

Francis Alÿs**The Nature of the Game****07.09.2023 – 07.01.2024****WIELS, Brussels**

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.

Since 1999, during his many travels, Alÿs has documented children playing in public places. At the Venice Biennale, Alÿs presented a series of filmed children games made during the pandemic in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Belgium, Hong Kong, Mexico and Switzerland, in dialogue with a group of his discreet small-format paintings. For the presentation in WIELS, he completes several new films, including children's games he recently saw in Ukraine. He confronts them with the film installation *The Silence of Ani* (2015), 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. This work was created in 2015 for the 14th Istanbul Biennial.

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 socio-political 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.

“Whereas adults are more likely to use speech to process experiences - whereas adults speak -, children play to assimilate the realities they encounter. Their games mimic, mock or defy the rules of the adult society that surrounds them. The act of playing can also help them to cope with traumatic experiences such as those of war by creating a simulacrum of the real and turning the dramatic circumstances around them into a more fictional, ludic world. But the magical thing about a child’s game is that it holds no secrets, “it’s all there is”. We as adults should be faithful to the children we were; remember and trust that moment, the most precious one of our existence.”

- Francis Alÿs

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.

Curators: Dirk Snauwaert & Hilde Teerlinck

PARTNERS

Commissioned by: Jan Jambon, Minister-President of the Government of Flanders and Flemish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Culture, ICT and Facility Management

Special thanks to: The members of the “Exhibition Circle Francis Alÿs”

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BIOGRAPHIES

Francis Alÿs (Belgium, 1959) lives and works in Mexico City. Alÿs trained as an architect. In his practice, he uses a variety of media, ranging from painting and drawing to video and animation. His work addresses ethnological and geopolitical themes by observing daily life during his walks and travels. His series *Children's Games* (1999-ongoing) is a collection of scenes of children playing in various countries around the world. Ten new films, made in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Belgium, Canada, Iraq and Hong Kong were shown at the 59th Venice Biennale in 2022. His work has been exhibited in renowned museums around the world. (www.francisalys.com)

Dirk Snauwaert (Belgium, 1963) lives and works in Brussels. He is the founding director of WIELS. In 2009-10, he curated a major survey of the work of Francis Alÿs entitled *A Story of Deception* in partnership with Tate Modern in London and the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Hilde Teerlinck (Belgium, 1966) lives and works in Barcelona. She is the CEO of the Han Nefkens Foundation.

EVENTS**Late openings with guided tours (NL/FR) and screenings of documentaries about Francis Alÿs**

Every 1st Wednesday of the month, 11:00-21:00

04.10, "Francis Alÿs: Spel Zonder Grenzen", 2022, Pieter Verbiest & Bertrand Lafontaine (VRT Canvas)

01.11, "De larges détails - sur les traces de Francis Alÿs", 2006, Julien Devaux (Les Films du Viaduc)

06.12, "Francis Alÿs, as Long as I'm Walking", 2009, Guido De Bruyn (VRT Canvas)

Lecture: Michael T. Taussig (EN)

08.11.2023, 19:00

Play Week

31.10-5.11.2023

During the autumn holidays, young and old can come and play at WIELS!

Family Fundays (FR/NL)

On the first and third Sunday of the month, one of our guides will take (grand)parents and their children through the exhibitions. Kids aged between 2 and 12 years old.

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

Press conference: Wednesday 6 September, 11:00

Public opening: Wednesday 6 September, 18:00

Open from Tuesday to Sunday from 11:00 to 18:00

Open every first Wednesday of the month until 21:00

Press contact for interview and image requests:

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WIELS

As one of the leading institutions for contemporary art in Europe WIELS presents temporary exhibitions by national and international artists, both emerging and more established. WIELS is a site of creation and dialogue, in which art and architecture form the basis for a discussion about current events and issues, not only through its exhibitions, but also through an international artist-in-residency, an education and community-oriented programme and complementary activities.

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