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Francis Alÿs Turns the Barbican Centre Into an Audiovisual Playground

The artist's short films document how children from across the world navigate their environment through play



What do you get when you put dozens of children together under the same roof? For one, an astonishingly loud room. Transformed into an audiovisual mega-playground, Barbican Art Gallery roars with the sound of cheering, laughing, sprinting, clapping, singing, dancing, whistling, cooing, swinging and yelling. These noises emanate from oversized projection screens displaying the largest survey to date of Francis Alÿs's Children's Games (1999–ongoing), a series of short films documenting how children from across the world navigate their environment through play.



'Francis Alÿs: Ricochets', 2024, installation view, Barbican Art Gallery. Courtesy: © Jemima Yong / Barbican Art Gallery

In Afghanistan, a group of young boys take turns using sticks to roll tyres down and back a wide gravel road, unbothered by passing cars, motorcycles and the occasional donkey. The smallest boy is also the fastest runner, his tyre nearly matching him in size, his seniors cheering him on to the finish line (Children's Game #7: Stick and Wheels, 2010). The streets of Havana are similarly overtaken by children racing on brakeless wheeled carts they have built themselves from odd nails and scrap wood (Children's Game #40: Chivichanas, 2023). Whether diving head-first, faces only inches away from the asphalt, or piling as many friends as they can fit onto their carts, the exhilaration of whizzing downhill is contagious. Kids multiply around them to watch and join in; neighbourhood dogs bark their contribution to the raucous symphony; even adults peek amusedly from their doorsteps.

Trained as an architect, Alÿs relocated from Belgium to Mexico City in 1986, where he began to stage and document actions engaging with the geopolitics of urban spaces. His keen sensibility to people's use of public spaces led to Children's Game #1: Caracoles (1999), in which a boy repeatedly kicks a plastic bottle up a steep street in Mexico City. Most of these early works emerged from chance encounters while Alÿs travelled to fulfil other projects, often alongside his long-time collaborators Félix Blume, Julien Devaux and Rafael Ortega. Speaking to the press at the exhibition preview for 'Ricochets' at Barbican Art Gallery, Alÿs and Ortega revealed that they felt a growing urgency to document these games since rapid urbanisation and the prevalence of digital entertainment were leading to the gradual disappearance of children's play from public life.

While some of the films capture games that have been passed on for generations, others are adapted or invented by children in direct response to their circumstances. In Children's Game #30: Imbu (2021), a small group huddles together and harmonizes a sharp buzzing tone, their eyes fixed on the clear late afternoon sky of Tabacongo, Democratic Republic of Congo. Their choir summons a swarm of mosquitoes above them, frantically zigzagging in the air, beckoned by an evolutionary response to the high-pitched call. As night falls, neither the children nor the mosquitoes grow tired of their dance, the swarm now even larger in spite of the children's excited stabs at swatting them dead – a good thing, since mosquitoes can act as hosts to malaria. In response to a different virus, Children's Game #25: Contagio (2021) follows the popular game of tag in a small Mexican town, revamped by a COVID-19 makeover. All players start off wearing face masks, with 'patient zero' the only one with a red mask. As the chaser 'infects' the others, they are required to change into red face coverings, until only one remains.

In addition to registering key moments of cultural transition through the eyes of children, some of the games poignantly reflect the turbulent geopolitical landscapes affecting the world at large. In Children's Game #39: Parol (2023), three Ukrainian boys in fatigues hold back a cheeky grin as they wave down passing vehicles, roleplaying as roadside patrol and scanning the traffic for Russian spies. With great attention to detail, the children carry wooden guns, verify the drivers' ID and inspect their trunks, before asking them to repeat the password Palyanitsya, the name of a Ukrainian bread that Russians struggle to pronounce. Meanwhile, Children's Game #19: Haram Football (2017) registers the immediate aftermath of two major conflicts in Mosul, as a dozen boys gather in the streets for a game of football. The video was filmed just a few months after an American airstrike had killed up to 300 people in the region. Mosul had also, until recently, been under the control of the jihadist Islamic State, which prohibited all football-related activities and, in 2015, publicly executed 13 teenage boys for watching a televised match. In Alÿs's film, the boys play the way they always have done: re-enacting dribbles and passes with an imaginary ball.

The exhibition is completed by two minimalist playrooms designed in collaboration with children from three local schools, as well as a series of line animations and small oil paintings of daily scenes, which Alÿs often creates in anticipation of filming a game. The upstairs gallery presents a short history of children's games, foregrounding their continuity and responsiveness to geopolitical and cultural transitions across time. Alÿs noted in the press preview that, as outsiders to the regions they travel to, he and his crew become witnesses to the children's realities. By extension, we as viewers are placed in a similar position. These short films capture our changing surroundings through the eyes of children: closely and with huge interest. The question then remains: if we truly are paying attention, where might it lead us next?

'Francis Alÿs: Ricochets' is on view at Barbican Art Gallery, London, until 1 September

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Main image: Francis Alÿs, Children's Game #41: Chapitas (detail), La Habana, Cuba, 2023, in collaboration with Julien Devaux and Félix Blume, video still. Courtesy: the artist