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Art From Covid-inspired tag in Mexico to soccer with no ball in Iraq: Francis Alÿs on his joyous films of children's games The artist has travelled the world documenting the way children play . As he puts his films on display , he talks about the way conkers cross cultures, password games in Ukraine, and whether 'playing out' is under threat



📷 'A schoolyard atmosphere' ... Francis Alÿs at his Barbican show. Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

We use the expression “child’s play” is a doddle, yet the ways children entertain themselves are often the result of great ingenuity and resourcefulness. The Belgian-born, Mexico-based artist Francis Alÿs has spent more than 20 years travelling around the world filming children’s games, some universal, others developed in response to conflicts, poverty and pandemics. For his forthcoming exhibition, *Ricochets*, Alÿs will turn the brutalist Barbican in London into a vibrant cinematic playground featuring kite fighting in Afghanistan, rope jumping in Hong Kong, stone skipping on Moroccan shores and whirling until one falls in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Visitors will encounter an exuberant cacophony emitted by about 30 films from Alÿs’s continuing *Children’s Games* series, some of which were previously shown at the Belgian Pavilion for the 2022 Venice Biennale.

“The coexistence of so many games will create a schoolyard atmosphere, with kids running, shouting, laughing,” says Alÿs, whose work encompasses film, painting, drawing and animation. “It’s loud. We want it to be like that. This is the reality of kids playing, you have to be immersed in their universe.”

For each venue the artist adds new games, filmed in that country. Over here, he’s made three films of kids playing in east London: *Grandma’s Footsteps*, a conker war and children doodling with chalk on asphalt. Alÿs has conceived the exhibition as two “moments”. The darkened lower floor is filled with different-sized screens showing games, which find echoes in Alÿs’s small oil paintings dotting the walls, reminiscent of Mexican *retablos* or devotional works. Starting as sketches on location, these atmospheric paintings frequently evoke the broader geopolitical settings of the films, depicting their protagonists dwarfed by their surroundings. On the upper floor there will be two dedicated playrooms, one with projected light for shadow play and the other with low stools for spinning on, as well as a new series of animation films. Sparsely displayed, these monochrome, hand-drawn animations connect to the theme of play, homing in on isolated children’s gestures like swinging legs, and hand games such as thumb wars and walking fingers.

Born in 1959 in Antwerp, Alÿs initially trained as an architect and moved to Mexico in 1986 to work with local non-governmental organisations, but ended up becoming part of the fledgling contemporary art scene there. Over his 40-year career, he has gained acclaim for his fable-like films that record life’s absurdities with lyricism and wry humour. He spent nine hours pushing a block of ice around Mexico City’s traffic-choked streets until it melted away for his 1997 film *Paradox of Praxis 1 (Sometimes Making Something Leads to Nothing)*. In his 2004 film *The Green Line*, Alÿs walked 15 miles through Jerusalem with a leaking can of green paint, tracing the charged armistice border designated at the end of the Arab-Israeli war in 1948. He’s also organised quixotic collective actions such as moving a sand dune in Peru by a few inches with a team of volunteers with shovels for his

2002 film *When Faith Moves Mountains*. In the past 15 years, though, Alÿs has withdrawn from performing in his films and invited children to be the protagonists. "It's essentially an age factor," he says. "There's a moment where you want to pass the voice on to the next generation." Beginning in 1999, he's compiled 47 films in 15 countries, each documenting a single game. "A lot of my work has been inspired by my own childhood games, exploring all sorts of universes as a child in the countryside in Belgium with a great amount of freedom," he says. His own children – aged 24, four and two – influenced his decision "to try to look at the world they're discovering and inheriting from us," he adds. They are "very pertinent critics about clarities or repetitions or unnecessary material", although the younger two are only just beginning to appreciate his films. His children are his first public. "In the end it's about them. And if they're not recognising themselves then I've failed." What's the draw of play? "It's an essential theatre for children to enter the adult world, which they often mimic through games," Alÿs says. It's also a forum for enacting dreams and imagining alternative futures. This is movingly illustrated by a group of kids in Mosul, Iraq, days after liberation, playing a football match with no ball in *Children's Game #19: Haram Football* – "haram" referring to the banning of football during Islamic State's rule.

Many games Alÿs has documented have recognisable counterparts all over the globe, often using objects scavenged in the streets. In Havana, Cuba, the crew noticed kids using rocks to flatten bottle tops ("chapitas"), which they threaded on string and spun ferociously, trying to slash their opponent's string. Chapitas finds a parallel with conkers, banned in many British schools. "What amazes me with the games is their transcultural dimension," says Alÿs. The artist filmed Mexican children playing rock, paper, scissors, Nepali children playing with "knucklebones", otherwise known as jacks, and the young residents of the Sharya refugee camp in Iraq playing hopscotch. The films last the length of the games – typically three to eight minutes – and almost never include subtitles translating the children's chatter. "You should be able to understand the essential rules of the game just by watching the video," says Alÿs. While the focus is on the rituals of play, the films inevitably reflect the world the children inhabit – bullet-riddled homes, streets devastated by bombs, a giant mining slag heap, a city of high-rise blocks. Alÿs doesn't choose the locations himself – where he films is determined by the invitations he receives. The project has started to take on "an ethnological dimension", although that wasn't his original intention and his approach, he says, is far from scientific. Earning the children's trust is fundamental when filming them. Alÿs attributes his success to the fact "they feel we take their game very seriously". He and his crew inevitably end up joining in. "The kids take the lead and you adapt, rather than you directing them," says Alÿs. "If they're engaged, they're fantastic, they give you way more than you expect. If they're bored, forget it. There's no faking, no pretending. That's a very, very clear contract."

Alÿs's deeply humane films and paintings from locations such as Ukraine, Afghanistan and Iraq (where he was embedded with the Kurdish peshmerga forces in 2016 as an artist-observer) convey the extraordinary resilience of children in the face of trauma, where play becomes a crucial coping mechanism. "Adults will process those experiences through speech. Children will process them through games," he says. In a film made last year called *Children's Game #39: Parol*, Ukrainian kids in military fatigues with toy guns stop cars to demand a password. Pivoting on the age-old custom of the shibboleth, the game is designed to flush out Russian spies since the password, "Palyanitsya", which is a type of Ukrainian bread, can't be pronounced properly by Russians. Likewise, the 2024 painting *Kyiv, Ukraine* portrays kids jumping into a huge crater left by a missile, encapsulating for Alÿs the incredible capacity of children to reinvent the reality around them as a means of survival. During the Covid pandemic, children's inventiveness reached new heights, with myriad variants of "tag" emerging to address their changed situation (Alÿs found a map of 50 worldwide). *Children's Game #25: Contagio* (2021) documents a Mexican version in which the kid designated "it" wears a red face mask and infects others by tagging them, those kids then becoming transmitters; the last one left shouts "survivor"

But the pandemic also accelerated the disappearance of many outdoor games, heightening Alÿs's sense of urgency to record some sort of archive. The lure of the internet, the growing encroachment of cars in public spaces, and parents' anxiety about letting their children play outside have all contributed to the demise of these activities. "I really think we are living a moment of transition," Alÿs says "and it's becoming important to register those games while they're still spontaneously available." *Children's Games* have found enormous resonance with the public wherever they have been exhibited. The films are freely available on Alÿs's website and are not for sale. As he explained during a recent workshop for children in London: "I have a trick. I sell the paintings and with that money I travel and do the films." One might argue that the series offers a rose-tinted view of childhood, since playgrounds can also be arenas for bullying, though Alÿs says: "I don't remember having had one case of bullying during the filmings, or anything of the kind. In my personal history, or with my kids, and yes, bullying happened, but mostly by means of excluding someone from the game, or being excluded." These mini-documentaries show kids navigating the world – witness their expressions of cunning, excitement and disappointment as they resolve differences, work together and learn how to win and lose. There's something powerfully inspiring about the way these activities and rituals have been passed down orally through generations, crisscrossing oceans, mountains and deserts and emphasising commonalities. Building this living archive of play is Alÿs's mission: "I think what I do best today, and it may change tomorrow," he says, "is documenting children and learning from them."