field of activity to locations elsewhere in the world. Sometimes he zooms in on peaceful villages and sleepy towns, but more often he targets politically charged situations full of tension and conflict. Always, his works embody his rich and imaginative observations of these places. He continues to examine their codes and map out their urban fabrics. Reality and imagination go hand in hand in subtle interventions in everyday life, which he registers using video, photography, drawing and painting.

In Peru, five hundred volunteers helped him to move a mountain of sand, scoop by scoop, which is shown in *When Faith Moves Mountains* (2002). The dedicated Sisyphean task is a recurring theme in his work, which is why he has sometimes been called 'the architect of the absurd'.

In each location, the simultaneously poetic and clearly socially engaged nature of his interventions emphasizes the political situation. In 2016 for example, he was embedded with Kurdish



Notebook, Sharya Refugee Camp, Iraq, 2016
Pen and colour pencil on paper, 13x42cm

Peshmerga troops outside Mosul for nine days, a period registered in a video (*Untitled, Mosul, Iraq, 31 Oct 2016*) that was screened in the Iraqi pavilion at the 2017 Venice Biennale. He has spent a lot of time in Iraq since, working with the local population and staying in refugee camps.

In 2004, Alijs began focusing on border locations to explore the role of the artist in sociopolitically charged places. What can an artist say that the media have not already? He filmed in the border city of Ciudad Juárez, Mexico's most lawless city, in the Strait of Gibraltar and in the waters that separate Cuba from Florida. In Jerusalem he left a trail of green paint along the so-called Green Line, which was designated the border during the 1948 armistice.

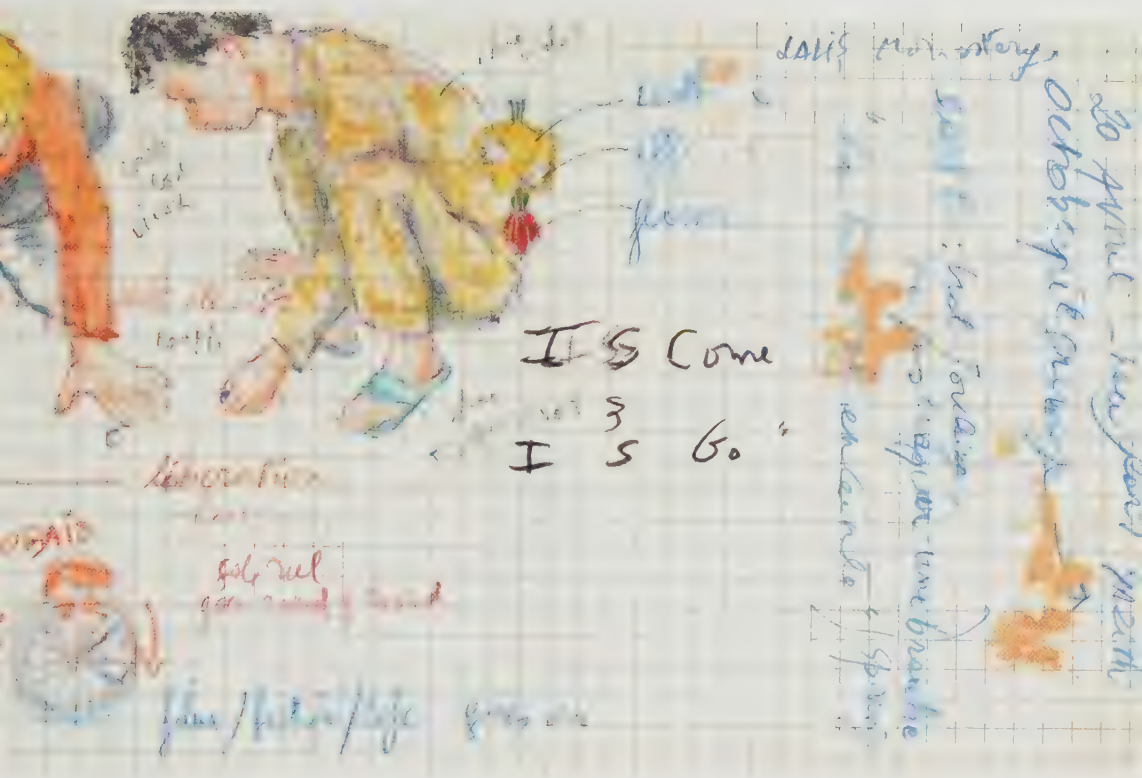
Almost every project starts with a performance, in many cases a walk through the streets of a city, developed on the basis of a few clear rules or starting points. From this, various works result –

from hand drawn animation loops and videos to sculptures, paintings and drawings. Questions about immigration issues, border conflicts and political conflicts are increasingly the subject of his research. His work is playful, absurd and serious at the same time, and is always topical.

Children's Games

During his many travels, Alijs starts to film playing children in the same way he registered the seemingly everyday situations and encounters in Mexico City. His camera follows the movements of children playing knucklebones in Nepal and musical chairs in Mexico and flying kites in Afghanistan, of Moroccan boys skimming stones on the water of the sea near Tangier and of children playing *Espejos* in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico.

Alijs's oeuvre of short cinematic works has



been steadily expanding since 1999. He films in ordinary towns and villages as well as in zones in which war is prevailing, like Afghanistan or a Yazidi refugee camp in Iraq. Places where the course of history is changing and heroes topple from their pedestals or are hoisted on them with a lot of aplomb. He always shows great interest in what is happening outside, in the streets.

It is in the streets that Alj's humanistic and slightly astonished gaze registers the playing children. Their games often reflect the rituals, customs and insights of each of the societies that he depicts. And at the same time, remarkably, the same games are played in similar ways all over the world and also represent a universal aspect of our world. The rules that govern the game are generally the same everywhere: hopscotch, marble shooting, hide and seek, musical chairs.

The artist patiently follows the children,

moves with them, but does not join in their games. The surrounding sounds are audible: birds, crickets, the wind, the screaming and laughter of the children. Visible are the sometimes harsh conditions in which the children live. This way, the audience becomes part of a long-drawn-out moment of their lives. Despite the sometimes miserable circumstances, including war and poverty, the mood among the children is above all light-hearted and cheerful, even optimistic.

Exhibition

Francis Alj's (Belgium, 1959) trained as an architect in Belgium and Venice before moving to Mexico City in 1986, where he focused on the visual arts. He is best known for his playful work, which is both engaged and poetic. In 2018 Alj's won the Eye Art & Film Prize for this work, the prize Eye annually





awards to an artist or filmmaker who makes an important contribution on the borderline of film and visual art.

Eye presents his impressive series *Children's Games* in a large, spatial arrangement. *Children's Games* is, to quote Alÿs himself, 'probably my most important contribution to art history'; he added, in all modesty, 'if I made one at all'. The work *REEL-UNREEL* (2011), a film that is not part of the *Children's Games* series, is on show in a separate room. This work can be understood as a sublimated and conceptual version of the spontaneous, more documentary and often quickly filmed *Children's Games*. It is about Afghan children who, by hand, 'hoop' two film reels through Kabul's dusty old city centre; the first reel unrolls, the second rewinds. In addition to the more abstract reference to images' unfolding and folding and the play with the words reel and real (is an artist capable of filming a real portrait of the city of Kabul?), it was also important to Alÿs to refer to the Taliban, who burned thousands of the Afghan Film Archive's films in 2001, for fear of the power of the image and its 'immoral' connotations. Apparently, the fire lasted 15 days. (Thank God the Taliban didn't know that they were burning copies rather than original negatives.)

After the exhibition, the works will remain in the care of the museum, supplemented by an extensive selection from Alÿs's cinematic oeuvre.

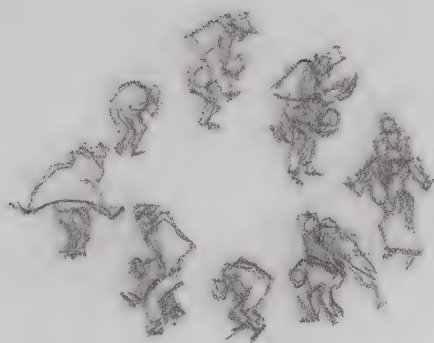
Publication

In *Children's Games*, the authors Cuauhtémoc Medina and David MacDougall both cast their own light on Alÿs's *Children's Games* on the basis of their respective fields of expertise. Cuauhtémoc Medina, Chief Curator of the Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo (MUAC) in Mexico City, has developed numerous projects, major retrospective exhibitions and publications with Francis Alÿs and

can be considered a connoisseur of his work. He reflects on the series *Children's Games* in the context of Francis Alÿs's comprehensive oeuvre.

David MacDougall is an ethnographic filmmaker and children have often been the subject of his films. In addition, he regularly writes about documentaries and ethnographic cinema and holds an honorary professorship at the Australian National University, College of Arts and Social Sciences in Canberra. He reflects on Alÿs's work from the perspective of ethnographic film and anthropology.

This book came to be in close collaboration with the artist.



Untitled, Mosul, Iraq, 2018
Pencil on tracing paper, 16x16cm



Yamqun, Afghani

26.

A Collection of 'Innumerable Little Allegories'

Cuauhtémoc Medina

15

Francis Alÿs's *Children's Games*

A Beginning in Reverse

Stories and games often lead us to a time before their beginning, or force us to start before the place of our departure, defying the convention of the linearity of time that seems to define the ethos of the adult world. Playing a game includes falling back in time and space, regressing and restarting, and suddenly jumping forward and backward, in an enjoyment of the defiance of logic and productivity. In the case of Francis Alÿs's *Children's Games* series, there is a beginning that appears as a belated recognition of a point of origin. When Alÿs was busy with developing the works he produced in the Strait of Gibraltar that eventually lead to the film *Don't Cross the Bridge Before You Get to the River* (2008), he witnessed children on the beach of Tangier, in Morocco, throwing pebbles into the sea, trying to make them bounce on the surface of the water. He was clearly amused by finding in the north of Africa a game he remembered playing when he was a boy, suggesting the universality of certain features of the challenge of growing up around the world. At the same time, the children's action had an immediate implication on the work he was elaborating: they seemed to be trying to make those pebbles cross the sea and reach the coast of Europe, which was visible from the beach. Like the immigrants who were the referents of the poetic bridge he was trying to visualize between Morocco and Spain, the pebbles appeared to be defined by the longing to reach the line of the horizon. The sequence was at the same time a document of everyday life and a symbol. It was at that point that all of a sudden Alÿs realized the potential of the form and the role that children's games had played in his world view and artistic practice:

I realized the importance that children's games had had as an inspiration not so much of the

scripts but of the mechanics of my works: the absurd logic of very clear rules which did not have much sense in themselves. I am not very good at defining what is it that I am looking for, but it is crystal clear when it is that I am out of bounds. Children's games are like that: the moment you step out of the rules of the game children will complain to you. Sometimes rules are not well defined, but there is a clear limit between being in or outside of a game.¹

This realization came with a kind of *deja vu*. Alÿs soon recalled a short video that he filmed in 1999 on the outskirts of a Mexican town, of a boy kicking a half empty plastic Coca-Cola bottle uphill in the road, then kicking it back when it came down the slope. The child played this solitary football, slowly ascending until he lost control of the bottle as it descended the road, undoing his efforts. The video, which Alÿs titled *Caracoles* (snails), was influential in the development of his well-known *Rehearsal Series* (1999-2005), in terms of narrating an effort followed by a failure, illustrating a dialectic of progress and regression that referred to our complicated relationship with the linearity of time and labour. In any case, Alÿs retroactively named *Caracoles* as the first of the *Children's Game* series. He realized that he wanted to slowly build a collection of different playing practices of children around the world, preferably images of the games played in public space. This could constitute something of an anthropological archive of a significant shared experience that the erosion of urban communities, the empire of cars in the streets, the greater dependence of children on the solitary confinement of new forms of electronically mediated entertainment and concerns for the safety of children in the street are slowly eradicating from our way of life. He started with projects in regions of the world where children had little exposure to social



networks and computer games, and where street life was still significant in the life of towns and cities. He noticed that there was very little representation and research on the street games of children, beyond old engravings and texts. He saw an opportunity to document practices that somehow had escaped the attention of our overwhelming flood of information, a rare opportunity to address a field that had surprisingly been neglected. A significant factor turned out to be that children's games seemed similar regardless of the geographic location of the communities he recorded, and appeared to involve a limited number of variants despite the diversity of cultures and identities:

Something that interested me in terms of my experience as an artist was the way children's games tended to have a universal quality. There are not many children's games: they tend to have a number of variations. A good example is *rayuela*, or hopscotch: there are an infinite number of variants but the basic mechanics remain throughout the many cultures I know. You depart from the earth to cross hell and reach

paradise, and then you return to earth jumping over hell, that is, *reborn!* It is a game of redemption. Similarly knucklebones: I have found it from Belgium to India and Nepal, where I finally recorded it.²

In retrospect, there were several reasons for Alÿs to turn his attention to compiling an archive of children's games in a number of videos grouped into a series starting from around 2007. On the one hand, he felt a slight disappointment with the scepticism of the adults that collaborated with his projects. This lack of commitment was the reason why the project of building a symbolic pathway into the sea pointing towards Cuba (*Bridge/Puente, Havana, Cuba-Key West, Florida*, 2006) was, in great part, blocked by the owners of yachts and boats in Key West, Florida. When forced to rethink his idea of building a bridge between continents by transferring his project in the Strait of Gibraltar, Alÿs again found it difficult to circumvent the attempts on the part of governments and local agencies to manipulate the terms of his work. Therefore, from that moment he decided to trust the realization of

his fables and stories to children, most notably in the middle- and long-feature films he produced in the vicinity of war theatres in Afghanistan and Iraq. His fascination with the perspective of his young collaborators coincided with the withdrawal of the artist as a character in his walks and projects, a feature that defined most of his early films and actions. His previous works did include sequences of children in the street, spontaneously interacting with the mysterious and inspiring character of Alj's works, for instance in relation to the futility of the artist's effort to push an ice block through the streets of Mexico City (*Paradox of Praxis I: Sometimes Making Something Leads to Nothing*, 1997) or his wanderings through Havana, Cuba, wearing magnetic shoes (*Zapatos magnéticos*, 1994). Such images were somehow unconscious or subsidiary to Alj's main conceptual aims. Even when he used specific images of games in the main square of Mexico city that served to illustrate the way he could no longer pretend to be a foreign passive observer of the Mexican reality (*If you are a typical spectator, what you are really doing is waiting for an accident to happen*, 1996), or the way the narrative of the music fable *Cuentos patrióticos* (1997) revolves around an endless game of musical chairs as a way to convey a temporality without the simple linear expectations of the ideology of progress, those games were used as allegories of complex social concepts rather than a theme or motive. Pervasiveness of images of games through Francis Alj's work, including painting and drawing series such as *Le temps du sommeil* (1996-present), suggest the extent to which his imagination has always been defined by the inspiration of the playground. But none of those antecedents appeared to suggest that he would at any point decide to compile an archive of those routines as one of the long-term lines of his production. The evocative power of the image of the children throwing stones

into the sea in Tangier in 2007, however, made him immediately realize the full poetic significance of the games children play as both standardized cultural forms, and powerful localized social symbols, in need of being recorded before they could become extinct.

Narratives without Words

The modest and straightforward documentary quality of Francis Alj's *Children's Games* relates to his understanding of them more as a collection of documents that gains significance with each case that is recorded, rather than because of a particular aesthetic or mark of authority. Seen in the context of Francis Alj's oeuvre as a whole, *Children's Games* has a significance as part of the archives of forms of vanishing vistas of city life that, all through the 1990s, he compiled in slide shows akin to the nineteenth-century books on 'popular types' that are so characteristic of early world city representations. In that sense, they are akin to the several series of snapshots of vendors or loaders pushing carts or cumbersome objects in the street (*Ambulantes*, 1992-2006), taken for the most part in Mexico City and other metropolises of the global South. Or his slide shows of people or dogs sleeping on the sidewalk (*Sleepers*, 1999-2006) or begging in public situations (*Beggars-Mendigos*, 2002-2004), which provide a candid representation of the complexity of a type of city dwelling that is about to disappear due to the tyranny of car culture and the many forms of social control used by governments and capitalism to impede anyone who intends to use public space for purposes other than speed transit and dedicated shopping. Like those other archives, Alj understands his inventory of street games both as a demonstration of their global currency across cultures and borders, and as a last attempt to at least preserve the images of a form of city life

that seems condemned to become extinct in the near future. These are films related to a pervasive intention that traverses all of Alÿs's city fables: to preserve and memorialize the resistance of inner-city living to the homogenizing forces of the so called rationalization of the world. Thus he constantly attempts to frame them, in pursuit of the most simple recording of children interacting on the basis of a number of rules, in relatively simple and sometimes even precarious environs. As we have said, a significant part of the artist's interest in those games is what he describes as their 'rigour' and intrinsic elegance and rationality, and the way they imply the existence of some kind of micro society that consists of their players. These are generally very short films, of just a few minutes, that portray specific children concentrating on their moves, exercises and small interactions, with little or no acknowledgment of being recorded and of the presence of the artist's camera. In general, Alÿs selects games that are either easily recognizable and universal, or that appear self-evident to the observer, with little or no cultural specificity, despite referring to a variety of local names in different languages. Except for the film about the Mexican *Piñata* (Mexico City, 2012), the artist avoids examples that require a complicated apparatus or toys. He is much more interested in the unwritten set of rules that govern the games, and the interactions in the micro-society of children that the games usually illustrate.

Nevertheless, it is clear to the observer that the series has an allegoric intent, which draws from the moral symbolism many of the games carry as means of education and the transmission of tradition. No 12, *Sillas* (Oaxaca, 2012), the musical chairs Alÿs filmed beautifully seen from above in the south of Mexico, is a clear allegory of fate and competition, in pursuit of survival or power grabbing. Others, like No 11, *Wolf and Lamb* (Yamgun,

Afghanistan, 2011) or No 16, *Hopscotch* (Sharya Refugee Camp, Iraq, 2016), are similar to many folk tales in how they describe a moral adventure in which danger, redemption and sin are part of the fabric of life. More prominently, several of the videos have violent implications that are underlined by the way they interact with other projects by Francis Alÿs in conflict zones, projects about specific societies and cultures at the beginning of the twenty-first century. No 15, *Espejos* (Ciudad Juárez, 2013) stages a shooting battle with mirror pieces among children hiding in the ruins of abandoned housing in one of the epicentres of drug traffic and mafia violence in Mexico, Ciudad Juárez, next to the border with El Paso in the United States. Cruelty by children is dutifully exemplified in the way young girls and boys deprive hapless grasshoppers of their rear legs, to limit their ability of escaping when thrown up in the air to force them to fly. Even the funny B-movie editing style of boys pretending to shoot at each other with L-shaped sticks in No 5, *Revolver* (Baja California, Mexico, 2009) cannot but evoke the way games naturalize aggression as a formative element of masculine identities. Either on their own, or in the way Alÿs frequently uses them as remarks or 'footnotes' in his more ambitious social critical projects, these films convey the way children are not isolated from the convulsions of their time or the conflicts of their society. Quite the opposite: like their elders' myths, their scuffles and runs are means of reflecting on the unresolvable contradictions of their community.

The Memory of Humanity

Children's Games constitute a mysterious tradition within which generation after generation of children familiarize themselves with the rules and goals of games, mostly without the intervention of their parents, teachers of other adults. Those games' loss



and decadence attests to the isolation in which children are increasingly raised in the so-called developed world, and the way our fears keep them from participating in society and prevent them from being part of the collectives of roving groups of children that used to populate our streets. The confinement of small humans to the solitude of schools, courses and screen entertainment will understandably lead to some of those undercurrents of culture drying out, cutting some of our last ties to the some of the basic symbolic languages of humanity.

The spectacle of the continuity of those routines is breath-taking when we examine the scenes of the 1560 painting *Children's Games* by Pieter Bruegel the Elder in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. Watching Flemish children from almost 500 years ago playing leapfrog, knuckle-bones, blind man's bluff or hoop and stick, along with the many scenes where children mimic adult activities or merely compete to dominate all kinds of equilibrium tricks, is both uplifting and intriguing. How is it that this complex composition of

what Karel van Mander described already in 1604 as a collection of 'innumerable little allegories'³ relates both to the dynamics of cultural inheritance and to the traditions of artistic representation? How does Francis Alÿs's own *Children's Games* series relate to a painting where, in the words of Edward Snow, 'the proliferation of meaning defies any settled statement'?⁴

Alÿs saw Bruegel's painting in the flesh early in his life. He fondly remembers visiting a retrospective exhibition of the Flemish master in Brussels when he was no older than eight years old. That was a particularly important artistic experience in his youth: he was deeply impressed by Bruegel's paintings, both because of the fascination he felt with all the anecdotes and images they contained, and because it was an extraordinary event in a family that rarely even visited the city centre, let alone an exhibition in a museum. He is aware of the way that that particular exhibition showed him the immense emotional and imaginative power painting had, despite being a flat medium. His memory of seeing Bruegel's paintings is acute:







I can see myself dressed in shorts seeing that exhibition. I can retrieve scenes that maybe were not part of that painting, like buttocks coming outside of the window shitting and all kinds of fantastic scenes for a child that had very little visual information.⁵

Alÿs lived in the countryside, with little access to illustrated books and magazines, in a family that refused to have a television. Therefore, the impact of Bruegel's scenes, his feelings of amoral joy for the material world as the place of a human animal existence, and the 'unseriousness of the ethical and epistemological frame' of his art, as T.J. Clark puts it,⁶ was enormous. The artist is keenly aware that Bruegel's *Children's Games* was part of that exhibition. However, the direct relationship between Bruegel's work and his own was something that he came to realize when friends and colleagues, such as myself, pointed it out to him, along with other references, like Helen Lewitt's or Nacho López's photographs of children in the streets of Mexico City in the 1930s and 1950s.⁷

Independently of how conscious or not Alÿs was of those references, the relationship with Bruegel's painting is illuminating. Alÿs's direct representation is related to Bruegel's understanding of the body as 'an ontological given, the place of lived experience',⁸ along with the ambiguity with which he both documents existing practices and hints at their deeper allegorical messages. Like Bruegel's paintings, Alÿs's videos mark a moment of transition, where the meaning of childhood for our civilization is at stake. Bruegel's catalogue of games was produced just before in the seventeenth century, when 'a vaguely formulated social attitude toward children as naturally immodest and uninhibited came to be replaced by an elaborately articulated idea of *childhood* as a state of innocence that was fragile

and highly susceptible of corruption'.⁹ Similarly, Alÿs's work seems to mark the colonization of childhood by the society of control, and the ensuing disappearance of the shared experience of a community made of the collective experience of the street as an alternative form of sociability to that of the family and the marketplace.

Not surprisingly, Alÿs sees his role as something more transcendent than the production of yet more contemporary works of art. As the artist puts it: 'Sometimes I think that I ought to complete the *Children's Games* series, as my legacy to humanity, before they entirely disappear.'¹⁰ He is acutely aware that each of these images involves a whole vocabulary of experience and a form of immaterial heritage that in a growing part of the world will no longer reach the following generation. We ought to watch *Children's Games* as some sort of natural history, aware that some of us might still keep in our bodies a whole imagery that will soon be extinct.

Notes

- 1 Conversation between Francis Alÿs and Cuauhtémoc Medina, 18 August 2019.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Quoted in: Sabine Haag (coord.), *Bruegel: The Master* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2018), 133.
- 4 Edward Snow, *Inside Bruegel: The Play of Images in Children's Games* (New York, North Point Press, 1997), 159.
- 5 Conversation between Francis Alÿs and Cuauhtémoc Medina, 18 August 2019.
- 6 T.J. Clark, *Heaven on Earth: Painting and the Life to Come* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2018), 103.
- 7 See particularly López's extraordinary image of street children holding mice by the tail as the only semblance of a toy they could lay their hands on. *Luna Cornea* 31 [2007], Special Issue on Nacho López, 128-129.
- 8 Snow, *Inside Bruegel*, op. cit. (note 3), 71.
- 9 Ibid., 39.
- 10 Conversation between Francis Alÿs and Cuauhtémoc Medina, 18 August 2019.







Francis Alÿs and the Games of Childhood

David MacDougall

27

I have been particularly struck by Francis Alÿs's *Children's Games* for two reasons. It addresses a subject very close to my own work and is also related more generally to the world of ethnographic filmmaking. For over a decade I have been making ethnographic films about children's lives in India, and I see in Alÿs's work a similar impulse to acknowledge both the power of cultural tradition and the agency and autonomy of children themselves.

I have often been asked for a definition of ethnographic film, for it is a category that seems puzzling to many people, situated as it is between social science and the art of cinema. For me this has never posed a problem. I consider ethnographic films to be any that have the intention of exploring the cultural patterns of a society. These films embrace a much wider range than those made exclusively within the disciplines of anthropology or sociology. There are even fiction films that I think could be described as ethnographic, such as Jean Epstein's *Finis Terrae* of 1929, Susumu Hani's *Bride of the Andes* (1966) and the 'ethno-fictions' of Jean Rouch. I therefore happily include Francis Alÿs's *Children's Games* in this larger body of work.

In recent years, ethnographic filmmaking has come to include two different activities: on the one hand, the use of a visual medium to explore human culture and society, and on the other, the exploration of visual culture itself, such as painting, photography, architecture and advertising. For me, however, it is the first activity that seems the most vibrant and revolutionary, for visual culture has long been studied and discussed in books and articles. Using filmmaking to try to understand the patterns by which people live brings an entirely new perspective to the idea, beyond the domain of words, and it can result in wholly new kinds of knowledge. This is not necessarily knowledge that can be formulated in the propositional statements

we are used to in academic writing, but knowledge that we gain through our senses and a more immediate acquaintance with people's lives.

It is often assumed that because film is a visual medium, it is concerned only with the visible. This is clearly not true. For one thing, film is now an audio-visual medium, in which sounds can be as important as images. Often the two are welded together in a way that produces a subjective experience that goes well beyond simply adding one to the other. Furthermore, films are more about the invisible than the visible, for they provide a channel to the full gamut of human experience: to people's thoughts, emotions, values and beliefs.

It is surprising how little attention has been paid to children and childhood until recently by professional ethnographers. Since the nineteenth century, most anthropologists have treated children as a *tabula rasa* on which, it was believed, the adults of a society imprinted their culture. When they did concern themselves with children, it was largely in terms of their upbringing and, in many societies, the initiation ceremonies that propelled them into adulthood. Even for an anthropologist like Margaret Mead, who took an interest in childhood and adolescence, the primary interest was in processes of socialization. It fell to others – to writers, artists, folklorists and filmmakers – to explore the experiential world of childhood.

Francis Alÿs is one of these 'others' who have taken children seriously. With his *Children's Games* project he has followed in the footsteps of folklorists Iona and Peter Opie, who in the 1940s began to explore and catalogue children's distinctive rhymes and games, culminating in their influential book *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* (1959). It was partly this book that began to turn the tide for anthropology. In the past two decades we have seen an immense growth in the anthropology of childhood. Anthropologists have come to



recognize that children make important economic and cultural contributions to society and may be significant generators of social change. Moreover, greater attention is now being paid to the autonomy of children and their life experiences. They are increasingly seen as independent beings with their own customs, beliefs and values.

The makers of fiction films seem to have looked more attentively at children's lives than documentary filmmakers, perhaps because it has been difficult, without the resources of fiction, to enter into the world of children's feelings, thoughts and experiences. Documentary filming of children may also require longer periods of observing them than most filmmakers have been willing to allow. Such projects also require the conviction that children's thoughts and perspectives are inherently important. The evidence suggests that this has rarely been the case. When the television program *Seven Up!* was first broadcast in 1964, what was most surprising about it was that no one had thought it worthwhile to interview children this way before. It eventually led to the long-running *Seven Up!*

series that returned to the same children every seven years. But I can think of very few documentary films before this that paid close attention to children. There was Lindsay Anderson's *Thursday's Children* about deaf children in 1953 and Susumu Hani's *Children Who Draw* in 1956, exploring children's emotions through their drawings, but almost all other films viewed children through the perspectives of public policy.

In the following years a few documentary films focused on children's inner lives. There was Johan van der Keuken's portrait of a young girl, *Beppie* (1965), Claire Simon's *Récréations* (1992) about the passions underlying children's play, and in 1994 Denis Gheerbrand's portrait of a boy with cancer, *La vie est immense et pleine de dangers*.

A few longer, multi-film projects have also been initiated, such as Ilkka Ruuhijärvi and Ulla Turunen's year-by-year study of a group of Finnish schoolchildren and my own project on the experiences of children in Indian institutions. By contrast, fiction films as early as Chaplin's *The Kid* (1921) began to see children as individual personalities.

Since then many famous fiction films about children have appeared by such directors as Mark Donskoi, Jean Vigo, Yasujiro Ozu, Roberto Rossellini, René Clément, Satyajit Ray, François Truffaut, Andrei Tarkovsky and Louis Malle.

Francis Alÿs joins the ranks of filmmakers like Vigo, and photographers Helen Levitt, Sally Mann and Anthony Goicolea, who have been willing to show the often hidden and edgy side of childhood experience. Here children stand apart from adults and contradict the comfortable myths that adults frequently create about them. One can see why Alÿs was especially drawn to the project of *Children's Games*, for it is consistent with his collecting of examples, as in the *Fabiola Project* (1992-present) and *A Personal Repertoire of Possible Behaviour While Walking the Streets of London Town* (2005). In the first of these, he exhibits part of his huge collection of popular images of the Roman Saint Fabiola, based on a lost nineteenth century painting by Jean-Jacques Henner. In the second, he creates nine works on paper proposing different kinds of perambulation of the city, inspired by an overheard mobile phone conversation.

The whole of Alÿs's art resonates with the themes found in the rituals that children perform. Many of these emphasize persistence and repetition, as well as the spectacle of an outsider on the periphery of society. In *The Green Line* (2004-2005), Alÿs carries a dripping can of green paint along the 'armistice line' of 1948 between Israel and Jordan, creating a memorial line of his own. No 6, *Sand-castles* shows the same concentration on a doomed task that we find in his *Sometimes Making Something Leads to Nothing* (1997), in which Alÿs pushes a block of melting ice through Mexico City.

Children's Games No 18, *Knucklebones* and No 1, *Caracoles* are replete with repetition, but they differ greatly in kind and mood. The first, from Nepal, is an exercise in rigorously acquired skills,

while in the second a boy repeatedly kicks a plastic bottle up a steep Mexican street, letting it roll partly back each time. Unhurriedly, he progresses along. His actions express the aimless pleasures available to a child in the city, each new adventure governed by the vagaries of chance and terrain. No 11, *Wolf and Lamb* and No 12, *Sillas* show children's creation of metaphors of social inclusion and exclusion. The political significance of this is mirrored in Alÿs's work *Cuentos patrióticos* (1997), where sheep move in an endless circle followed by their shepherd. Alÿs's preoccupation with lines of demarcation is also found in a number of other *Children's Games*. And in *REEL-UNREEL* (2011), a further work involving children, two boys simultaneously unroll and roll up a strip of 35mm film along the streets of Kabul.

Filming children may demand certain abilities but obviate others. Initially, for me, filming children was like entering an alien world. Although we were all children once, or are children now, childhood is still in many ways closed to adults. Children think differently from adults and organize themselves according to their own customs and beliefs, which are passed from one child to another rather than through adults. Children are connected to adults and dependent on them in many ways, but they are very good at keeping to themselves. When filming in a school dormitory in India, I found that although it took some time to win the children's confidence, once I was trusted they quickly became absorbed again in their own activities. I learned not by asking questions but through long immersion in their daily lives. Later, many told me they had completely forgotten I was filming them.

There are many approaches to making ethnographic films, but in general they require the same sort of expenditure of patience and time required of an anthropologist in the field. To make revealing films about people in another society,



you have to know them well, and the filming cannot be done casually. In any case, unless you are serious, they will probably not let you film them. The willingness to be filmed depends upon a high degree of trust between filmmaker and subject, especially when borders of culture, language, age or gender are to be crossed.

But there is more. The filmmaker must be capable of a special kind of empathy: a responsiveness of mind and eye to the thoughts and feelings of others, and an ability to move among them with a kind of corporeal intelligence. The filmmaker must also not disrupt the very thing that he or she has come to film. Documentary filmmaking used to be highly industrialized, with technical jobs being done by different members of a crew. This meant that it was almost always intrusive or artificial, for it was always the most dominant activity at the time. Perhaps only in wartime, in combat filming, was this not the case. Not surprisingly, then, most

documentary films were a kind of re-enactment, staged for the benefit of the filmmakers. Only comparatively recently, with the invention of new camera equipment and more recently digital video, has it become possible to film the spontaneous events in people's lives.

For many of us, this has meant developing non-intrusive methods of filming. People are always aware they are being filmed, however much they may temporarily forget or ignore it. The objective of the filmmaker is therefore to make them comfortable with the idea of being filmed, and comfortable with the actual process. At some level there must be an area of agreement between filmmaker and subjects, a belief in the value of the film. There must also be an acceptance of having the camera present. This usually requires a period of gradual acclimatization. Throughout the filming, the behaviour of the filmmaker is crucial. If the filmmaker is constantly calling attention to the pro-



blems of filming, such as fussing with the camera or sound or light, people's attention will be distracted from their own concerns. The filmmaker must therefore be as unobtrusive as possible and in general make no interventions, directions or special demands on the subjects. This requires experience and expertise. At its best, the use of the camera becomes as instinctive and fluent as the playing of a musical instrument.

One of the traditional points of tension in ethnographic filmmaking has been that between ethnographic accuracy and cinematic art. For many anthropologists, the two were in fundamental opposition. They believed that filmmakers, by making aesthetic choices, would inevitably distort the scientific record by imposing their own sense of form or beauty. This wrongly presupposed, of course, that a scientific record could be free of bias in the first place, and that filmmakers were preoccupied with aesthetics. Filmmakers may be

as much concerned with getting at the truth as scientists, putting aside any personal pretensions. With changes in the understanding of science, it has also gradually become apparent that there is no single ethnographic reality that can be grasped as a whole. It is one's interest that determines how one defines a cultural object or social event. Is a wedding, for example, the ritual itself, its economic or political implications, its role in cementing society, or the different feelings it engenders in its participants? It is all of these, but not all can ever be grasped at once, much less in a film. The work of both scientists and filmmakers is always selective, and it is perfectly legitimate for them to give greater weight to those aspects of society that particularly interest them.

Beyond this matter of emphasis, what aesthetic decisions are involved? Even before embarking on a project, there are the given aesthetics of the medium used, which have coalesced over time –

for example, that a film frame is rectangular rather than circular. There is the particular aesthetic sensibility of the filmmaker. There are the aesthetic tastes of the culture from which the filmmaker comes. And there may be the overall aesthetic patterns of the society filmed, in all its habits, social forms and material culture – what I would call its ‘social’ aesthetics. What is important in making ethnographic films is that aesthetic decisions are made in the interests of drawing closer to the subject rather than distracting from it. Thus an image that is ostentatious, that draws attention to itself instead of the subject, should be rejected or avoided in the first place. And yet, these are the very images that many television films embrace because they seem ‘professional’ or are thought to appeal to popular tastes.

From another perspective, an ethnographic film may need to convey the particular aesthetic grounding of its subject, such as the formality of a Japanese tea ceremony. Or there may be a wider concern: to explore the distinctive look and feel of a community – that which makes it familiar and unique to its inhabitants, even within a broadly similar general culture. This requires the talent to create a cinematic geography in which we, as viewers, feel we know where we are, and in which the objects around us become known and recognizable. This is not simply a matter of how a film is structured, but also of how the filmmaker has visualized a specific space and sensed its atmosphere.

In most of Alÿs's video work, he created performances to be filmed by others, but in *Children's Games* he did most of the filming himself, so that in some ways these images more directly express his own sensibility. His interest in different cultures also brings this project closer to the concerns of anthropology. On the one hand it demonstrates the singularity of cultures, but on the other the many transcultural aspects of childhood exper-

ience. One can see that in order to make these films, Alÿs has had to gain the confidence of the children. One can also see that this was not only a matter of befriending them. He must have shown that he regarded their games as important in some way, not merely childish play. Perhaps for the first time they felt they were being taken seriously by an adult. This respect for their skill and inventiveness is clearly reciprocated in their willingness to show him the detailed structures of their games.

The reason ethnographic filmmaking is an art, and not just a method, is that it requires balancing multiple variables of intention, sensibility and analysis. Each filmmaker will balance these in a different way. The variables may be personal, such as how one responds to another person, or analytical, such as how one interprets an event in one's mind. Above all, there are the innumerable accidents of chance and circumstance that have brought one to a place and influenced what happens there. Part of Francis Alÿs's art is that he has been adept at inventing his own accidents. But in making *Children's Games* he has come up against the inventiveness of children, a capacity that challenges his own.



Mexico City, Mexico

1999

4'34"

in collaboration with

Julien Devaux

Caracoles



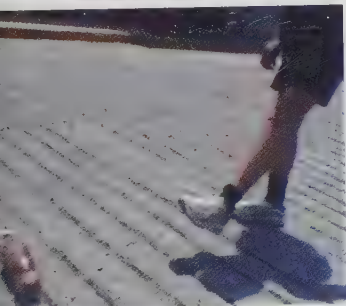
Children's Game #1
Caracoles

High above the city that shimmers like a distant sea, a boy kicks a plastic bottle half full of liquid up a steep shanty road of light and dark. A *norteño* song plays somewhere. A truck passes. The challenge is to get to the top of the hill by kicking the bottle steadily upwards, intercepting it as it rolls back, kicking it again, playing with and against gravity. The bottle drifts and dodges, zigs and zags, is briefly kidnapped by a dog. At the end, the Sisyphean stakes of the game become clear as the bottle gets away and with a groan the boy runs downhill after it.









Tangier, Morocco

2007

4'43"

in collaboration with

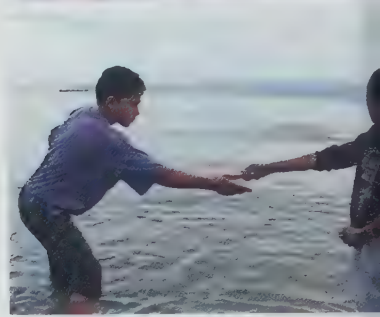
Rafael Ortega

Ricochets

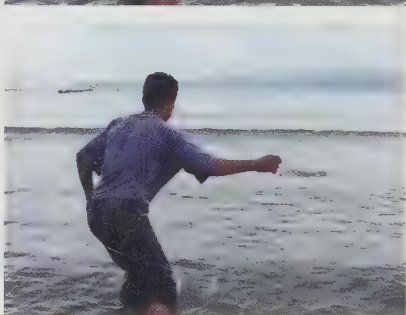


Children's Game #2
Ricochets

The bay is peaceful, framed by low hills in the distance. Three boys stand thigh-deep in the brown water, trousers rolled up. The biggest, on the left, is proficient in the art of stone-skimming: sending flat pebbles spinning over the water in such a way that they bounce off the surface as many times as possible before sinking. The middle boy feeds him stones from a stockpile inside his t-shirt, while the smallest looks on laughing. The skimmer throws quickly, intently, without thinking, without assessing his stone. Some stones sink at the second bounce, some skip a long way. It's all the same to him, he must keep throwing.









Mexico City, Mexico

2008

2'39"

in collaboration with

Julien Devaux

Coins

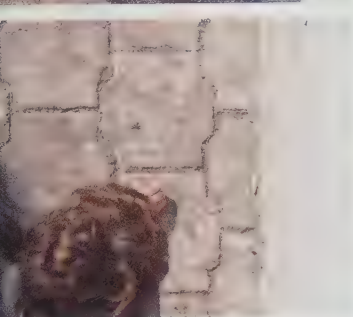


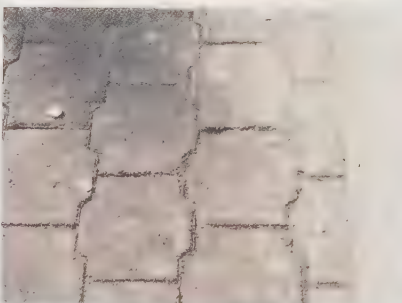
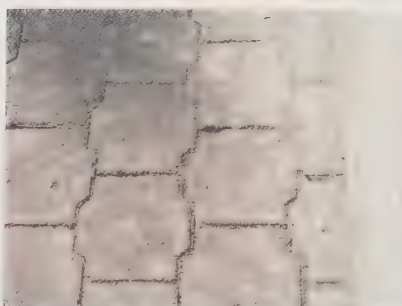
Children's Game #3

Coins



We see three kids from behind, standing at a set distance from a peeling, whitewashed wall. The rule is that each player throws a coin against the wall, which drops and rolls back on the pavement; the player whose coin remains the closest to the wall can keep the other players' coins. As we watch, though, the coins tinkle everywhere, several flung by each player, further multiplied by their shadows, after which all three rush forward to scoop up loot, seemingly at random and yet without disagreements.







Paris, France

2008

7'56"

in collaboration with

Julien Devaux and Félix Blume

Elastic



Children's Game #4
Elastic

Close-up on shiny boots, knotted elastic, cobbles. Within the confines of a courtyard two demure little girls are playing a game of confinement, entrapment, escape. An elastic band has been stretched into a rectangle around four points - the legs of one girl and of a chair. At first the rectangle is positioned close to the ground. Silent with concentration, the girls take turns bracing the elastic and performing a prescribed sequence of jumps on and around the tensed bands. Ankles are entangled and then jump free. As the elastic rises higher, more and more of the body is involved in skilful contortions and athletic, perilous choreography. There's no ultimate winning, just getting better at the dance.









Baja California, Mexico

2009

2'49"

in collaboration with

Elena Pardo and Félix Blume

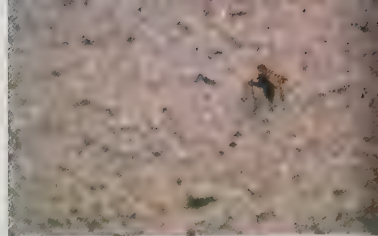
Revolver

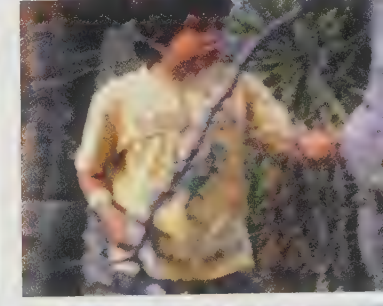
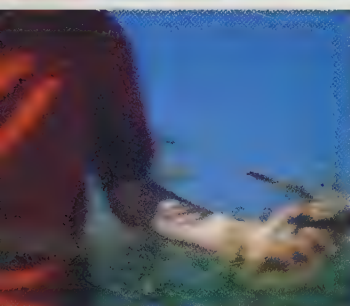


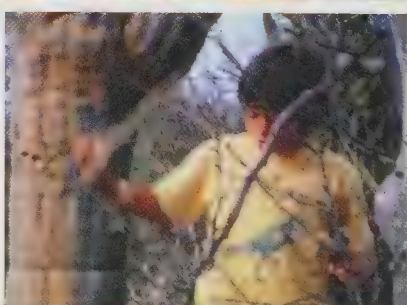
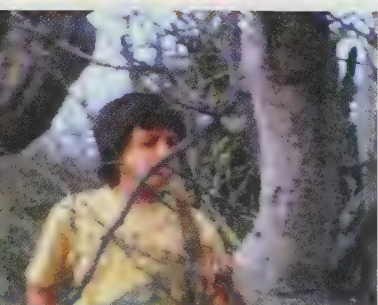
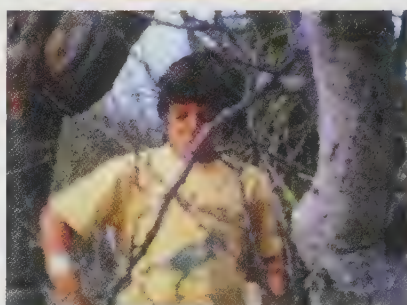
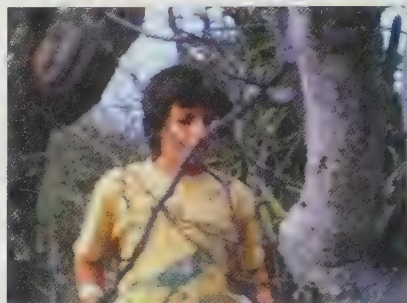
Children's Game #5

Revolver

The props in this game are wooden sticks or branches shaped like guns. Two kids pretend to fire at each other, making elaborate and highly varied shooting noises. A further dramatic element is the creative use of whatever lends itself in the vicinity - dustbins, trees, walls, abandoned cars - to improvise scenes inspired by war films and westerns, car chases and shootouts between gangs. The camerawork is rapid, swirling, full of jump cuts. A little girl sometimes raises her arms, in exasperation or surrender? Near the end, some half-hearted dying noises. Though the roles of victim and killer are pre-assigned, neither boy actually bites the dust.









Knokke-Le-Zoute, Belgium

2009

6'04"

in collaboration with

Julien Devaux and Félix Blume

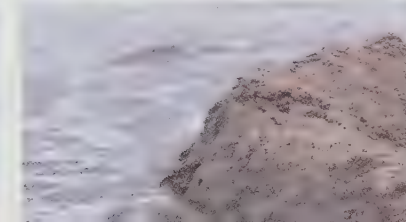
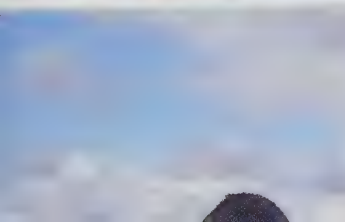
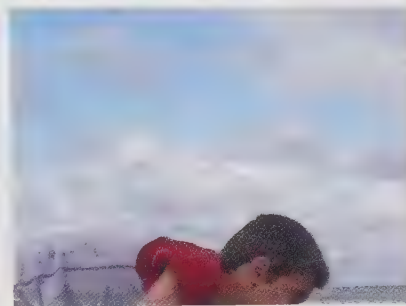
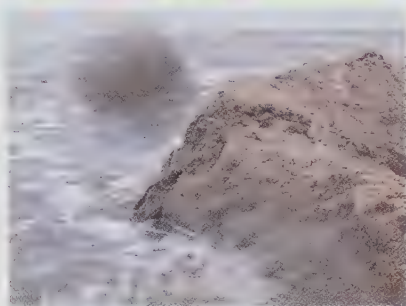
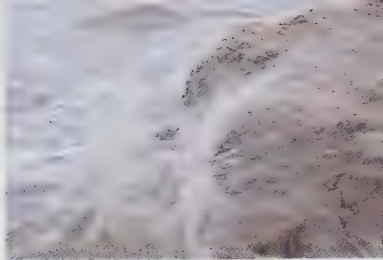
Sandcastles

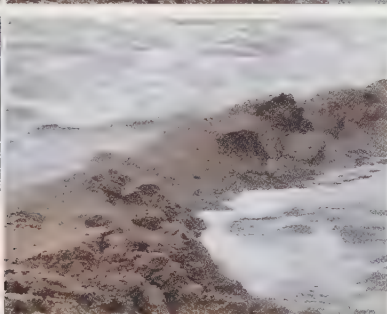
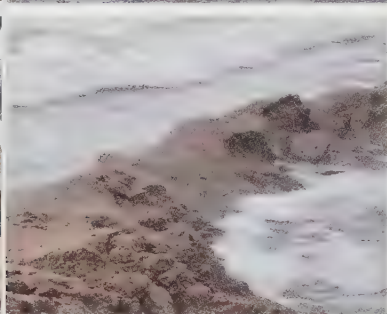


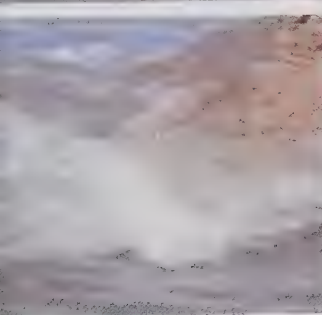
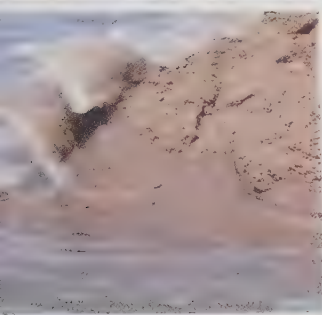
Children's Game #6
Sandcastles

The castle must be positioned just far enough from the sea to be completed before the tide reaches it. As the moat is dug by busy spades, the vacated sand forms a growing pile in the middle. Seawater starts to rise into the moat from below. As the waves break gently, closer and closer, the children dig faster to fortify the outer rampart with sodden sand. Even as the defences are being flooded, they work on shaping and firming the castle with hands and feet. The tide soon overwhelms the mini world and smooths the whole thing flat, leaving the children standing ankle-deep in ebb and flow.









Bamiyan, Afghanistan

2010

5'22"

in collaboration with

Natalia Almada

Hoop and Stick



Children's Game #7
Hoop and Stick

On a wide, gravelly mountain road, earth-coloured dwellings in the background, small boys scamper behind tyres of different thicknesses and circumferences, beating them onwards with a stick. A donkey brays in sympathy. The thin, flexible tyres of bicycles are the hardest to keep upright, especially when performing turns (slowing and tilting the rubber hoop without loss of momentum) before racing back, sometimes in competition with another, cheered on by their companions, towards the starting line.









Amman, Jordan

2010

2'37"

in collaboration with

Julien Devaux and Félix Blume

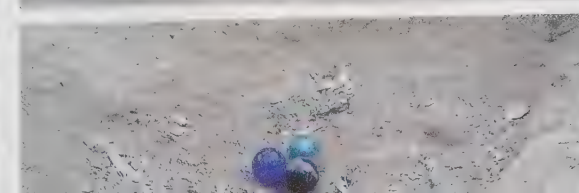
Marbles

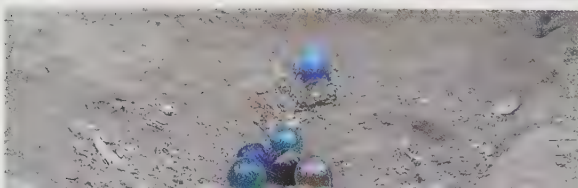


Children's Game #8
Marbles



This game requires considerable practice and precision, especially on the uneven terrain of an urban waste lot. The action consists of flicking a marble with thumb and index finger so that it reaches a hole in the ground in the fewest possible stages, ideally knocking away other marbles in its path. The player can keep any marble he has knocked out. If he doesn't knock out any, he must wait his turn to try again, hoping another player won't claim his marble in the meantime. Whoever collects the most marbles wins. As the marbles tumble into the hollow, we see the players' heads circularly reflected for a second in their tiny polished spheres.







Salto Acha, Venezuela

2011

6'10"

in collaboration with

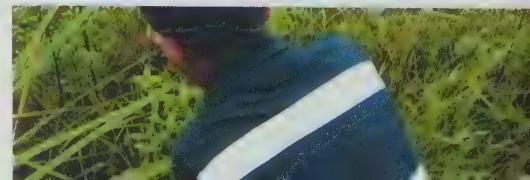
Félix Blume

Saltamontes

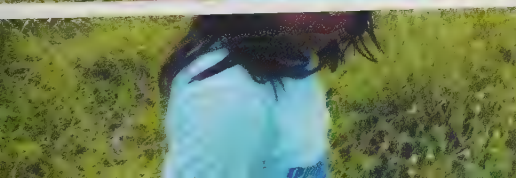
[Grasshoppers]

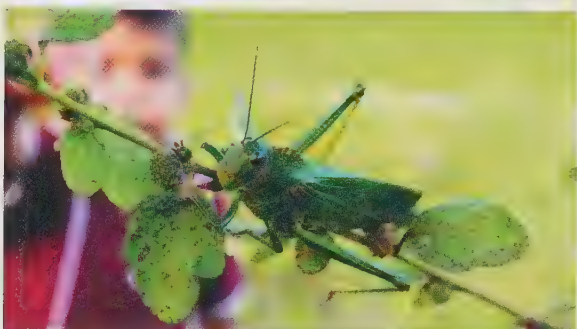
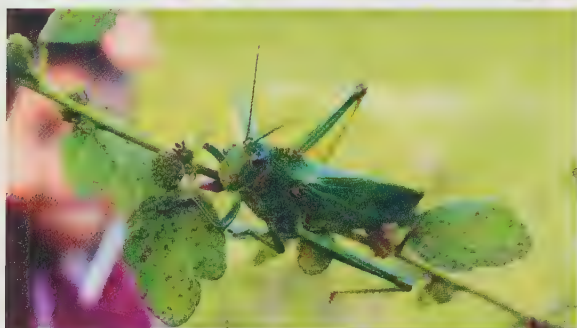


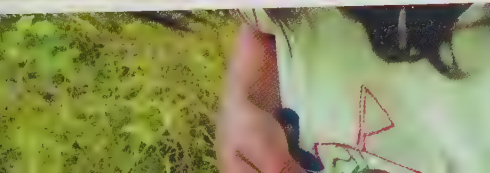
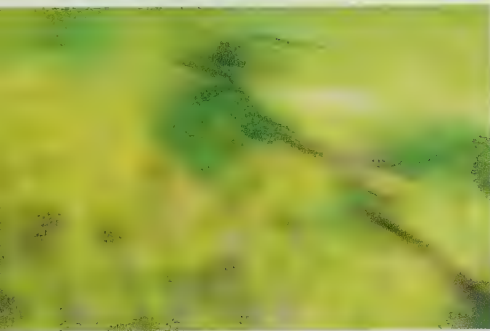
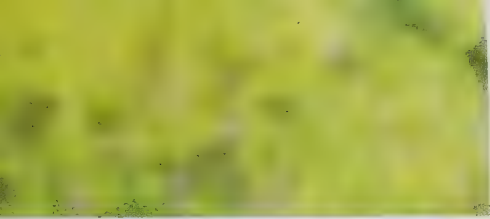
Children's Game #9
Saltamontes [Grasshoppers]



Girls and boys, together for once, hunt through lush grass and undergrowth, on the lookout for well-camouflaged grasshoppers. When one is found its hind legs are pulled off, though not its wings. Each child hurls his or her grasshopper up into the air, where it flutters against the sky above the upturned faces of the skipping, wheeling children. Unable to fly far, it will soon free-fall and be captured again. The winner is the player whose grasshopper stays in the air the longest.







Balkh, Afghanistan

2011

4'13"

in collaboration with

Julien Devaux and Félix Blume

Papalote

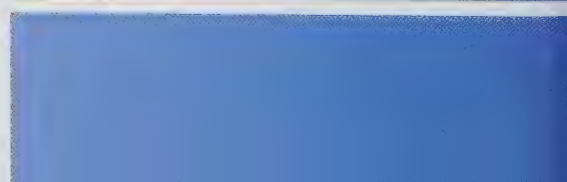
[Kite]



A 10-year-old boy in a pink salwar kameez stands near a dune-coloured wall under a powder-blue sky. He frowns and gesticulates, conversing in stops and starts with the heavens or at least with the gusting wind because you don't see his kite at first, and the string is so fine you can't see that either. What you see is a body interacting with unknown forces, pulling to the left, the right, up, down, quick, over to the left again, and so on. Here is not only the body of the boy, but the body of the world in deft mutual mimesis, amounting to 'the mastery of non-mastery' that is the greatest game of all: a guide, a goal, a strategy - all in one - for dealing with man's domination of nature [including human nature]. Afghan kite fighters often attach small blades to their kite strings, or coat them with ground glass and glue, the better to down their opponents' kites. Under the Taliban, kite-flying was banned.









Yamgun, Afghanistan

2011

3'01"

in collaboration with

Julien Devaux and Félix Blume

Wolf and Lamb



Children's Game #11
Wolf and Lamb



A group of children hold hands in a circle. The child in the middle plays the lamb, the one outside is the wolf. The wolf tries to catch the lamb by breaking through the human fence, but the kids crouch down quickly, blocking him with lowered arms. If the wolf does breach the circle, the lamb can duck out of it, while the kids now try to keep the wolf imprisoned inside. At times the cheeky lamb provokes the wolf, rushing out of safety almost into his path and darting back in. The lamb may be caught, ending that round of the game, inside or outside the fold - but these kids prefer close shaves, the dramatic prolongation of suspense.







Oaxaca, Mexico

2012

5'05"

in collaboration with

Elena Pardo, Julien Devaux

and Félix Blume

Sillas musicales

[Musical Chairs]



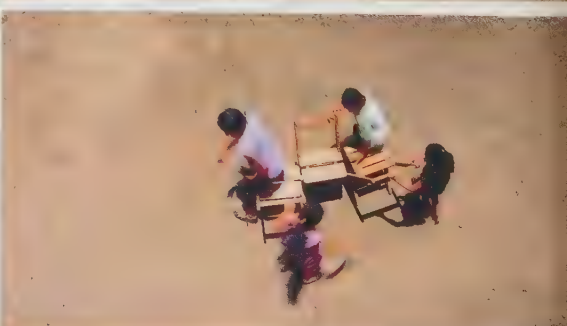
Children's Game #12

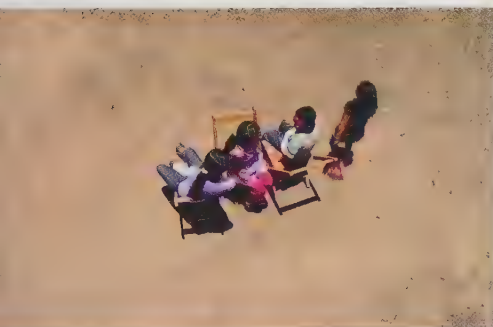
Sillas musicales [Musical Chairs]

The game is filmed from above in a single take, emphasizing the inexorable process of subtraction. Six children place five chairs in a row, facing in alternate directions. When the music starts, the players skip one behind the other around the chairs. When the music stops, everyone scrambles to occupy the nearest chair and one person is left standing. The loser carries a chair away, stomping out of shot to the left. The music starts again, and so it goes on until the winner claims the last chair. Then there is only an empty space.









Oaxaca, Mexico

2012

8'17"

in collaboration with

Elena Pardo, Julien Devaux

and Félix Blume

Piñata

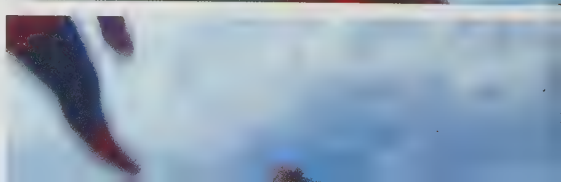
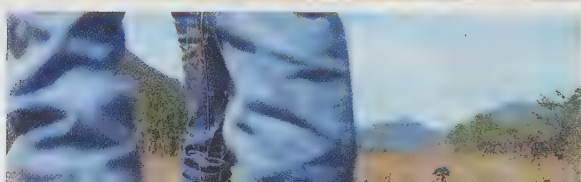
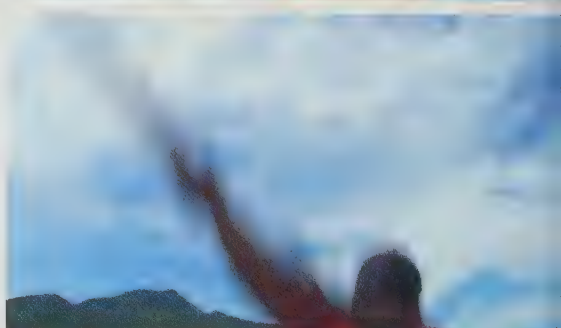
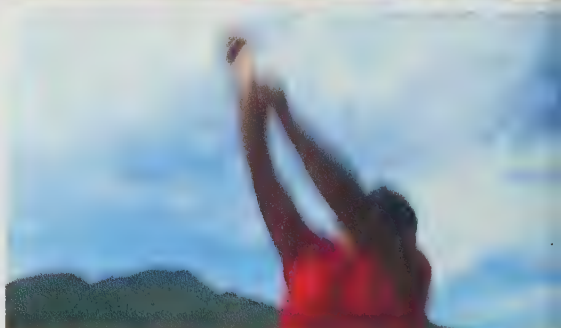


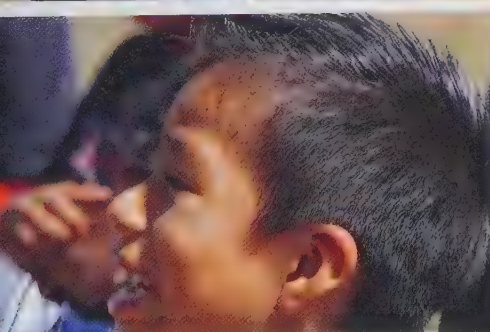
Children's Game #13
Piñata

A piñata is a papier-mâché figure stuffed with sweets. Common at birthdays in urban patios, here we find it in a field, where a garish Superman dangles between tall poles on a rope jerked by an adult, to make hitting harder. Each player is blindfolded and spun around several times before attempting to hit the piñata with a long stick. The kids' wild swinging is directed by the shouts of friends, while the allotted time of each turn is counted down in a song about finding and losing one's way. Fierce blows are dealt with varying accuracy until the piñata is fully smashed open and its sweets shower to the ground, leaped on by all the kids at once. The hollow, punctured figure is triumphantly dismembered.









Mexico City, Mexico

2013

2'51"

in collaboration with

Emilio Rivera, Julien Devaux

and Félix Blume

Piedra, papel o tijeras

[Rock, Paper, Scissors]

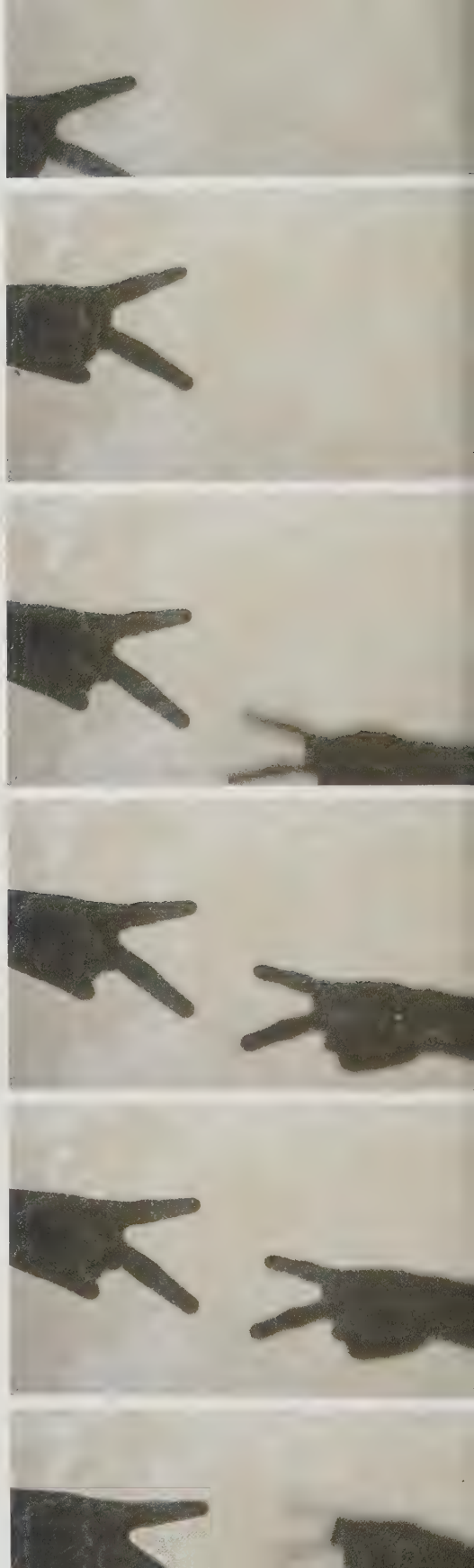


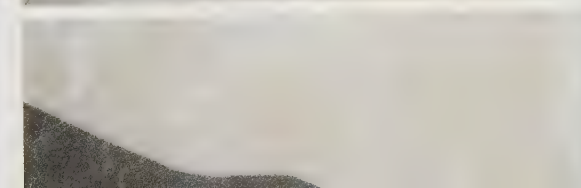
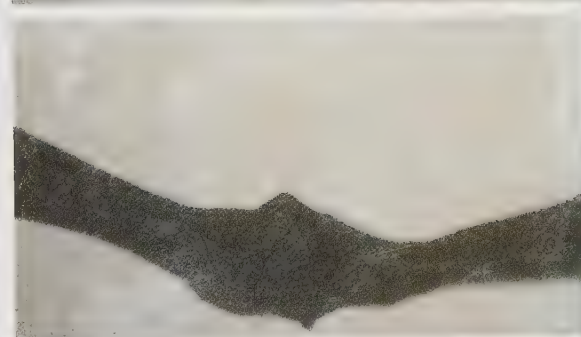
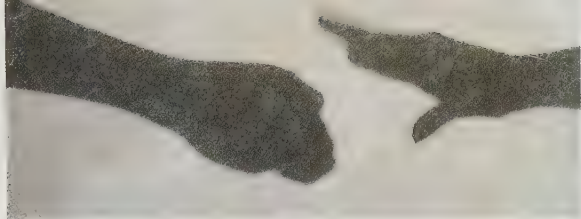
Children's Game #14

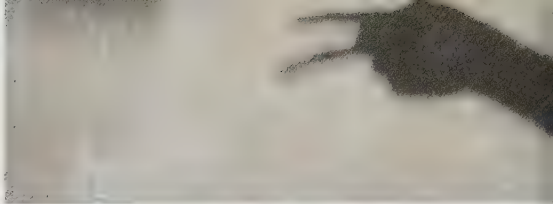
Piedra, papel o tijera

[Rock, Paper, Scissors]

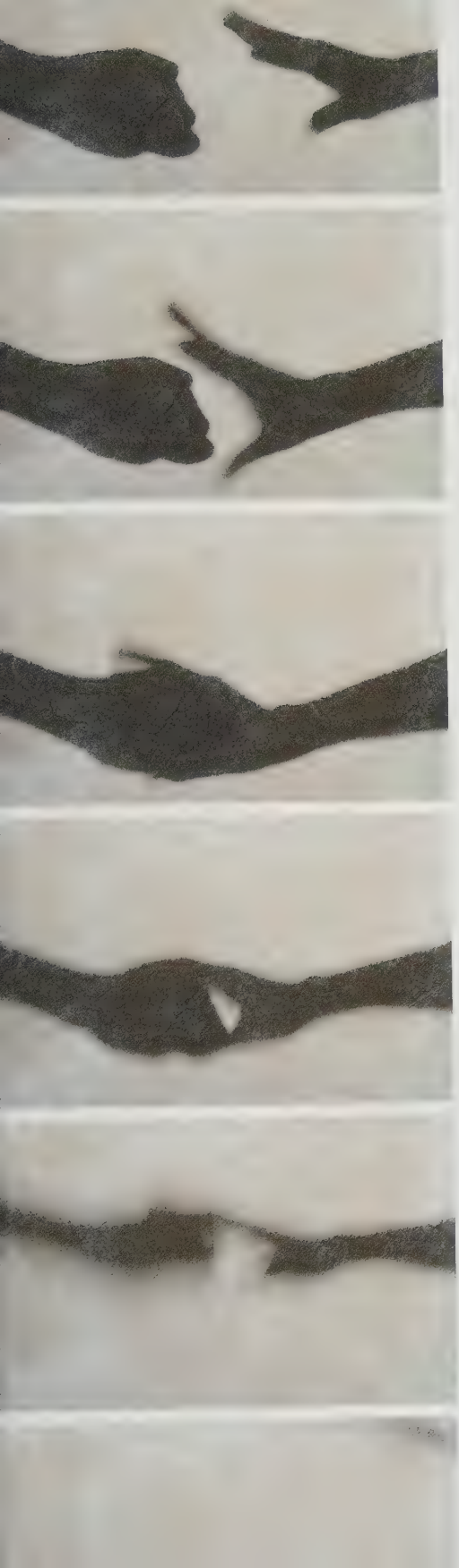
This ancient Chinese game is played by two people, who in unison say 'rock, paper, scissors' before 'throwing' one of the three figures at each other: closed fist or flat hand or two fingers in a V shape. Rock blunts scissors, scissors cut paper, paper enfolds rock. Each round is win, lose or - if both players choose the same 'tool' - draw. We see not hands but a shadow-play of hands against a pale background, as the two antagonists display the tremendous skill that kids alone can muster in what seems impossibly fast motion. 'Conceptual art', you say, the kind you could watch for hours, the hands as synecdoche not of the body but of two bodies in a rhythmic frenzy of elegant interaction and dissolution.







Children's Game #14
Piedra, papel o tijera
[Rock, Paper, Scissors]



Ciudad Juárez, Mexico

2013

4'53"

in collaboration with

Julien Devaux, Alejandro Morales

and Félix Blume

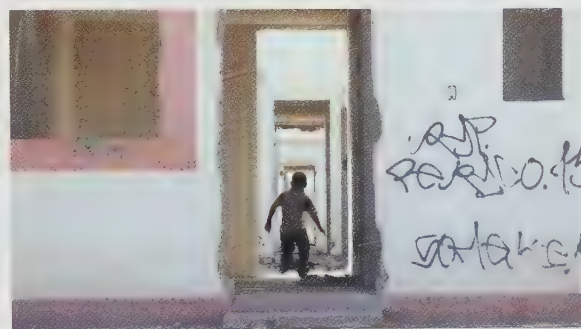
Espejos

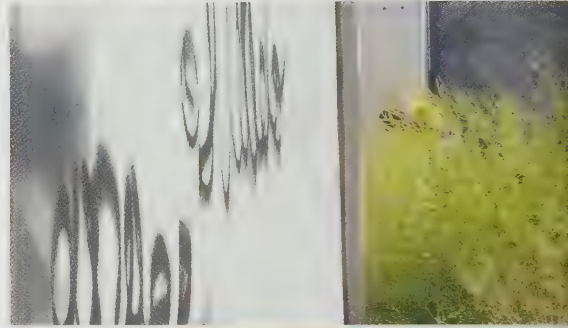
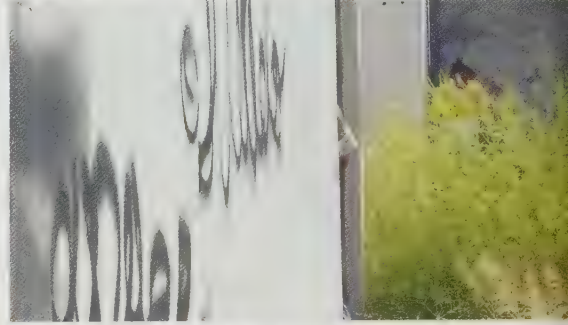
[Mirrors]



Boys stampede through the shells of small geometric homes, fancy boxes falling to bits in a dry-grass wasteland like futuristic ruins. The players flatten themselves behind walls, peer cautiously with half an eye from glassless windows. Each boy holds a piece of broken mirror and aims at the enemy with the light refracted by the sun. They can't resist making shooting noises, though these burning bullets are flashes from millions of miles away. Wandering dots of brilliance seek bodies out. Once a player is blinded by the light, he slumps and dies.



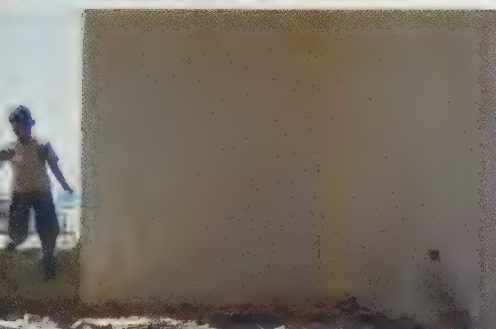






Children's Game #15
Espejos (Mirrors)

123



Sharya Refugee Camp, Iraq

2016

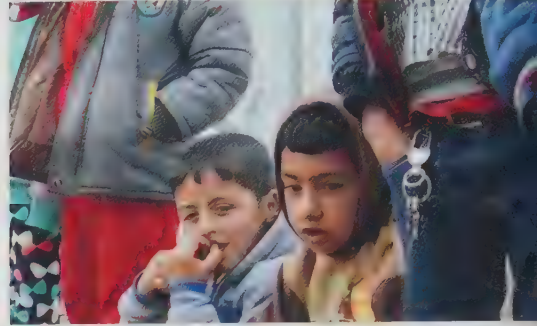
3'49"

in collaboration with

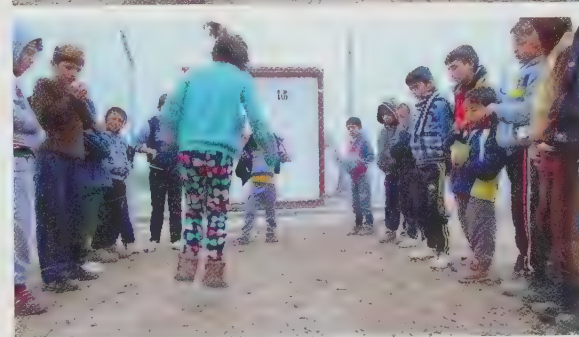
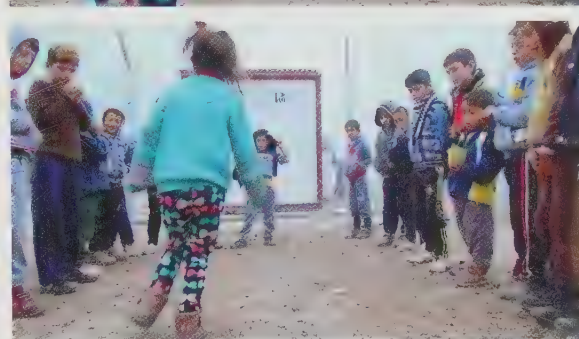
Julien Devaux and Félix Blume

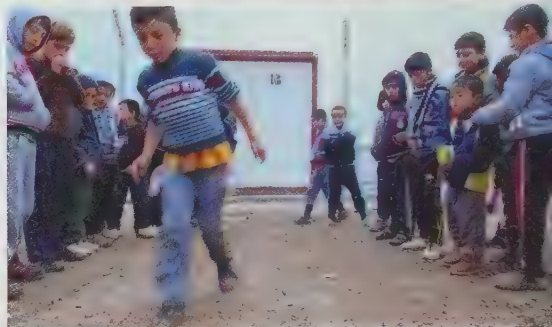
Hopscotch





Outside a stark tent city, this version of the game involves a grid of squares, two across by six long, marked by lines gouged into the arid ground. The player tosses a stone into the grid and starts hopping up one side of it to where the stone lies, careful to land only once in each square or station. When the stone is reached it must be kicked or nudged back down the other side to the start line, still hopping on the same foot. The test is difficult, and few succeed. For as the closing subtitles tell us: 'In ancient cultures hopscotch symbolizes the progress of the soul from Earth to Heaven. The player hops between Worlds to escape Hell and reach Heaven, from which he will return to Earth reborn and redeemed.'







Kathmandu, Nepal

2017

3'21"

in collaboration with

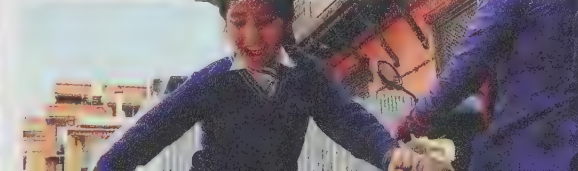
Julien Devaux and Félix Blume

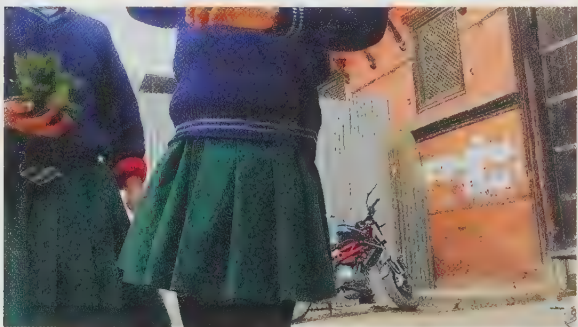
Chunggi





Reminiscent of male football tricks where a ball is juggled frontally off the knee or foot, Chunggi, popular among Nepalese girls, appears a lot more difficult. It involves a light bundle of leaves, as green and gathered as the school skirts of the players, that is repeatedly thrown up sideways with the outside or the inside of the foot while hopping on the other leg to a firm, fast beat: the girls look like carefree flappers dancing the Charleston. Part of the fun is counting aloud in English. One girl reaches 50. Then, with regretful backward looks, they vanish through the tall wooden portal into their school.







Kathmandu, Nepal

2017

6'08"

in collaboration with

Julien Devaux and Félix Blume

Knucklebones



Children's Game #18
Knucklebones



Knucklebones, or jacks, has existed for more than 2000 years and was first played with the astragalus bones of a sheep. This version - played with stones by two girls seated on the landing of a concrete stairway, people's legs and occasional monkeys passing by - is close to the Korean Gonggi, with no separate ball. The turn begins by throwing a stone in the air and performing certain actions with the four others before catching it again. Later all are tossed up and received, at least some, on the back of the same hand. Pick-ups are sometimes between splayed fingers. The film blurs the logic of any sequence, dwelling on the leaping, clattering stones and the agility of dusty hands.







In 2018, Francis Alÿs won the Eye Art & Film Prize, the prize Eye annually awards to an artist or filmmaker who makes an important contribution on the borderline of film and visual art. Each year an international jury and advisory board, consisting of key players from the world of (visual) art and film, selects the winner.

Jury 2018

Sandra den Hamer, Chair (Netherlands) | *Director of Eye Filmmuseum*
 Agnès B. (France) | *Fashion designer & art collector and patron*
 Solange Farkas (Brazil) | *Director and curator of Associação Cultural Videobrasil*
 Andrea Lissoni (Italy/United Kingdom) | *Senior curator, International Art (Film), Tate Modern*
 Aernout Mik (Netherlands) | *Artist*
 Olivia Stewart (United Kingdom/Italy) | *Trustee PJLF Arts Fund, Director BellRock Script & Directing Workshops, Curator*
 Apichatpong Weerasethakul (Thailand) | *Film director*

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PJLF Arts Fund

The Eye Art & Film Prize is supported by the British Paddy and Joan Leigh Fermor Arts Fund. The PJLF Arts Fund was set up in 2011 to support artists, writers, filmmakers and musicians. Celebrated author Patrick Leigh Fermor (1915-2011) and photographer Joan Leigh Fermor (1911-2003) were keenly interested and involved in the arts. The Paddy Leigh Fermor Archive and the Joan Leigh Fermor Archive are housed at the National Library of Scotland in Edinburgh.

This publication was published on the occasion of the exhibition *Francis Alÿs – Children's Games*, Eye Filmmuseum, Amsterdam 19 December 2019 – 8 March 2020



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Exhibition

The exhibition is curated by Jaap Guldemon in collaboration with Marente Bloemheuvel

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Director of Exhibitions/Curator: Jaap Guldemon
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The *Children's Games* videos can be viewed at francisalys.com

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For *Children's Games*, artist Francis Alÿs [b. Antwerp, 1959] registered children at play from all over the world, from children playing knuckle-bones in the Nepalese city of Kathmandu to those playing musical chairs in Oaxaca, Mexico or flying kites in Afghanistan.

Alÿs filmed in towns and villages, friendly places, as well as in zones ruled by conflict and tension, such as a Yezidi refugee camp in Iraq and in Kabul under siege. *Children's Games* captivatingly portrays the ways in which children all over the world create their own world of games and leisure.

Alÿs's oeuvre consists of films, performative actions, drawings, documents and paintings. They are playful, imaginative and rich observations of social situations and, sometimes, politically charged moments and places. This book is the first to present *Children's Games* as a series and includes contributions by curator and art historian Cuauhtémoc Medina, ethnographer and filmmaker David MacDougall and journalist Lorna Scott Fox.

