

This major survey of Francis Alÿs (born in Antwerp in 1959) at Wiels is the first comprehensive presentation in his native country and one of the largest exhibitions of his work to date. For this artist who has for several decades now established himself as one of the most important voices of contemporary art, his training as an architect and move to Mexico City in 1986, where he has been based ever since has decisively impacted his work. Alÿs is best known for his “actions” –simple, sometimes quotidian gestures that reveal the unspoken logic structures of a society or revise typical ways of doing things - which he documents in various ways. Walking through the city is his preferred method to make certain phenomena and issues visible. Sometimes it’s just him walking, sometimes other actions take on the tenor of epic events set in dramatic landscapes involving hundreds of participants. Alÿs also works with painting, animation and drawing, and the dreamlike surreal images he creates are another facet of his work.

Alÿs’s actions are frequently humorous, often transient, and can sometimes seem absurd, but they are always concise and carefully planned. For a long time Alÿs has been interested in spreading news about his work through unconventional means such as rumour, so audiences can interpret his projects in unpredictable ways without seeing images of them. The poetic qualities of his artworks and ways of disseminating his work, combine with an idiosyncratic approach to questions of urbanism, economics, migration, and borders. This exhibition brings some of Alÿs’s most famous works together with recent projects, concentrating on the different ways in which the artist has used poetic acts and images to address political situations, whether in Mexico, Lima, Panama, or Jerusalem. The exhibition is conceived as a meandering path through the building, beginning already on the street, where a street-facing window offers the image of children skimming stones in the Strait of Gibraltar, and going all the way up to the desperate efforts of a VW beetle to reach the top of the hill in Tijuana. The path, which makes reference to the walking that remains so central to Alÿs’s practice, leads us towards both more well known and newer works, each of which helps confirm Alÿs as one of the most influential artists of his generation.