

Wandering Through Time: Francis Alÿs's *Paseos* and the Circulation of Performance

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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.
— Francis Alÿs

This short poem was printed on the back of a postcard, the place where one might expect to find a hand-written message from a friend on a trip. The postcards were left on postcard racks in two locations in the city of Stockholm in 1998: the Stockholm Museum of Science and Industry, and the Nordic Museum. The front of the card bore the image of a man, a photograph that appeared to have been altered (digitally or by hand) so that the colors were intensified and the outlines of the body made blurry and painterly. The man had his back to the camera and wore a bright blue sweater with a sleeve unraveling; the thread of the sweater extended from the man's wrist out of the frame of the picture, attaching his body to something unseen, maybe another person, maybe just the path behind him. Perhaps it was the "fatal thread" that led the "villains" to the window of the woman. Perhaps the story would be continued elsewhere—it certainly sounded like a beginning.

If one were to come across the postcard by accident, one might imagine a story to explain the image and message. Yet it is likely that most people who picked up the postcard at those locations would have known that the man pictured was an artist, the artist who had designed the installation that had brought them to each of these sights. They would know that the image before them was a photograph taken of the artist, Francis Alÿs, on his walk from the Stockholm Museum of Science and Industry to the Nordic Museum. At the Nordic Museum, they could even look at a map of Stockholm installed there by Alÿs and trace the path of his walk in that unraveling sweater. Yet even those people, with access to the contextualizing information like the title of the show (*the loser/the winner*)¹ and the title of the walk it documented (*Fairy Tale*) might try

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¹ This is the installation cited by the author of the article, Carlos Basualdo, from which much

to imagine a story to explain the assemblage. Certainly the invocation of a “fairytale,” and the promise that what is being given is “just as good as”—but presumably *not*—“true” suggests that a story is being made. Yet the gaps in the narrative invite the audience to finish the story using the frameworks and scenarios that shape their own cognitive schema.

In this article, I analyze the narrativization of Francis Alÿs’s performance journeys—urban pedestrian wanderings that he calls *paseos* (Spanish for walks or strolls). I consider how the mythologies engendered by these walks are themselves creative practices. These mythologies function as a kind of performance history for each walk and for the artist as an individual. The study of performances from the past (especially those that occur without a script or clearly defined theatrical frame) must, by necessity, be understood as a study of the ways those performances have become part of a historical record. The art object cannot travel through time as a painting does, but rather it travels through time via discursive vehicles. Alÿs’s walks are a particularly clear example of these journeys, offering an opportunity to consider the travel routes of performances that are, themselves, travel stories.

Biographic sketches of the artist also reflect this focus on journey and travel. Francis Alÿs arrived in Mexico in 1987, an architect by training who was hired by the French government to assist in repair to water systems damaged by an earthquake in Oaxaca (*blueOrange* 19, *The Prophet and Fly* 94). Within several years of his arrival, his focus had shifted from architecture to art-making, and while he experimented in various media, the interest in public spaces that had brought him to Mexico continued to inform his work, and his focus remained on the uses and construction of public space. As an artist with experience creating work outside of the traditional artistic establishments, perhaps it is unsurprising that his work is created with an eye towards unconventional modes of circulation.

In his *paseos*, witnessed primarily by de-facto audiences of passers-by, Alÿs often employs simple but attention-grabbing objects. In one he pushed a block of ice through Mexico City for the nine hours it took to melt. In another, he walked through Jerusalem following the 15-mile border drawn on a 1948 map, all the while carrying a leaking can of green paint, marking his path with a line that mirrored the one on the map. These objects make the most ordinary of activities extraordinary, transforming walking from prosaic to poetic. In the introduction to his book, *The Stage Life of Props*, Andrew Sofer writes, “*Irrespective of its signifying function(s)*, a prop is something an object becomes, rather than something an object is.” (12) An object sitting onstage gains meaning through use, it is transformed by and transforms the performer who handles it. An object is neither static nor meaningless until manipulated by a performer; it is simply not (yet) a prop. Alÿs’s use of certain objects does not make them props, at least not by Sofer’s definition. Without the frame of the theatre, these objects are still

of this description is taken. I should note, however, that while the walk, *Fairy Tale*, is documented in other sources on Alÿs’s work, I cannot confirm this title independently and have only see it used in this instance.

read in terms of what they are, not in terms of their representative power. I want to suggest that, in fact, Alÿs's objects function in the opposite way: while the theatrical frame turns objects into props by endowing them with symbolic power through activity within the narrative, Alÿs's objects turn an activity into a performance, giving the event a theatrical frame. They mediate the relationship with the audience by signalling to those who encounter the walk that it is a performance.

It is useful to turn to Diana Taylor's concept of the "scenario" in considering how an activity or encounter, like a walk, staged and re-staged through time and space, carries meaning. Scenarios are the repertoire (a form of embodied knowledge) she defines in relation to the archive (fixed textual knowledge) in *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Scenarios are made up of actions, "gestures, attitudes, and tones not reducible to language" (28). In the most basic sense, Alÿs's paseos are journeys: walks that simply take him from one point to another. Yet we can consider even the most fundamental element of the walks as a kind of scenario: a lone traveler moves through an urban space. As details of place and identity are articulated, they become richer, though no less familiar (a European traveling through Latin America, a racial minority in the city). Alÿs embodies a shared knowledge and reproduces it with details. As Taylor explains, "The scenario places spectators within its frame, implicating us in its ethics and politics" (33). Once we as audience members recognize the scenario, we also become aware of our relationship to it. In the Jerusalem project described above, the details of place (following the historical divide of a war-torn city) and objects (a leaking can of paint) come together with the elements basic to other paseos (foreigner in a strange land) to make meaning that is political, mythical, and familiar. Yet that meaning is both inherent for the live spectators and constructed for us, the secondary audience, by the framework through which we encounter the walk. Indeed, the book, more than simply functioning as documentation, extends the performance event, allowing an expansion of the performance audience to include the readers. The book is not written entirely in the artist's voice, thus those of us in the second group must be conscious of the fact that we are analyzing both the artist's signification and the critical work already done through the documentation. Yet it is part of the larger artistic project, one that is attentive to both the vehicles and nature of circulating narratives.

In analyzing performances to which they do not have immediate access, performance historians are often called upon to imagine the conditions and experience of a live performance from the past. Often the event was framed as artistic in its original context, hence its inclusion in a performance history. When this is the case, there may be documents of the event itself (programs, newspaper reviews, box office receipts) that offer some insight into the audience of the event and their understanding of what they heard and saw. Yet in the case of Alÿs's paseos, the audience of the event itself may have no idea that the man trailing paint behind him is creating an aesthetic project. Those who experience the work through an aesthetic frame do so after its completion, often standing in a gallery or sitting in a library many miles from the site of the event. It is the *story* of the event that this secondary audience has access to, and,

as a story, the frames and tropes of familiar narrative structures unavoidably circumscribe it. Rather than consider this an impediment to our experience and understanding of his work, Alj's would have us know that this is a condition of it: "In most of my projects, I'm interested in the piece functioning in two levels. One level is the reality of the piece itself. I'm interested in doing it. [. . .] But in parallel to that I'm interested in diffusing, through postcards or any relevant means, a kind of circulating rumor of the piece. To keep the stories simple enough they can be repeated by word. You don't need to have seen the piece. We're talking about a tree-lined scenario. The piece can be told over dinner. [. . .] There's no need to have access to a visual image of that performance, experience, whatever you want to call it."² His comments recall Allan Kaprow's instructions for the evaluation of Happenings: "They would be measured by the stories that multiply, by the printed scenarios and occasional photographs of works that have passed on forever—and altogether would evoke an aura of something breathing just beyond our immediate grasp rather than a documentary record to be judged" (Kaprow 62). In studying Alj's, we must consider the re-creation and analysis of the stories' circulation as integral to the understanding of his projects. I argue that through the paseos themselves and their documentation, the artist exploits a shared cultural familiarity with the tropes of myth and fairytale that remains general enough so that the meaning of the paseos is mutable and accessible.

Of course, this poses another historiographical challenge. How is it possible to chart the anecdotal circulation of the performance? To analyze Alj's's success at making "rumors," as he calls them, the historian would presumably need to gain access to the dinner tables where his rumors are shared. One might even try to follow a rumor geographically: starting in the city where the paseo took place and working outwards from there. One might interview people on the street, perhaps neighborhood regulars who would be likely to notice something out of the ordinary. In doing so, one would likely be realizing Alj's's plan—perpetuating the story oneself in an attempt to track it. The performance itself took place on a public city street, ostensibly available to anyone (though practically, accessibility is never universal.) Thereafter, a gulf opens, and certain forms of circulation become available only for those with access to the galleries, newspapers, books and journals that perform and mediate the circulation itself. I take the above description of *the loser/the winner* (1998), largely, from an article about Alj's by Carlos Basualdo. By identifying an element of storytelling in the work, I am no doubt also reflecting Basualdo's narrativization of the piece. Indeed, far from simply describing his experience of the installation, Basualdo adds his interpretation: "Alj's's paseo is a fable—a journey that is also already a story of a journey—and fables are nothing but a curious mix of reality and fiction, a truth half told in a world of half-truths, that questions the truthfulness of reality itself" (Basualdo, 104). Thus the myth-making, and the recognition of it as part of an intentional project, continues.

² *Point of View (Anthology of Moving Image)*: El Gringo and *Interview with Francis Alj's*. Interview by Hans Ulrich Obrist. DVD. Produced by New Museum of Contemporary Art, Bick Productions, 2003.

Using a form of documentation while remaining conscious of its interpretive frame is simply a responsible practice for a historian. Yet I believe it is particularly worthwhile to note this practice in researching performances like Alÿs's, where our access to the event is available almost exclusively through the critical lenses and descriptions of another. By contributing to the discourse about a live performance, my voice becomes another mode of circulation, and the reader of this essay then becomes a tertiary audience—one who encounters the performance through the discourse of the discourse. Rather than understand this as a dilution of the artist's project, Alÿs's work encourages us to perpetuate the journey—and to recognize that in doing so we are *not outside* of the work, safe at a critical distance, but rather we become collaborators, with all the rights and responsibilities that such agency implies.

In one his earliest paseos, a 1997 piece entitled *Paradox of Praxis*, Alÿs pushed a block of ice through the street of Mexico City for the time it took to melt completely ("Interview"). As is typical of his walks, the performance was both ordinary and extraordinary. On the one hand, the activity paid homage to some of the most ubiquitous members of the community: the street vendors who sell cold drinks throughout the city. At the end of the piece there was nothing left to show for it but an anonymous puddle of water, one that would (as though belaboring the metaphor of the ephemerality of performance) itself eventually evaporate. And yet, by pushing a block of ice, Alÿs also must have drawn the attention of people on the street. Although visually citing the drink vendors, it is unlikely he would have been mistaken for one—most people who happened upon this performance would have recognized the Sisyphean nature of the task at hand, at least for a moment. In the paseos, Alÿs struck upon a singular way to explore the problems and challenges of urban spaces that had brought him to Mexico in the first place: he would call attention to the simple act of walking. In his essay "Walking in the City" in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau explains that to walk through a city is to create it: "The act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language or to the statements uttered. [. . .] It thus seems possible to give a preliminary definition of walking as a space of enunciation" (97-98). De Certeau uses a metaphor of writing to describe the experience of and purpose to walking through an urban space. Typically, writing is a practice of fixing narrative on a page; thus, de Certeau asks us to consider walking as a creative act, the making of a story. "Walking affirms, suspects, tries out, transgresses, respects, etc., the trajectories it 'speaks'" (de Certeau, 99). In the case of Alÿs's paseos, documented and discussed, the walks "speak" to an audience that might never see them, yet the temporal and geographic space between their occurrence and their various receptions allows for the "statements uttered" to become fleshed out by those who "hear" them.

Both de Certeau and Alÿs play on our understanding of walking as the most prosaic of activities. By choosing an everyday activity, Alÿs makes the story accessible; by using an unusual object, he makes it noteworthy. It is this element of surprise, this inversion of our expectation, that invites critical response and the kind of analysis that leads to media coverage and institutional validation. The work illustrates the very mode

of resistance that de Certeau suggests—using space in an unexpected way. There is an explicit politics to de Certeau’s theory, and this question of political intervention is one that Alÿs echoes. In a 2007 show of his work in New York, the gallery walls bore photos of the artist performing alongside the words: “Can an artistic intervention truly bring about an unforeseen way of thinking? Can an absurd act provoke a transgression that makes you abandon the standard assumptions of the sources of conflict? Can those kinds of artistic acts bring about the possibility of change?” (Cotter). Yet while de Certeau’s theories seemed aimed at the private citizen, responsible for and focused on his or her own experience, Alÿs’s wanderings are made available to the public. Several critics have compared Alÿs to the late 19th century French *flâneur*, a term popularized by Charles Baudelaire and defined as the independent man who traveled the streets of Paris, simply observing the events of public life. This connection is a tempting one, especially because of the close association of the *flâneur* with the Impressionist painters such as Edgar Degas and Edouard Manet. Yet the analogy is problematic; while Alÿs is a keen observer of the city where he makes his home (his photographic series, *Sleeping*, a series documenting sleeping humans and sleeping dogs on the streets of Mexico City is one example), it is his body that is the focus of his paseos. In fact, the *flâneur*’s body was also always the subject at hand, even when he was ostensibly an observer. Yet when Alÿs offers his body as part of the work of art, he is not so much reasserting his own identity as offering *a* body as protagonist for the untold fairytale.

W.B. Gallie defines history as “a wide family or syndrome of researches and writings, the key members of which always contain narratives of past human actions. These narratives are followable or intelligible in the same general way that all stories are” (*History Narrative Reader* 49). The question remains whether we can consider a performance as a kind of history. I would argue that because Alÿs explicitly intends his work to become “rumor,” to circulate without the artistic frame, the analysis of his work can be opened up to the same theories and questions that would be applied to the writing and analysis of a historical record. This enables the critic to consider the narrativization of the circulation of the performance. Historian Hayden White explains that it is the historian who narrativizes history: “The events are *made* into a story by the suppression or subordination of certain of them and the highlighting of others, by characterization, motific repetition, variation of tone and point of view, alternative descriptive strategies, and the like—in short, all of the techniques that we would normally expect to find in the emplotment of a novel or a play” (*History Narrative Reader* 223). I would argue that when we look to study Francis Alÿs, we should pay attention to the “techniques” used by critics and by Alÿs himself to understand the narrativization. In considering Alÿs’s own use of narrative in the creation of his work, we see it diverges from White’s description of historical writing by purposely leaving the story oblique and unfinished. Because the *experience* of the work cannot circulate through photographic reproduction, all encounters with it, through the “wide syndrome” of discourse, must be parsed for narrativization as a fulfillment of Alÿs’s project.

Different performances leave different traces—different kinds of evidence of their existence—and it is the collection and interpretation of these traces that make a performance history. Peggy Phelan’s claim that “Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations; once it does so, it becomes something other than performance,” implies that we can never have access to what is most essential to the performance once it has passed. Instead we must resign ourselves to studying it by what is left behind. (146) From this perspective, historians are a kind of deferred audience, but with critical distance, too. For a musical on Broadway, we might look to playbills, box office receipts, cast recordings, and newspaper reviews. For Alÿs’s paseos, we might look to the objects used in the paseos—the magnetic dog, the thread that once was sweater—as well as reviews, descriptions, and critical essays. The spectator who comes across the postcard mentioned above handles an object in use in the moment of performance, not a trace of a past event. It might seem that as such, we can differentiate it from the materials used by historians: the documentation of the walks in both visual and written form. Yet if we accept the idea that the performance is ongoing, that we as critics and secondary audience are collaborators, then shouldn’t the documents we use be understood a part of a live (and living) performance, too?

The paseos can be studied through photographic evidence, through video footage, through gallery shows and through the discursive projects it has inspired. This last category includes both works by and about Alÿs. As I mentioned above, the rhetoric of narrative, storytelling, fairy tales, is found throughout the writing about Alÿs. In the *New York Times* review of his gallery show entitled “Sometimes Doing Something Poetic Can Become Political, and Sometimes Doing Something Political Can Become Poetic,” Holland Cotter characterized his work as “a form of performance art, and art of symbolic gesture, a kind of acted-out metaphor” (Cotter). What is perhaps most interesting about this description is that the writer is careful to point out that there is something different in what Alÿs does from other forms of performance. The notion of an “acted-out metaphor” is distinct from ‘acting AS a metaphor’ or even ‘acting.’ The phrase “acting out” (the second word tells us the location of the performance) is used to describe a real-world aspect to Alÿs’s performance; they are not acted *on* a stage, but rather acted *out on* the street. The writer goes on to compare the work to the “earthworks” of Gordon Matta-Clark, a visual artist who is perhaps best known for his massive “splitting” pieces, in which he cut an abandoned house in half.³ Like Matta-Clark, Alÿs presents his work (at least some of it) in the public sphere, without the frame of a gallery or theatre, their metaphors expanding beyond those limitations, either because of spatial needs (Matta-Clark) or temporal (Alÿs). By making this comparison, the writer makes another attempt to place Alÿs in an artistic lineage, this time with artists who use the materials of ordinary life to make stories that take

³ The term ‘earthworks’ or ‘land art’ is generally used to describe a practice of monumental, outdoor installation that often uses natural materials. Perhaps the most famous example is Robert Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty*.

linguistic clichés (for Matta-Clark, a house divided; for Alÿs, time melting away) and bring them to literal life, on a vast scale.

Many articles available on Alÿs, in both academic and mainstream publications, use words like “fable,” “fairytale,” and “joke” to describe the artist’s work. One profile even frames his entire life as a fable, and refers to the artist as “our protagonist.” (Basualdo) Although Alÿs’s subjects include serious social issues such as urban poverty and the border patrol, his work is often described as “playful,” and writers sometimes turn to the style of his paintings as evidence of the underlying whimsy of the works. Trained as an architect, Alÿs is largely a self-taught painter, and his work is heavily influenced by the style of the *rotulistas*, sign painters in Mexico City; his paintings reflect this simple, illustrative effect. Yet the artist has a strong commitment to social justice: in 2004, Alÿs was awarded the blueOrange prize by the Federal Association of German Cooperative Banks, an \$86,000 award that he donated to a training center for homeless children in Mexico City. Thus, through his work and public persona, he balances these seemingly opposite tones. Although fairytales can certainly be dark—as is suggested in the epigraph to this article—associations with fairytales and myths are considered the province of children’s literature and play. Alÿs’s work both subverts this tendency and exploits it.

One of the important ways in which Alÿs’s work is both documented and circulated is in the books that take him as the subject. Artists’ monographs and exhibition catalogs are widely available to perpetuate his stories and record his ephemeral projects. As an artist who works in a variety of media (painting, performance, earthworks, video), books can unify various works (or rather, the documentation of them) in one form. One example of such a book is *The Prophet and the Fly*, published in conjunction with the exhibit “Francis Alÿs. Obra Pictórica, 1992-2002,” which travelled to several galleries throughout Europe in 2003. The book contains reproductions of Alÿs’s paintings; photographs taken of the artist performing; his own photographic work, film and video stills; critical essays, and interviews woven in with images of other artists’ work (particularly Renaissance masters) that have inspired Alÿs; as well as excerpts from novels, poems and philosophy that have influenced his practice. To emphasize the theme of storytelling that runs through this assemblage, one of the first pages shows a page of text from Homer’s *Odyssey*, with single letters cut out of words. Alÿs has taken one of the foundational texts of the Western canon, cut holes in it, and offered it as frame for the rest of the book. In this way, he illustrates the interactive relationship we have with works of art. Even when they (seem to) come to us whole, we fragment them to suit them to our purposes. Other writings collected in the book include selections from D. H. Lawrence’s novel *The Rainbow*, Plato’s *Republic*, Samuel Beckett’s novel *Molloy*, and the children’s book *Curious George*. In some cases, the inclusion of these foundational texts makes explicit themes dealt with in his artistic practice. In an excerpt from Plato’s *Symposium*, Aristophanes explains the nature of romantic love through the story of spherical two-faced beings split in half by the god Zeus, forever trying to find their way back to one another. Included in this retrospective exhibition catalog, it becomes clear the excerpt

was an inspiration for a 1999 piece created for the Venice Biennale, in which he and a collaborator, each carrying one half of a disassembled tuba, entered the city from opposite sides, walked until they found each other, at which point they assembled the tuba and played a single note. The tuba/being separated by the hand of the artist/god became whole again, and marked the occasion by making music. It is as though we, the readers, are looking at the product of the various source materials that have entered the artist's consciousness, processed and poured onto the page. The book is structured with surprising juxtapositions that seem at once intentional and haphazard. Handwritten notes and messy sketches give certain pages the feel of a private notebook; although the text we hold is printed and bound—vetted by at least three curators and gallery staffs, not to mention the artist himself—there is a convenient fiction being spun, whereby the reader gets to feel as though he or she is peering over the artist's shoulder. While the book is a testament to, and document of, Alj's use of fiction and story, it also utilizes a fragmentary structure to model the ways in which pieces of an artistic project travel through time, to be assembled and fleshed out by readers. By including not just the artist's work but also the source materials and inspirations for it, the book models the way the artist himself make stories and meaning out of a variety of fragmentary influences.

“Every story is a travel story—a spatial practice,” writes de Certeau (115). This sentiment also underlies Alj's paseos. It is possible to interpret all of Alj's wanderings as themselves metaphors for the circulation of his stories. This suggestion is even more explicit in two thematically linked pieces of Alj's that both displace a more obviously aesthetic product, a painting: *The Commuters* (2000-2005) and *Walking a Painting* (2002). In what is often cited as Alj's earliest paseo entitled *The Collector* (1991), he pulled a magnetic toy dog on a leash through the streets of Mexico City, accumulating scraps of metal along the way. The absurdity of “walking” an inanimate object is even more thoroughly embraced in *Walking a Painting*. In the performance, Alj carried one of his paintings through the streets of Los Angeles—releasing it from its natural habitat (gallery, studio) and taking it into the world. A project conceived to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the riots that followed the Rodney King beating, Alj walked his painting through the neighborhoods where the riots had taken place. The untitled painting was inspired by the following quote from the April 30, 1992 edition of the *Los Angeles Times*: “Across South Los Angeles, blacks, whites, latinos and asians are meeting in violent confrontations. The popular myth that Los Angeles was transforming itself into a harmonious multiethnic model city seems to waft away in the smoke billowing over the city.” (*The Prophet and the Fly* 99) The painting depicts a racially diverse group of people, painted simply like characters in a children's book, against a neutral, blue background. Photographs of the walk appear in the book *The Prophet and the Fly*, framing the walk aesthetically as surely as the painting itself is framed. The photographs extend the walk, bringing the image of Alj's wandering body to new audiences. In the photographs, Alj is shown walking in the bright California sun, across streets filled with cars but hardly any people—the few who do appear seem to take no notice of him. By taking the newspaper excerpt as a

starting point, Alÿs brings the “myth” of racial harmony into conversation with the myth-making his paseos invite. The project is a web of displacements, both temporal (the disjuncture in time that all commemorative events exploit between the original moment in the past and the current moment of remembrance) and geographic (the painting outside the gallery, a European wandering American streets, a white man in predominantly black neighborhoods), each with their own narrative. In the photographic documentation, a white border frames the image—of a man carrying a framed painting depicting a utopian “myth” that does not/did not reflect the city through which it travels. In a sense, Alÿs calls attention to the idealism of works of art, and the photographs seem to imply that this idealism has little impact on its surroundings. It is only when the walk has been “framed” by a white border and printed in a book (or exhibited in a gallery) that it can be fixed in a place and interpreted as a work of art.

In *The Commuters* (2000-2005), Alÿs sent a painting into the world to wander on its own. Or more precisely, he made a painting available to be taken home each evening by a member of the public and returned the next day. In this piece, he makes the metaphor of art circulating beyond the realm of the artist even more emphatic, entrusting circulation to audience members. While in his other paseos, he himself made the journey, in this one he provided the object that would make someone else’s journey extraordinary. Yet as in other pieces, he played with the simultaneous remarkability and prosaic nature of the journey by titling the piece *The Commuters*. As it is plural, we can infer that the title does not refer to the painting itself but rather must describe the audience/participants who carry the painting home and back. The word “commuters” conjures an image of armies of anonymous workers, filing into trains and cars on a journey they make twice a day. By arming a commuter with a painting, Alÿs makes them notable; by labeling them a “commuter,” their action becomes linked to the ordinary. Drawing once again from Taylor’s notion of “scenario,” it is the very recognizability of the figure of the commuter that allows for the joke of putting a work of art in his or her arms: “scenarios, by encapsulating both the setup and action/behaviors, are formulaic structures that predispose certain outcomes and yet allow for reversal, parody, and change.” (Taylor 31) Because the object carried is so explicitly framed as aesthetic, the ultimate effect is of a piece of art circulating in everyday life, being used by individuals however they see fit. Rather than being forced to come to a gallery to encounter it, the art can be integrated into their lives, “far away from the dogma of museum interpreters.” (*The Prophet and the Fly* 124) This is the way story works: we make sense of a narrative if we can recognize it; it has meaning for us if we can integrate it into our own experience of the world. The audience becomes an agent of circulation; our interpretation of the story re-makes it and allows it to grow and travel by becoming something new and personal.

In considering the use and meaning of the concept of myth, one must necessarily grapple with the cultural specificity of certain stories and narratives. One could turn to folklore studies, literary theory, or children’s books to begin to create a key to the cognitive map of stories. In his essay, “Mythologies,” Roland Barthes proposes an

understanding of the concept of myth as “a mode of signification, a form” (109). In Barthes’s formulation, it is the medium that determines a mythic quality, and borrows a structuralist approach to the relationship between sign and signifier to explicate his theory on how myth works discursively. He writes, “Myth is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters this message: there are formal limits to myth, there are no ‘substantial’ ones” (109). Alÿs echoes this sentiment, claiming, “myth is not about the veneration of ideals—of pagan gods or political ideology—but rather an active interpretive practice performed by the audience, who must give the work its meaning and social value” (*Prophet and Fly* 31). In comparing these two formulations, one notes a discrepancy between their understandings of where the myth-making occurs: for Barthes, it seems to be a tool of the creator (this is further emphasized in other parts of the same essay where Barthes examines the propagandizing nature of myth-making), whereas for Alÿs, the responsibility belongs to the audience. Yet for both, it is the mode of circulation and consumption that supersedes the object itself.

An examination of Alÿs’s work allows the performance historian a case study through which to consider the ways that the circulation of performative works wrestle with their own ephemerality. Certain performances (as with other events) call out to the historian through time, and though this attraction may tell us as much about the historian as it does about the work of art, the fact remains that the call itself is still an object worthy of study because its very existence speaks to the indestructibility of the thing-that-is-no-longer-there. Joseph Roach defines “surrogation” as a process by which a culture reproduces itself, a process that “continues as actual or perceived vacancies occur in the network of relations that constitute the social fabric” (2). I turn to this concept because surrogation accounts for a desire on the part of the audience of performance, an acknowledgment that performances happen because we want them to. They have a generative place in society. Surrogation implies the possibility of active relationships between audiences and performers, and it is an attention to the just that relationship that inspires Alÿs to create performances that will become rumors. Alÿs’s method of creation and circulation depends on this desire, a basic human curiosity and need for stories to interpret and share. By making “rumor” the goal of the project, the performance never ends, like the scenario it is simply made and re-made through its description. As Alÿs has remarked on this process, “I think the on-going processuality is just a means to avoid conclusions” (“Interview”). I would argue that for Alÿs, conclusions are endings. By avoiding them, he is suggesting a model by which performances have no clear ending, no curtain falling. They travel and are remade each time a new audience encounters them. While criticism may continue the circulation, by design, these performances cannot be fixed in the discourse. As walks, his performances provide an almost overdetermined metaphor for the way that all performances can become myth. Without access to their original form, we must reimagine them to encounter them, even if it’s only in our mind’s eye. Alÿs’s walks begin with the movement of his body through space, but the work continues to move long after the body has come to rest.

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