

Facetious and poetic, his work is no less political. The Flemish artist will represent Belgium at the Venice Biennale next summer.

Conceptual and sensitive, the work of Belgian artist Francis Alÿs has been shown very little in France. It is to the David Zwirner Gallery that we owe, last spring, its most complete exhibition presented in Paris: a set of works, drawings, paintings, videos, sculptures, in connection with a project carried out in Gibraltar, *Don't Cross the Bridge Before You Get to the River*, emblematic of the fictions conceived by the artist, between pure imagination and political questioning. On both sides of the strait, on a beach in Morocco and on another facing it in Spain, Alÿs filmed in 2008 children engaged in a joyful and improbable aquatic procession aiming to symbolically link the two shores of the Mediterranean...

What do we know about this French-speaking Fleming born in Antwerp in 1959? That, having arrived in Mexico City in 1986 as an architect, he decided to stay there and turn to the visual arts – several short films document his wanderings in the city over more than a decade, each following a different protocol. Then he became interested in children's games, all over the world, and particularly in underprivileged countries: his series *Children's Games*, started in 1999, is still ongoing. That between 2010 and 2014, he traveled to Afghanistan several times, first invited by Documenta, a contemporary art event that takes place every five years, then as a war artist seconded from the British Army task force. Finally, that he has benefited from several important exhibitions in institutions of international stature, that his works are present in major public and private collections and that he will represent Belgium at the next Venice Biennale.

Walk to stay idle

"If I look back to my young years as an artist, when a language was first developing, walking was above all an easily accessible space that turned out to be extremely conducive to experimenting with a whole series of things," he explains. -il, while an exhibition organized this fall by the Cantonal Museum of Fine Arts in Lausanne highlighted a founding text, "As Long As I Am Walking". "While I walk, states this manifesto written in the early 1990s, I am not choosing, smoking, losing, doing, knowing..." A series of actions are thus listed in a repetitive mode incantatory. "When I wrote this, reflects Francis Alÿs, in what state of mind was I? I think I was trying to understand... There is this tension between studio activity and street activity, in public space. We are constantly brought back to one or the other... And there is the somewhat fatal attraction towards the place of exhibition, the gallery, the museum space. In the list of everything he doesn't do while walking, the artist notes: "I'm not...painting. »

This distancing of his practice is illustrated again in the film *The Leak* (2002), where we see him leaving the Museum of Modern Art in Paris, a pot of paint pierced in his hand, for a stroll filmed at the level bitumen and which leaves a long sinuous white flow. The last image sees the artist hanging up the pot by its handle on a nail driven into the wall, like a gesture bringing it back inevitably to the picture rail. Two years later, he undertook a similar walk in Jerusalem, but stretched over two days and retracing by a trail of color the border resulting from the 1949 armistice between Israel and the Arab States (*The Green Line*, 2004). The subtitle of the work states: "Sometimes Doing Something Poetic Can Become Political, And Sometimes Doing Something Political Can Become Poetic". Thus the poetry of the march joins a political approach. If only because each of its urban excesses reflects an ever-asserted desire "to produce as little as possible". It's management.

For the love of art

After having surveyed Mexico for a long time, Francis Alÿs ventured into the Middle East, notably in Afghanistan and Iraq. “He has traveled extensively to distant lands and worked on long-term projects. That's partly why we haven't seen an exhibition in New York or Paris in recent years, because projects take a considerable amount of time to come to fruition,” explains Bellatrix Hubert, senior partner at Galerie Zwirner in New York. , who underlines: “He always follows the same creative process, the collective dimension remains important and his video work works in an immersive way. »Among his most famous films is *Tornado*(2010), which places the camera – and the viewer – in the heart of a cyclone, and whose filming spanned years, explains director Rafael Ortega, with whom Alÿs has worked for a long time. Since 2002, with *Cuando la fe mueve montañas*, attempt to move a dune in the Peruvian desert with the help of a small crowd of volunteers armed with shovels, Francis Alÿs gave up marketing his videos. “It's a decision I made after this project in Lima. Even if the sale could in no way cover the costs of such a production, there was an ambiguity in the fact of having asked people completely free of charge to move a dune and finding myself marketing the documentation of the event. This decision greatly facilitated my relationship with my later collaborators. No one is going to make money from what we do, it's for fun and love of art, call it what you want. And then the video format, which can be reproduced so easily, renders the object itself completely obsolete.

A whole section of Francis Alÿs' production, made up of drawings and paintings, nevertheless gives rise to monetized transactions. “I was trained as an architect, he recalls: drawing is my way of expressing an idea. It is also a means of communication and a less aggressive medium than the camera. When I travel, when I draw, people come to me. Not to mention that I live from the sale of my drawings, which allow me to finance my projects. Observational sketches, slow cathartic assimilation of a war situation, preparatory studies, storyboards unfolding film scripts, small format paintings...: the typology of drawings present in Francis Alÿs' work is extremely varied. Of great delicacy, some of his oils on canvas decline a chromatic palette of Raphaelian softness, as if alongside his experimental videos, the drawing referred to a more classical language. In another series, produced after his stays in Afghanistan, entitled *TRF* (for *Tactical recognition flashes*), the artist focuses on military insignia which inspire him monochromes in the shape of squares and diamonds painted on the wood itself, enigmatic and magnetic badges which abstractly condense a situation as real as it is difficult. to understand.

A “punk” at the Venice Biennale

In recent years, Francis Aljys' stays in Europe have been short and far between, to the point that Western cities have become somewhat foreign to him, far removed from the idea he has of public space as "a place of mixing, of cultures, of different social strata, of professions..." Despite his international recognition, it may come as a surprise to see him represent Belgium at the Venice Biennale. He laughs at it himself: "I am a bastard product, of Flemish origin, of French-speaking family, a Mexican citizen in the process of becoming a permanent resident in Canada: an amalgam which makes the national notion a little vague. But Venice offers him a wonderful showcase. "In 2017, I participated in the biennale with a small work in the Iraqi pavilion, and I was impressed by the number of people who saw it. At a time when everything is going very fast, the attention span of a spectator is so short that when we manage to stop people between four and twelve minutes in front of images that are after all quite banal, it's a small miracle. One is tempted to see the extent to which this situation can be repeated. Especially when you already have some baggage behind you, because despite everything, what time brings is doubt. When you are young, you ask yourself fewer questions. Is it my role to do this, is it my right to do that? You learn a lot by showing. The feedback we get from an exhibition is crucial. »The Belgian pavilion will be mainly devoted to the continuation of its series the attention span of a spectator is so short that when we manage to stop people between four and twelve minutes in front of images that are after all quite banal, it's a small miracle. One is tempted to see the extent to which this situation can be repeated. Especially when you already have some baggage behind you, because despite everything, what time brings is doubt. When you are young, you ask yourself fewer questions. Is it my role to do this, is it my right to do that? You learn a lot by showing. The feedback we get from an exhibition is crucial. »The Belgian pavilion will be mainly devoted to the continuation of its series the attention span of a spectator is so short that when we manage to stop people between four and twelve minutes in

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