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Francis Alÿs: The Nature of the Game at WIELS Following his presentation for the Flemish entry for the Belgian Pavilion at the 59th Venice Biennale in 2022, Francis Alÿs presents this new, more comprehensive version of the exhibition "The Nature of the Game", twelve years after the artist's memorable retrospective at WIELS that introduced Belgian audiences to the full scope of his work.



Francis Alÿs, Children's Game #27: Rubi (film still), Tabacongo, DR Congo, 2021. 6'18". In collaboration with Julien Devaux and Félix Blume. Copyright Francis Alÿs, Courtesy Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Jan Mot and David Zwirner Gallery

Since 1999, during his many travels, Alÿs has documented children playing in public places. At the Venice Biennale, he presented a series of filmed children games made during the pandemic in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Belgium, Hong Kong, Mexico, Morocco and Switzerland. In this new presentation, he completes several new films including children's games he recently saw in Ukraine and confronts them with the film installation *The Silence of Ani*, in which children play hide-and-seek in the ruins of an ancient Armenian city on the edge of present-day Turkey. Using bird calls, the children create the illusion that the city is coming back to life.

Play is a basic natural human need, just like eating and sleeping. As children, we learn it instinctively or through imitating others. Children's play should be seen as a creative relationship between children and the world they live in, as an activity that can sometimes conceal a sociopolitical dimension. However, as social interactions increasingly take place online in a virtual world, Alÿs captures this moment of profound transition that our society is undergoing and gathers a memory of children's games before they disappear. While some of the games relate to the traditions of a specific area, others are more universal. Many of these games can also be found in the 16th-century painting *Children's Games* by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, a work that made a strong impression on Alÿs when he first saw it as a child. This painting has been linked to an anonymous Flemish poem, published by Jan van Doesborch in Antwerp around 1530, in which humanity as a whole is compared to children absorbed in their foolish games.

Alÿs is fascinated by children's games, and their occasionally seemingly incoherent rules and logic, including those in conflict zones. Although he has spoken of his inner struggle to represent that which cannot be represented, the apparent absurdity of the artistic act allows him to reintroduce meaning into a situation in which no meaning can be discerned. Similarly, children's games, which continue regardless of the circumstances, create a framework and a structure (even if it is ephemeral and meaningful only to the children themselves) that is universal.

Observing and documenting human behaviour in urban environments is a constant theme in Alÿs's work. His films record both cultural traditions and children's spontaneous and unconstrained actions, in the street, as well as in conflict zones and the turbulence of modern life. Children's games play an important role in investigating the persistence of patterns of popular social behaviour. They have earned a central place in Alÿs's practice so that he can use his camera to capture the culture and patterns by which people live, sometimes even in places where they seem least likely to occur.