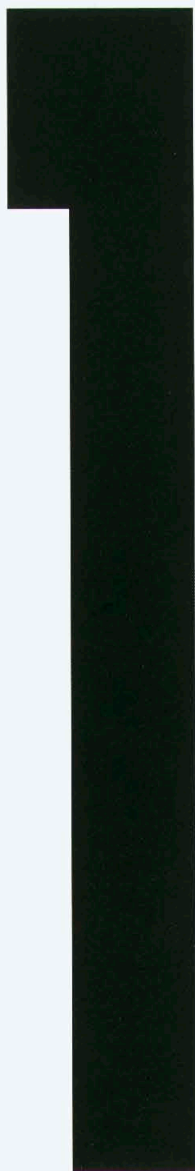


FRANCIS ALÿS  
MATRIX 145



OCTOBER 6, 2001 – JANUARY 6, 2002  
WADSWORTH ATHENEUM  
MUSEUM OF ART  
HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT

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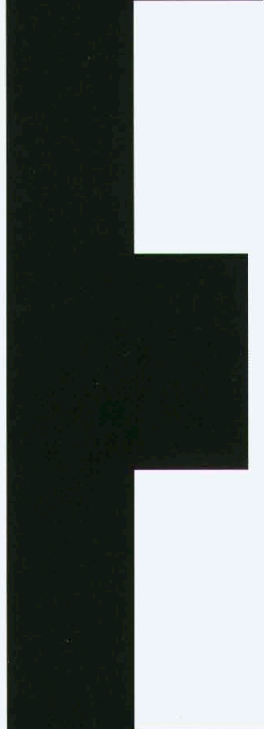
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IX





*The Collector, Mexico City, 1991-92*

## Listen carefully, as our menu has changed...

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

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

Alÿs, who trained as an architect, has long been concerned with how we inhabit spaces. More particularly, his work over the past decade has taken urban spaces in the Americas and Europe, from São Paulo to Venice, as the *tableaux* for his



interventions. His home since 1987, Mexico City, that sprawling anarchic megalopolis, has been the site for numerous works that reflect on place, subjectivity and the nature of artistic practice.

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

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



top: Zócalo, Mexico City, May 20, 1999 (video still)

bottom: *The Ambassador*, Venice, 2001



***Paradox of Praxis, Mexico City, 1997***

In this era of high-tech global networks, the telephone remains the most ubiquitous and democratized form of electronic communication in the world. For this reason perhaps, the telephone in some ways belongs to an earlier period. What technophobe is intimidated by the conventional telephone? Nevertheless, telephone technology has been transformed by the digital age in which, for example, the touch-tone phone has opened a new world of interactive possibilities. Which returns us to where we began, with Francis Alÿs's epiphany borne of frustration.

Alÿs came to realize that the digital technology of automated interactive attendant telephone systems could provide him with the means to create "a virtual walk into virtual space."<sup>iv</sup> What had been up to this point a strictly terrestrial investigation could have its virtual counterpart.<sup>v</sup> As with his other walks, the artist could construct an itinerary that calls for the repetition of certain actions within a given system. Different, however, is the status of the "walker," who is no longer the artist, but has become the participant. The caller leads the narrative, choosing to move through the given options at will. Of course it is the artist, via the technology, who is ultimately in control of the possibilities. This experience of a simultaneous sense of the freedom to make multiple choices and the restriction of those choices within a circumscribed range of possibilities is analogous, it seems to me, to our relation to new technology and to the very experience of contemporary urban life.

Toll-free calling, first introduced in the 1960s, has become synonymous with successful telemarketing. Since 1996, when the original block of 800 numbers was exhausted, new toll-free prefixes have been introduced, 866 most recently. Last year more than 20 billion toll-free calls were made in the United States. In a subversive twist, rather than trying to sell something, Alÿs's toll-free number is all about giving something away. While museums across the United States implement new programs to promote access and outreach, Alÿs has actually devised a way to give art away to anybody who can make a phone call. The paradox of this *1-866-FREE-MATRIX* praxis is, of course, the irrelevance of the museum as a physical site. Like the melted ice cube, there is no there, there.

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

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

Nicholas Baume

Emily Hall Tremain Curator  
of Contemporary Art

Francis Alÿs in conversation with the author, August 2001.

<sup>vi</sup>Francis Alÿs, *The Collector*, 1991-92, notes by the artist.

<sup>vii</sup>Francis Alÿs in *Walks/Paseos*, Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico, 1997, p. 15.

<sup>viii</sup>Francis Alÿs in conversation with the author, August 2001.

<sup>ix</sup>Alÿs had, in 1999, made a foray into the Internet with *The Thief*, a screensaver web page project for DIA Center for the Arts, New York.

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

<sup>xi</sup>Seth Siegel published the *Xerox Book* in 1968. It featured projects made for the publication by seven artists using the photocopy machine, a then new technology that made it possible to easily produce inexpensive reproductions in large volume.

# FRANCIS ALÿS

1959

BORN IN ANTWERP, BELGIUM

LIVES AND WORKS IN MEXICO CITY

## SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

### 2001

Peter Kilchmann Galerie, Zurich  
"The Last Clown," Lisson Gallery, London  
Musée Picasso, Antibes

### 2000

"The Last Clown," Sala Moncada, La Caixa  
Foundation, Catalonia; travelling to Gallerie  
D'Art de l'Université Québec, Montréal

### 1999

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

### 1998

"Le temps du sommeil," Contemporary Art  
Gallery, Vancouver

### 1997

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

### 1996

Museo de Arte Contemporaneo de Oaxaca,  
Oaxaca

### 1995

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

### 1994

Curare, Mexico City  
Galería Ramis Barquet, Monterrey

### 1992

Galería Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico City

### 1991

Salón des Aztecas, Mexico City

## SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

### 2001

"Squatters #1," Witte de With, Center  
for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam &  
Museu de Serralves, Porto  
"Francis Alÿs, Pierre Huyghe, Beat Streuli,  
and Gillian Wearing," Ikon Gallery,  
Birmingham

"Monitor: Volume 1," Gagosian Gallery,  
New York

"Da Adversidade Vivemos," ARC/Musée d'Art  
Moderne de la Ville de Paris

"The Whitechapel Centenary," Whitechapel  
Gallery, London

"Subject Plural: Crowds in Contemporary  
Art," Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston

"Painting at the Edge of the World," Walker  
Art Center, Minneapolis

### 2000

"Cinema without Walls," Rotterdam 2000,  
Rotterdam

"Out of Space," Kölnischer Kunstverein,  
Cologne

"Residue," Kunsthalle Exnergasse, Vienna

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

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

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

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

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

"Stimuli," Witte de With, Rotterdam

### 1999

"The Passion and the Wave, 6th Istanbul  
Biennial," Istanbul

"Reality and Desire," Fundacion Joan Miro,  
Barcelona

"48 Biennale di Venezia," Venice

"Mirror's Edge," Bild Museet, Umeå,  
Sweden, curated by Okwui Enzowor;  
touring to Vancouver Art Gallery; Castello di  
Rivoli, Torino; Tramway, Glasgow

"Signs of Life," 1st International Melbourne Biennial

"Drawn By," Metro Pictures, New York

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

"Go Away," Royal College of Art, London

#### 1998

"Loose Threads," Serpentine Gallery, London

"Roteiros," XXIV São Paulo

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

"Insertions," Arkipelag, Stockholm

"III Biennial Barro de America," Caracas

"Imaginarios Mexicanos," Quebec

Galeria Camargo Vilaça, São Paulo

#### 1997

"In Site 97," Tijuana / San Diego

"Adenda," Dhont Laethem Museum, Belgium

"Antechamber," Whitechapel Art Gallery, London

"Primera Biennial Tridimensional," Mexico City

"2nd. Biennial of Saaremaa," Estonia

"Asi està la cosa," Centro Cultural Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico City

#### 1996

"NowHere," Louisiana Museum, Copenhagen

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

"Inclusion/Exclusion," Steirischer Herbst '96, Graz

"Pittura Figurativa," Castello di Rivoli, Torino

"Interiors," LACE, Los Angeles

#### 1995

"Longing and Belonging," Site Santa Fe, New Mexico Galeria Camargo Vilaça, São Paulo

Jack Tilton Gallery, New York

Opus Operandi, Ghent

#### 1994

"V Biennial de la Habana," Havana

Galeria Ramis Barquet, Monterey

Mexico Curare, Mexico City

#### 1993

"Lesà Natura," Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City

#### 1992

"México Hoy," Casa de las Américas, Madrid, Spain

#### 1991

Galeria Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico City

Blue Star Art Space, San Antonio

Latitude 53 Gallery, Edmonton

#### 1990

Quiñonera, Mexico City

#### WORK IN THE EXHIBITION

##### *1-866-FREE-MATRIX, 2001*

Automated interactive call attendant system, toll-free telephone number

Matrix installation: digital telephones, wall mounted in wooden cubicles

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

#### MATRIX LECTURE

2 pm, Sunday October 7, 2001

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

#### GALLERY TALK

12 noon, Tuesday, October 9, 2001

"Living Systems"

Nicholas Baume, Emily Hall Tremaine Curator of Contemporary Art

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

**Additional support provided by Agnes Gund and Daniel Shapiro**