







Francis Alÿs

Ricochets

Edited by Florence Ostende

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Foreword

This book is published on the occasion of *Francis Alÿs: Ricochets* at the Barbican, London, and the Serralves Museum of Contemporary Art, Porto. Alÿs's largest institutional solo exhibition in the UK for almost fifteen years and his first major exhibition in Portugal will transform both institutions' iconic architectures into cinematic playgrounds celebrating the breadth and importance of the artist's work. This richly illustrated catalogue explores Alÿs's pivotal works in dialogue with his critically acclaimed series *Children's Games* (1999–present). Highlighting rarely seen source material, a series of essays by leading writers explores the artist's influences across art history, philosophy and literature.

With a career spanning four decades, Francis Alÿs (born 1959, Antwerp, Belgium) has forged a unique and radical practice ranging from painting and drawing to film and animation. Trained as an architect and urbanist, Alÿs moved to Mexico City in 1986, where the rapidly shifting urban and social context inspired him to become a visual artist. Working in collaboration with local communities, his engagement with cross-cultural contexts operates beyond dominant, Western-centric narratives. What emerges is a lifelong commitment to witnessing social and political change through art. Since the start of his film series *Children's Games*, Alÿs has travelled to over fifteen countries around the world, capturing games such as musical chairs in Mexico, leapfrog in Iraq, jump rope in Hong Kong and wolf and lamb in Afghanistan. This film installation – one of his most ambitious to date – reflects the universality and ingenuity of play, foregrounding social interactions in decline due to rapid urbanisation and the erosion of public spaces.

We would like to warmly thank the curator of the exhibition, Florence Ostende, who collaborated closely with the artist over several years in order to reveal a renewed perspective on his prolific career, while shaping an insightful critical repertoire for the work by bringing new voices into dialogue with Alÿs's artistic practice. Special thanks to Inês Geraldese Cardoso, Assistant Curator, who inspired, supported and galvanised all aspects of this project with boundless dedication, creative flair and excellence, as well as Rita Duarte, Exhibition Organiser, who coordinated the production of this exhibition and brought to life the artist's vision in our galleries. We are extraordinarily fortunate to work with graphic designer Mark El-khatib and designer Lucy Styles, who played crucial roles.

Our special thanks go to Karena Johnson, Josie Dick and Carmen Okome in Creative Collaboration at the Barbican for supporting the ambitious, year-long art and learning programme with three local schools: Prior Weston Primary School, Richard Cloudesley School and St Lukes CE School. We are thankful to the students, head teachers, and teachers from these schools. We are deeply grateful to Rafael Ortega, who has been a vital collaborator at every step, and Lucy Pook, whose sensitive contributions were indispensable to the schools' collaboration.

Our thanks are extended to Alÿs's collaborators Julien Devaux, Félix Blume, Emilio Rivera, Finella Halligan, Elena Pardo and Esteban Azuela. We would also like to thank Bellatrix Hubert and Rebecca Holmberg from David Zwirner for their insight and warm support as the project grew, as well as Peter Kilchmann and Jan Mot for being wonderful allies. Our sincere gratitude to Rochelle Roberts and Corinna Pickart from Prestel, as well as Aimee Selby, whose invaluable contributions have made this publication possible. Our heartfelt appreciation goes to the authors Helena Chávez Mac Gregor, Carla Faesler and Cuauhtémoc Medina for their remarkable essays in this publication. We would like to thank Cuauhtémoc Medina and Virginia Roy at MUAC, Dirk Snauwaert at WIELS, and Yilmaz Dziewior and Rita Kersting at Museum Ludwig for their collegiate spirit towards our project. We are grateful to Pascal Willekens and his dedicated team at Vidisquare.

At the Barbican, we remain extremely grateful to the City of London for their continuous support. The exhibition has also received generous support from the John S Cohen Foundation, the Delegation of Flanders (Embassy of Belgium) and the Company of Arts Scholars Charitable Trust, as well as additional support from David Zwirner. We would like to thank our CEO, Claire Spencer, and our team: Katrina Crookall, Deputy Head of Visual Arts; Alice Lobb, Senior Manager Exhibitions and Partnerships; Maarten van den Bos, Bruce Stracy, David Corbett and Christopher Spear in our Production team, alongside our installation crew; Priya Saujani, Gallery Manager and Ian Fowles, Front of House Manager; Isobel Parrish and Hannah Moth in Marketing; Hannah Carr, Lily Booth and Georgia Holmes in Press, as well as the wonderful Sam Talbot team; Natasha Harris, Alina Tiits and Maria Carroll in Development; and Jo Davis and Rosie Gibbs in Retail. Heartfelt thanks are due to Jane Alison, former Head of Visual Arts, for supporting this exhibition from the start.

At the Serralves Museum we deeply admire the work of the artist, whose career and influence have significantly shaped our national artistic landscape. Consequently, we are confident that this exhibition will stand out as a pivotal moment not only in the museum's history but also for the country. We would like to thank the Board of Directors of the Serralves Foundation, particularly its President, Ana Pinho, as well as the entire Serralves Museum team, including our esteemed colleagues and directors, namely Marta Almeida, Deputy Director. Special recognition is owed to Inês Grosso, Chief Curator, and Filipa Loureiro, Curator.

Lastly, our heartfelt thanks and immense gratitude go to Francis Alÿs for his creative vision and trust. Francis generously opened the doors of his studio in Mexico City and created an impressive ensemble of new films and paintings for this landmark exhibition, alongside contributing rarely seen works from his personal collection, which allowed us to stage *Children's Games* in a new light.

Shanay Jhaveri
Head of Visual Arts, Barbican

Philippe Vergne
Director, Serralves Museum



Florence Ostende

Dominoes, Tornadoes and Ricochets

In a classroom facing the Brutalist towers of the Barbican in London, eight-year-old Maysa asked Francis Alÿs what his favourite film was. The artist revealed it was a very simple but beautiful film about ‘a child who goes and gets bread for his family, and on the way back, there’s a dog barking in the middle of the street, and he needs to find a way to distract the dog to cross that part of the street to get to his home’.¹ In *The Bread and Alley* (1970), Abbas Kiarostami – who sees his first work as the ‘mother’ of all his films – captures a single action reduced to its minimum form of expression, or what the Iranian filmmaker calls ‘dead time’.² Kiarostami and Alÿs share a common language defined by the simplicity of the observational mode.

One way to understand their shared approach to concision is to think of it as a means of creating a sense of immediacy, instantaneity, directness; a form of distillation that brings Alÿs’s work closer to the scale of a short poem than an epic novel. In fact, the artist’s long-lasting interest in the flash fiction of writer Augusto Monterroso (1921–2003) is another instance of his quest for epigrammatic, distilled forms. The Guatemalan writer is well known for authoring the shortest story ever written: ‘When it woke up, the dinosaur was still there.’³ In only nine words, the reader rewinds the action from the moment the dinosaur woke up to the moment it fell asleep. In only nine words, the reader speculates on what may have happened during the animal’s sleep and whether its sleeping body exists in a separate world from the physical realm. Such was the literary backdrop against which Alÿs became a visual artist.

But what the process of condensation seems also to facilitate here is the unravelling of a direct line towards other forms of consciousness – as if nine words

- 1 See Francis Alÿs and Rafael Ortega, ‘A Conversation with Children’, pp. 226–36 in this publication.
- 2 ‘The Bread and Alley’, Kiarostami Foundation, www.kiarostami.org/film/the-bread-and-alley, accessed 1 May 2024.
- 3 In his monograph published by Phaidon, Francis Alÿs featured ‘The Black Sheep’ (1969) and ‘The Two Tails, or the Eclectic Philosopher’ (1969) by Augusto Monterroso. Cuauhtémoc Medina, Russell Ferguson, Jean Fisher and Michael Taussig, *Francis Alÿs* (London, 2007, expanded edition 2019), pp. 122–24.





Abbas Kiarostami, *The Bread and Alley*, 1970. 10:00 min. Film still

could fast-track entry to the consciousness of the animal's dream, like a shortcut. In the same way, Kiarostami's condensed plot, set in a narrow alley, operates as a direct channel to the gaze of the child. The boy's consciousness is wired to the viewer's, encoded in a ten-minute script bypassing the long and epic roundabout of discursive meanders. The viewer is connected to the child *in media res* and invited to an unfiltered embrace, an accelerated act of reunion and empathy. A form of togetherness. In a similar way, the short films composing the ongoing series of *Children's Games* – which Alÿs started in 1999 – form a channel through which a new understanding of the artist's practice emerged, an alternative and prismatic point of entry into the fundamental nature of his work.

Action is at the centre of Alÿs's practice. When the artist began making art in the 1990s, he was the agent of most of the actions he filmed or documented. Walking, pushing, dragging, Alÿs appeared as the sole protagonist of the work. His presence wasn't performative in the theatrical sense of the word. In fact, his actions resisted all forms of theatricality. They melted and dissolved in the ephemeral like breadcrumbs on a path. Alÿs used his own body because it was there and it was available. It was an empirical choice. *Children's Games* operates as a clear transition from this period, marking a shift from his own agency to the children's. With the *Children's Games*, the question became as much about *whose* action it was as *what* the action was. It is in the space of this collective consciousness – reflected in the children's eyes adorning the cover of this book – that I want to situate the oeuvre of the artist.





The changing nature of participation in his work started to evolve in 2008, while Alÿs was in the process of making *Don't Cross the Bridge Before You Get to the River*, writing in the project logbook: 'Change of protagonists by moving from adults to the only ones who seem to be genuinely interested in (or amused by) our utopian project: the kids from both sides of the Strait.'⁴ Here, the artist formalised the shift of agency from adults to children, who, on each side of the Strait of Gibraltar, performed a fictional bridge between Morocco and Spain – an expression of the inherent contradiction between the open global economy and restrictive migration policies. That being said, what led Alÿs to displace his own presence from the centre of the action was already in motion two decades earlier, when he began to interrogate the body in relation to the possibilities of language.

A rare untitled portrait painted in 1990 – presumably a self-portrait – depicts the bust of a man with the letter 'a' leaning against his shoulders. With its clear outline, simple composition and colours, the painted figure calls to mind illustrations found in children's books. The man seems to be daydreaming. Like in Monterroso's nine-word flash fiction, one wonders if one letter might encapsulate the dreams of a single person. Can one letter hold the possibility of all the others? Or the impossibility, rather? Growing up in Belgium, Alÿs was familiar with the word-image paintings that the Surrealist artist René Magritte had elucidated on the occasion of a 1937 lecture he gave in London: in front of the audience, Magritte took as an example a text by André Breton in the hope of proving that a drawing of a sun could replace the word 'sun' without altering the meaning.⁵

In Alÿs's portrait, the tip of the red letter rests on the helix of the character's ear, creating a tension between word and image. Alÿs turns the dominating alpha into a lowercase, tilting, falling, receding. Here, language alone fails to represent the image of the mind. In his first exhibition catalogue in 1992, at Galeria Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico City, Alÿs published a little-known poem entitled 'Dominoes' that revealed a fluid, slippery and playful approach to language. This early writing was, to some extent, a prescient gesture towards his *Children's Games* series:

Tweaking my hair / hair of the dog / dog watching painter /
painter in a bag / bag in the river / river in the picture / picture
over couch / couch stuffed with smells / smells body knows
/ knows through its quills / quills forming coat / coat shovelling
dirt / dirt as if dirt / dirt in my eyes / eyes to my mind / mind to

4 Francis Alÿs, 'The Logbook of Gibraltar (2005–2009)', in *Francis Alÿs: A Story of Negotiation*, ed. Cuauhtémoc Medina, exh. cat., Museo Tamayo, Mexico City (Mexico City, 2015), p. 124.

5 Marijke Peyser, 'A Dream Collection – Surrealism in Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen', René Magritte, *Le Poisson* (1939), www.boijmans.nl/en/collection/artworks/4236/le-poison, accessed 1 May 2024.





Untitled, c. 1990. Oil and embroidery on canvas, dimensions unknown





Fairy Tales, Mexico City, 1995.
Colour-retouched black-and-white photograph, 27 × 18 cm

hand / hand to brush / brush for a tail / tail to nose / nose out
of frame / frame off-scene / scene as through skin / skin of my
hands / hands feel like gloves / gloves in goo / goo in between
/ between gods and pigs / pigs could fly / fly in amber

The poem centres on actions and evocative images ('brush for a tail', 'quills forming coat', 'gloves in goo'). The repetition of the last word in the next sequence is a technique known as anadiplosis or *dorica castra*, a device used in poetry but also in clapping songs and nursery rhymes. Here, the repetition of words connecting one fragment to the next forms an infinite loop, inducing a motion or walk from one idea to another like a *cadavre exquis*. 'Dominoes' generates a sequence in ricochets that short-circuits logical transitions, plugging diverse forms of consciousness – from dog to river to mind – into a single stream.

The process of working in successive sequences, chains of thoughts and strings of words gradually became a means of moving away from his own static point of view in order to build more fluid forms of agency. The exercise of concatenation – which might be interpreted as another way of walking or strolling in the city – offered new possibilities in decentering the fixed authority of the 'self'. This





Gustave Doré, woodcut for Charles Perrault's 'Le Petit Poucet' (Little Thumb),
in *Les Contes de Perrault* (Perrault's Fairy Tales) (Paris, 1867). 24 × 19 cm

sequential approach, similar to a ricochet, first materialised into lines – threads, trails and drops – that dispersed the presence of Alÿs's own body. For instance, *Fairy Tales* (1995) documents an action whereby the artist walks in the streets of Mexico, turning his back on the camera while a thread from his knitted sweater unravels off the frame. In 1998, the photograph was printed on a postcard in Stockholm with a short poem by Alÿs: 'Here is a fairytale for you / Which is just as good as true / What unfolds will give you passion / Castles on hills & also treason / How, from his cape a fatal thread / To her window the villains led'.⁶ Rather than producing objects, the act of making art was reduced to a string of words, a fable, dematerialising the weight of the performing body into a short, direct and weightless line.

In a similar performance entitled *The Leak* (1995), Alÿs walked in the streets of São Paulo holding a can of paint, leaving a trail of drops and lines on the pavement. In a book published by Galeria Camargo Vilaça that year, Alÿs juxtaposed images of *The Leak* with an illustration by Gustave Doré of the character Tom

6 Chloe Johnston, 'Wandering through Time: Francis Alÿs's *Paseos* and the Circulation of Performance', *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies* 6, no. 2 (October 2010), <http://liminalities.net/6-2>.





Study for Railings, 1998. Oil on canvas, 26.4 × 18.4 cm





Thumb (also known as Little Thumb), made for an 1862 edition of Charles Perrault's fairy tales. The children's story tells of a boy marking his trail with little stones and breadcrumbs to find his way back home.⁷ Leaking, dripping, melting, unravelling, Alÿs's early actions in the 1990s transformed his performing body into expressions of dissolution, disintegration and loss, in the same way his first sculptures had evaporated: 'I was working with rubber from tires and with balloons and that kind of thing, stuff that eventually crumbled over time and turned to dust.'⁸ It is tempting to think of Alÿs's early walks in the historic centre of Mexico City in parallel to Octavio Paz dropping words onto the page of his poem transcribing his night-time walks nearby. As if suspended in the air, the lines form ricochets of the mind:

Poetry:

Incarnation

of sun-over-stones in a name,

dissolution

of the name in an over-yonder from the stones.⁹

Furthering the idea of loops, echoes and repetition, Alÿs debuted his ongoing series of III paintings *Le temps du sommeil* (1995–present). Each painting is reworked over time, with the date of its latest iteration stamped in the bottom corner. Small, fantastical sceneries painted in circled vignettes against a red background focus on actions that look like dreamlike rituals or games. Hung in a straight line, they connect altered forms of consciousness in a single string of actions to form a 'sentence' of dreams. Initially, most paintings represented Alÿs's protagonist – a man in a suit – as the agent of the activity, but gradually, over time, more characters appeared and took over. A scene stamped in 2016 depicting children playing leapfrog was added over the male protagonist, who slowly dissolved in the layers underneath. The actions would sometimes reappear in other works by the artist, such as the leapfrog game filmed in Iraq as part of the *Children's Games* series.¹⁰ The process behind the work turned into a game of leapfrog, too, a string of actions moving forwards, jumping over one another.

7 Francis Alÿs, Galeria Camargo Vilaça, São Paulo, Brazil, 1995, available on the artist's website: https://francisalys.com/ebooks/FrancisAlys_CamargoVillaca_1995, accessed 1 May 2024.

8 This text by Francis Alÿs was published in Patricia Sloane and Kurt Hollander, *Grupos y espacios en México: Arte contemporáneo de los 90 / Groups and Spaces in Mexico: Contemporary Art of the 90s: Licenciado Verdad*, vol. 1 (Barcelona, 2017), p. 315.

9 Octavio Paz, 'Nocturne of Saint Ildefonso', trans. Betina Escudero, *CutBank* 1, no. 14 (Spring 1980), pp. 24–25.

10 *Children's Games #20: Leapfrog*, 2018. A full index of the *Children's Games* to date can be found on pp. 248–51 of this publication.





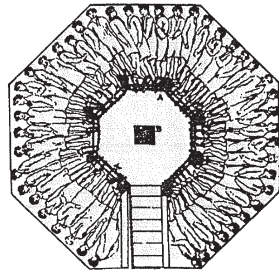
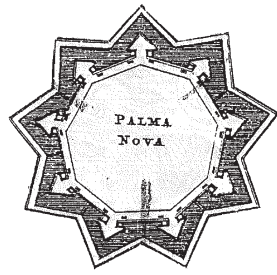
While *Le temps du sommeil* pursued its journey across the years, a significant turning point occurred in an action Alÿs pictured and repeated on numerous occasions: a man in the street rolls a drumstick over iron gates, an image that first appeared in paintings (*The Nightwatcher 1*, 1997–99 and *Study for Railings*, 1998) as well as in the animation film *Time is a Trick of a Mind* (1998), and finally in the film *Railings* (2004). In the latter, Alÿs performs the action himself, rolling a drumstick over railings and brick walls in the streets of London. The sound produces a rhythm synchronised to his walking body: a musical sequence arises and proliferates, echoing the architecture of the city. The following year, Alÿs went back to the idea of the initial painting and replaced the man – possibly himself – with a skeleton using the bone of its left arm as a drumstick. By removing the flesh of the performing agent, Alÿs transformed the action into a *memento mori*. Since he made that painting, he developed multiple unrecorded studies and observations of the railing performance in which other agents, such as friends or children, re-enact the action. The bone became the baton of a relay race to be passed over to the next player, to the next generation. In other words, the role of the artist could only be complete if others were to participate in or take over the game.

The evolution of the way agency operates in Alÿs's work came about in the programmatic film *If you are a typical spectator, what you are really doing is waiting for the accident to happen* (1996), which anticipates to a degree the birth of the *Children's Games*. The film opens with a child dragging a plastic container from a thread amid a crowd and other children playing in the street. A plastic bottle enters the frame, pushed by the wind, dancing and rolling freely on the pavement. From time to time, the bottle crosses paths with children and adults, who kick it like a ball. The action ends as the bottle rolls across the street and we hear the strident sound of a car pulling on the brakes. We understand Alÿs has been knocked over, and the camera falls to the ground. The bottle aimlessly continues its way out of the frame. 'Something new was triggered,' Alÿs recalls.¹¹

While our eyes tend to remain fixed on one point, one protagonist, one action, the camera breaks away from the intentional agency of a single viewpoint and moves freely over the grid of the pavement, adjusting to the choreography of the wind. Alÿs was prescient in engaging with the idea of radical attention: presenting something at the edge of our vision that matters. The structures and signs that regulate our built environment enter into a collision with the free motion of the human or non-human agent framed by the camera. During his postgraduate studies in architecture and urbanism, Alÿs turned his attention to the interrelationships between humans and the city, notably the impact of social control over urban public

11 Russell Ferguson in conversation with Francis Alÿs, in Medina et al., *Francis Alÿs*, p. 15.





'Palmanova' (top) and 'English Prison' from Robin Evans, *The Fabrication of Virtue: English Prison Architecture, 1750–1840* (bottom).



Pietro Longhi, *Exhibition of a Rhinoceros at Venice*, c. 1751. Oil on canvas, 60.4 × 47 cm

space.¹² In his dissertation, he observes the ideological foundations of urbanism, from the perfect city grid by Greek architect Hippodamus of Miletus to the ideal Renaissance city of Palmanova in Italy and the architecture of English prisons.¹³ Alÿs suggests that a profound disconnection between everyday life and urban life took place in our premodern era, from 1600 onwards, when hygienist laws chased animals out of European cities. Alÿs sees animals as 'silent witnesses' of the failure of rationalism and modernism, and illustrates their 'lost innocence' with a painting by Venetian painter Pietro Longhi, *Exhibition of a Rhinoceros at Venice* (c. 1751). Facing the spectators of the carnival, Clara the rhinoceros (brought to Europe from India) stands as evidence of the imperialist impulse of specimen collecting and as

- 12 Alÿs graduated in 1983 from Institut d'Architecture de Tournai, Belgium, and in 1986 from the Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia, Venice.
- 13 Robin Evans, *The Fabrication of Virtue: English Prison Architecture 1750–1840* (Cambridge, 1982). From Francis de Smedt [Francis Alÿs], 'Palmanova: ritorno degli animali', doctoral thesis, Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia, 1985. I would like to thank Cuauhtémoc Medina for sharing this document from his archives.



Study for Wada'an Tristesse, 2018. Oil on canvas, 27 × 20 cm





an allegory of nostalgia.¹⁴ Alÿs's study of the forces that pushed the 'leftovers of our society' to the margins of our world led him to believe the only answer lies in dematerialised forms and actions: 'When faced with this dysfunctional utopia, I could not think of any urbanistic, architectonic, nor artistic answer to shake off the apathy of the place. I could not convince myself that adding matter (an object, a sound or an architecture) to that site could in any sense alter its own inhabitants.'¹⁵

It was soon apparent that the agent of this 'lost innocence' would therefore function as a vital act of togetherness. In a diary entry written in 2018, while he was making the work *Salam Tristesse* in Iraq, Alÿs describes witnessing a parade of children playing around a donkey he had brought to a Yezidi refugee camp. As the children started dancing and chanting around the animal, all magnetised by its presence, Alÿs wrote: 'It's about truth, the children show their society for what it really is and its failure . . . with the donkey. They teach us a lesson, and they do it like children do: turning life into a game, turning their fate into a tale.'¹⁶ In recounting this scene, Alÿs reintroduces the banished animal, now turned into a heroic figure through the eyes of the children.

As a child, Alÿs had been struck by Pieter Bruegel the Elder's painting *Children's Games* (1560), which he encountered in Brussels.¹⁷ The 230 children and 83 games depicted in this encyclopaedic work create an index of play, while its bird's-eye view and absence of perspective flattens any social hierarchies. Alongside similar representations of parades, processions, social gatherings and popular rituals, the painting stands as a striking example of collective portraiture in art history, in contrast with the grand tradition of history painting and portraits of glorified heroes. On the occasion of *The Modern Procession* in 2002 – a project about the migration of the Museum of Modern Art's icons of modernity from Manhattan to its new outpost in Queens – Alÿs recalled the procession of Giuseppe Pellizza da Volpedo's *The Fourth Estate* (c. 1901) as a notable reference point.¹⁸ In Pellizza's

14 Alexa Torchynowycz, 'Exhibition of a Rhinoceros: Iconography and Collecting in Eighteenth Century Venice', PhD thesis, University of South Florida, 2011, https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1005&context=honors_et, accessed 1 May 2024.

15 Cuauhtémoc Medina, 'Fable Power', in Medina et al., *Francis Alÿs*, p. 61.

16 Francis Alÿs, *Salam Tristesse, Irak, 2016–20*, in collaboration with Ruya Foundation, exh. cat., Fragmentos, Espacio de Arte y Memoria, Bogotá (Bogotá, 2020), p. 38.

17 Cuauhtémoc Medina, 'A Collection of "Innumerable Little Allegories": Francis Alÿs's *Children's Games*', in *Francis Alÿs: Juegos de niños / Children's Games, 1999–2022*, exh. cat., MUAC, Mexico City (Mexico City and Barcelona, 2023), p. 39.

18 'A Conversation among Francis Alÿs, Robert Storr, and Tom Eccles', in Francis Alÿs and Anne Wehr, *The Modern Procession*, Public Art Fund (New York, 2004), pp. 79–89.





Giuseppe Pellizza da Volpedo, *The Fourth Estate*, c. 1901.
Oil on canvas, 293 × 545 cm

painting, a procession of striking workers protest for their rights. The frontality of the scene unfolds before the viewer's eyes as a mass in motion.

A significant influence on Alÿs's *Children's Games* is Helen Levitt's series of photographs of children making chalk drawings on East Harlem sidewalks. Levitt's images also provide an alternative to the frontality of Pellizza's painting as she unobtrusively shot the children sideways with her Leica camera equipped with a right-angle viewfinder, documenting ephemeral forms of street graffiti between 1937 and 1945. Her acute observation of children performing solitary forms of collective play invites us to look at Alÿs's *Children's Games* as a global archive weaving together individual modes of existence with forms of togetherness. The game of stone skipping that Alÿs recorded in Tangier (*Ricochets*, 2007) captures the very essence of these multiple agencies that coexist in a collective world of experience. The resulting line of stones bouncing and sinking into the water creates a horizon of emancipatory action.

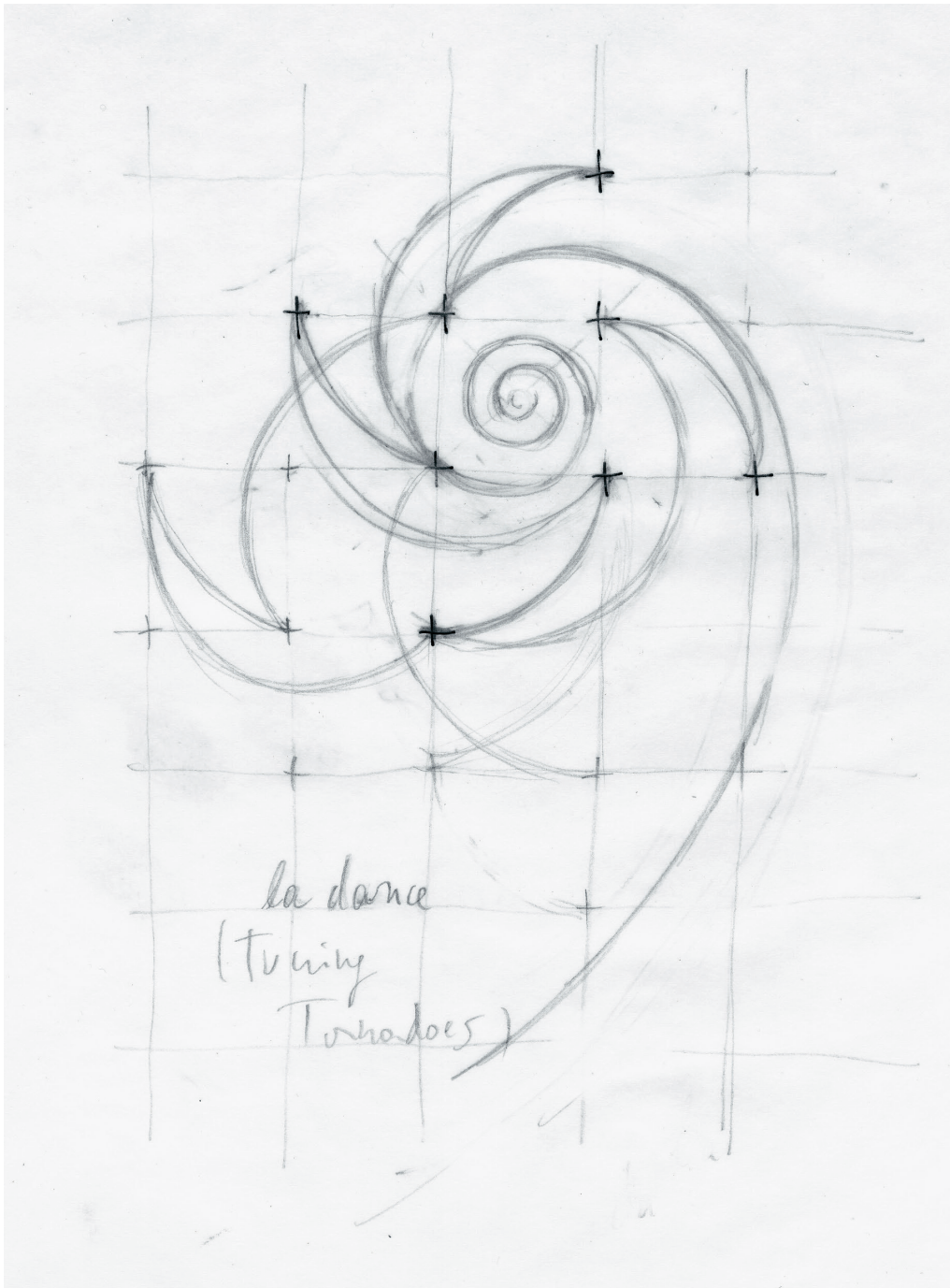
As Alÿs witnessed the early years of his first child, he also started chasing tornadoes south of Mexico City between 2000 and 2010. He initiated a method of filming that further expanded the idea of destabilising, disrupting and unsettling the agency of a single body commanding the camera's point of view. By putting himself amid the chaos of powerful natural forces – the eye of the tornado – Alÿs





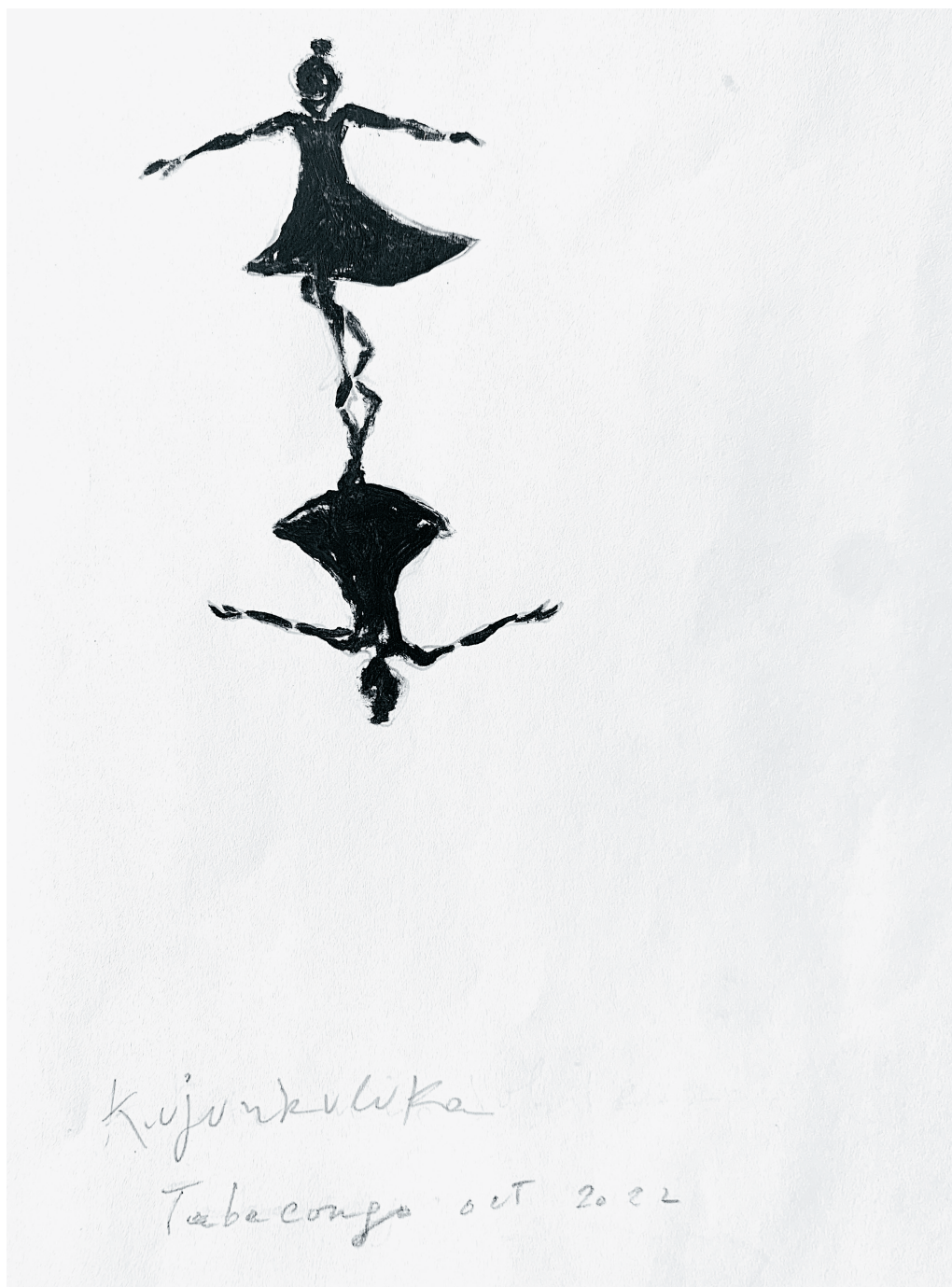
Study for The Modern Procession, 2002.
Oil, graphite, collage and tape on vellum, 27.9 × 21.6 cm





Study for Tornado, 2000–2010. Graphite and ink on vellum, 27.9 × 21.6 cm





Study for Kujunkuluka (detail), 2022. Ink on paper, 21 × 29.7 cm





Helen Levitt, *New York*, 1939. Gelatin silver print on paper, 5.1 × 8.9 cm

interfered with the potency of his own actions. He developed a new way of editing the film material he had collected: 'In the filming of *Tornado*, the camera's continuous performance cancels any possible sequence of events.'¹⁹ Words scattered on his studio wall generated 'unlikely axioms' for the editing process, leading to diagrams, cells, spirals, swirls instead of lines, streams and trails – a phenomenon Alÿs defines as the 'collapse of poetics' which at the time reflected the chaos of civil unrest in Mexico.²⁰ His position as an observer or witness of tragic political events became the subject of his reflections during his time in Mosul, Iraq, in 2016: 'Can a human tragedy be testified to by way of a fictional work? When I was chasing tornadoes in Mexico, I wanted to exorcize the horror – an utter outrage/disgust – caused by the Narco-violence. The Jihad launched by ISIS belongs to the realm of terror – an extreme fear. Terror is erratic, wicked, unimaginable, unacceptable; it fails to be represented.'²¹

19 Francis Alÿs, Foreword, in *In a Given Situation* (São Paulo, 2010), n.p.

20 Ibid.

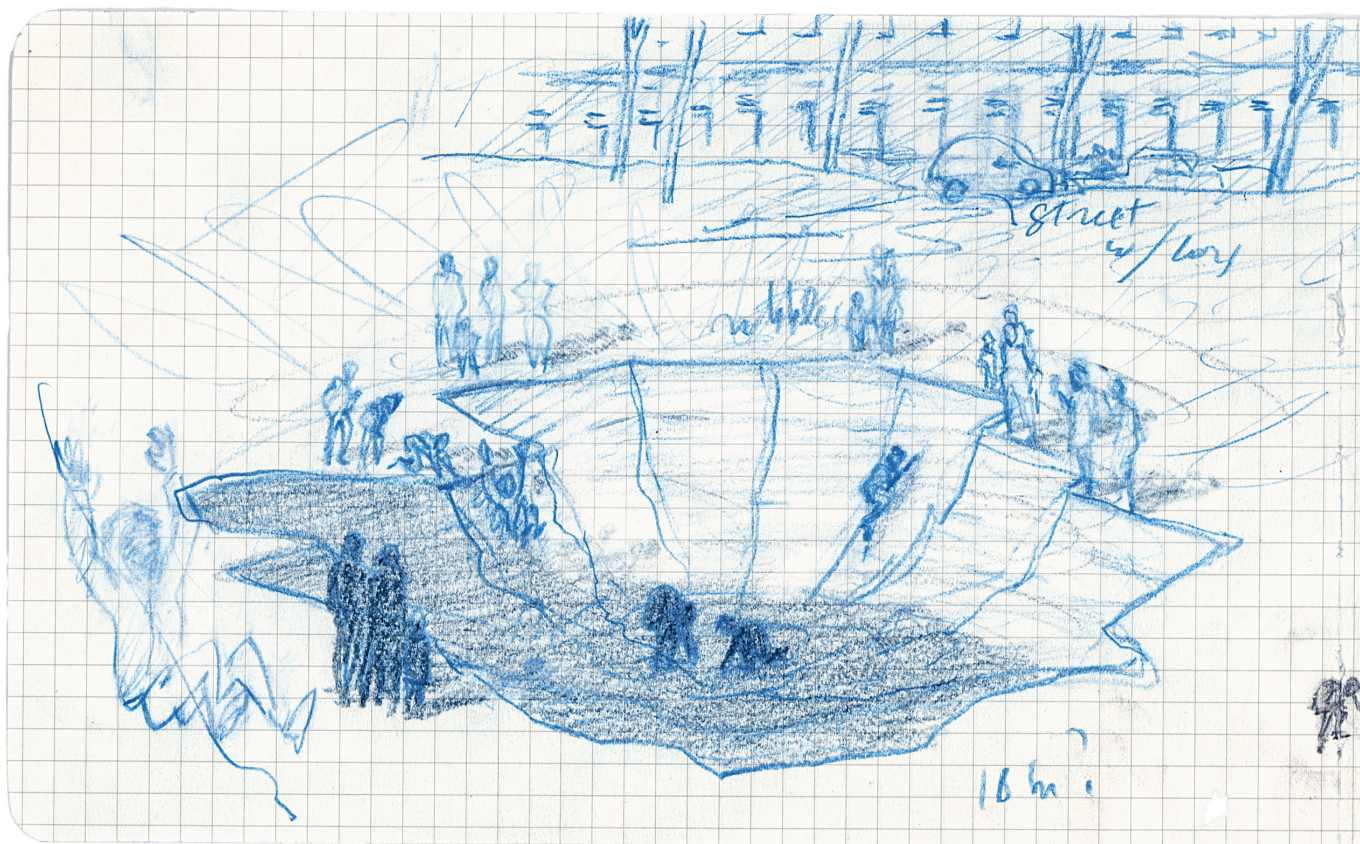
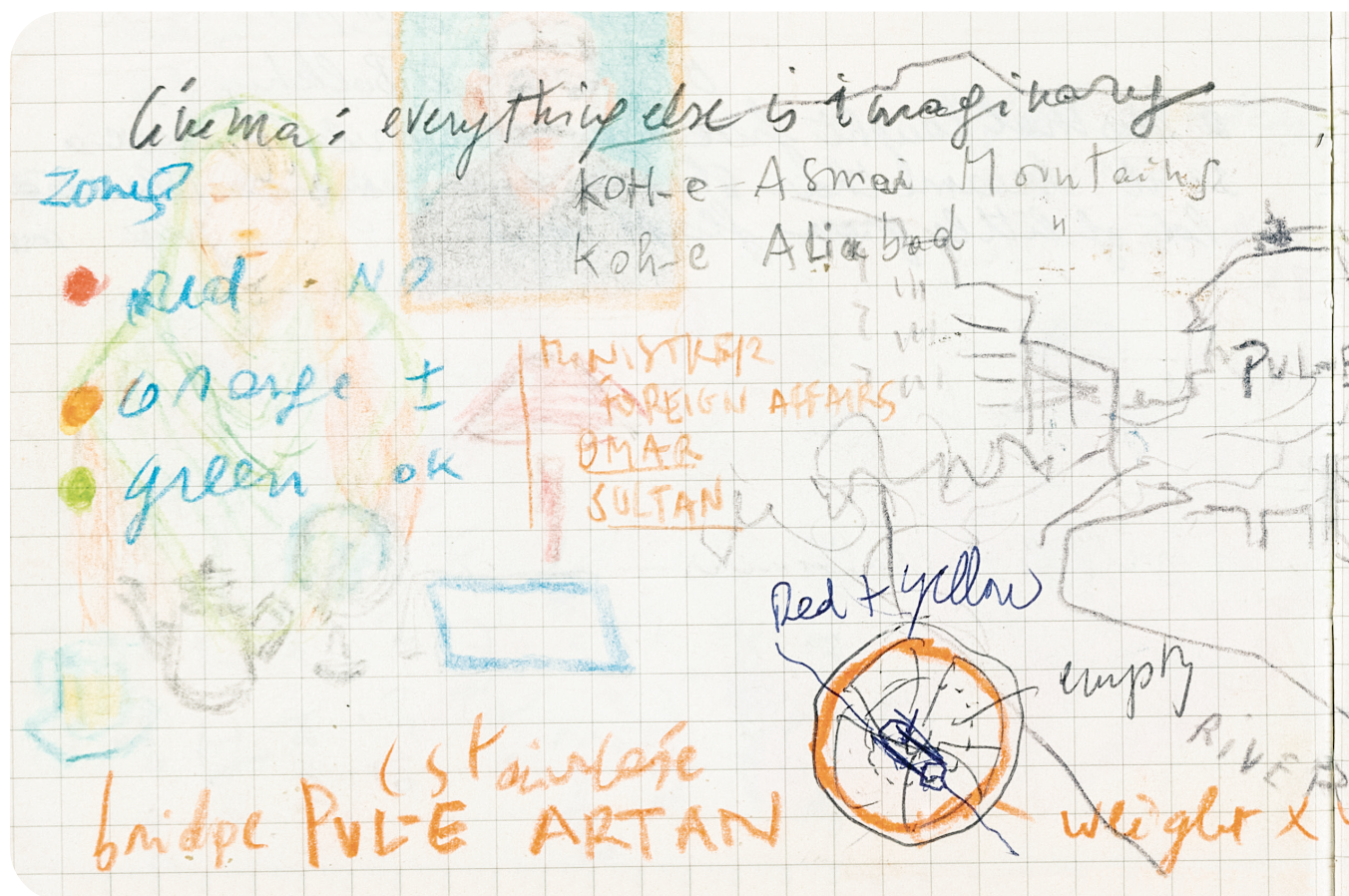
21 Alÿs, *Salam Tristesse*, p. 6.





Children's Game #2: Ricochets, Tangier, Morocco, 2007. 4:43 min. Film still





Top: Notebook, Kabul, Afghanistan, 2010. Ink and pencil on paper, 13 × 42 cm
 Bottom: Notebook, Kyiv, Ukraine, 2023. Ink and pencil on paper, 13 × 42 cm