

The Renaissance Society

at The University of Chicago
5811 South Ellis Avenue
Chicago, IL 60637

Museum Hours
Tuesday - Friday: 10 am - 5 pm
Saturday, Sunday: 12 - 5 pm
Closed Mondays
www.renaissancesociety.org



By the early twentieth century, urbanization was a stock part of European modernity come again as a master narrative. Elsewhere the story was just beginning as cities in developing countries, notably those of Latin America and Southeast Asia, grew exponentially during the middle of the last century. The emergence of the megacity, however, has a postmodern corollary, namely the passage from the megacity to what is now referred to as the global city. Unlike the designation megacity, with its emphasis on a totalizing sense of urbanity forever in crisis of collapse, global city refers to the sub- yet transnational character of the world's largest metropolises as they are hubs of economies that are at once domestic and global. A prime example is Mexico City, poster child for the megacity.

Between 1940 and 1990, its population grew ten fold from 1.4 to 14 million. Emblematic of economic globalization, Mexico City has become susceptible to a post-Fordist paradigm no longer exclusive to advanced industrial nations. The structural dynamic linking Mexico City's regimen of corporate headquarters to the quality of life for the city's working class poor is one defined by a decline in manufacturing and an increase in service sector employment. The result is a growing inequality gap and a shrinking middle class as factories either close or relocate. Given that more than half the world's population now live in cities whose fates belong to the boom and bust cycles of a deregulated global economy characterized by the international ebb and flow of capital, to speak of "how the other half lives" in Mexico City is to speak of conditions that are global indeed.

When Belgian native Francis Alÿs (b. 1959) moved to Mexico City in 1986 he had no plans to become an artist. Trained as an architect, Alÿs was inspired by a city overwhelmingly accessible at its street level and utterly incomprehensible in its demographic scope and historical layers—pre-hispanic, colonial and modern. But Mexico City is less the subject of Alÿs' work and more his laboratory if not muse. Insofar as Alÿs could be said to have a medium it would be walking, making Alÿs the consummate post-studio artist. Accordingly, the majority of his work has taken the form of photo/video-based documentation of events (some staged, others a species of vérité) all transpiring in the street. In this respect, Alÿs is heir to that most Latin American of genres, namely the "action," a gesture falling somewhere between performance and intervention.

Enacted in the public realm, "actions" were historically the front line of assault on the barrier between art and life. When Alÿs arrived on the scene, however, that barrier was next to non-existent making his foray into the genre organic rather than ideological. If anything, art and life had become a two way street. Just as art had found its way into life, so too life had found its way into art. In a manner beyond question, Alÿs' ongoing photodocumentary slide shows of Mexico City denizens caught unaware in their quotidian lives (*Ambulantes*, 1992-present, *Sleepers*, 1999-present, *Beggars*, 2002-present) share equal billing with his actions whose subjects have included crime (*Re-enactment*, 2000); the economy of trash (*Barrenderos*, 2004, *The Seven Lives of Garbage*, 1995); and a vicious pack of stray dogs (*Gringo*, 2003).

Despite the contrast between the actions, which have a strong allegorical bearing, and the photodocumentary work, which is ground in transparency, both bodies of work signify a marginalized agency and subjectivity that is a staple of city life.

As an economy of scale, however, marginalized living in Mexico City is anything but marginal. Mexico City's various forms of disenfranchisement—social, political, cultural and economic—are part and parcel of the city's texture, giving its street-life a quotient of immediacy. As a result, Alÿs' work derives its poignance from gestures that although specific allude to more general conditions in which a tenuous sense of human worth is accepted as a structural part of modernity. This coincides with visual art's well cultivated suspicions as to its own use value. Unable to categorize itself as a discrete form of either manual or intellectual labor, art would instead count itself a friend of futility, and proudly so where Alÿs is concerned. But Alÿs' purposeless yet critical expenditures—whether it is pushing a large block of ice through Mexico City streets for the nine hours it takes to melt (*Sometimes making something leads to nothing, Paradox of Praxis 1*, 1997) or gathering an army of individuals to shovel an immense sand dune a few inches (*When Faith Moves Mountains*, 2002)—achieve their legibility in a context whose significance to the global economy as a reservoir of cheap labor cannot be disregarded. In light of these circumstances, Alÿs' crafting of a tangible futility highlights a purposelessness that in its socio-economic entrenchment has paradoxically acquired what is perhaps its only use-value, namely that of a sign-value making it ripe as a subject for art.

Alÿs' Renaissance Society exhibition features two works installed in an ambitious two-story exhibition-design by the artist. *Politics of Rehearsal*, 2005–2007, is a thirty-minute video made with frequent collaborators, Rafael Ortega and Cuahtémoc Medina, and *Bolero (Shoe Shine Blues)*, 1999–2007, is an installation featuring a short animation and over five hundred of its attendant working drawings.

Alÿs has described his work as "a sort of discursive argument composed of episodes, metaphors or parables, staging the experience of time in Latin America." The idea of the rehearsal, with its stops, starts and repetitions all aimed at perfecting a performance, is one such metaphor. As its title warrants, Alÿs has returned to it on numerous occasions and *Politics of Rehearsal* builds directly on three previous videos. *Rehearsal 1*, 1999–2004, recasts Sisyphus as a red Volkswagen Beetle that, synopated to a musical rehearsal, repeatedly attempts but fails to ascend a hill on the outskirts of Tijuana. *R.E.H.E.A.R.S.A.L.*, 2000, is a short, animated video featuring a hand spelling the word "rehearsal" across the top of a piece of paper. And *Rehearsal 2*, 2001–2006, is a fifteen minute video in which a professional striptease is performed to a rehearsal of Schubert's soprano/piano duet *Lied der Mignon (Song of Longing)*. Alÿs describes *Rehearsal 2* as:

"a scenario in which the development of a mechanics—such as two steps forward, three steps back, four steps forward, three steps back—and in which, although the progression is not linear and occurs in a different temporality, there is some kind of

progress at the end of the day. It's just a different pace. Postponement or delaying does not mean stagnation. There is always a progression, but through a different mode."

Politics of Rehearsal consists of four distinct components two of which (the Schubert rehearsal and the striptease) are drawn from *Rehearsal 2*. The remaining two components are a film excerpt from Harry Truman's 1949 inaugural address and running voice over commentary by art historian and cultural theorist Cuahtémoc Medina being interviewed by Alÿs whose voice has been subtracted from the tape. A statement at the beginning of *Politics of Rehearsal* describes it as a "metaphor of Latin America's ambiguous affair with modernity." To call *Politics* a metaphor is something of an understatement. Not so much a mixed metaphor, it is a mixture of metaphors with Medina's non-diegetic voice over as a binding agent. The combination of historical material, performance, and most importantly, voice over commentary, make it an explicit illustration of Alÿs' ideas, the literal construction of a metaphor in which the performance is presumed to have an illustrative connection to Medina's verbal disclosure. The performances and Medina's words, however, neither confirm nor clarify one another. The result is a brand of latter day surrealism where high art, "tittytainment," and intellectual reflection coexist in equal measure and free of contention, which is perhaps the most apt of metaphors for Latin America.

Bolero is one of several animations Alÿs has made in the past decade. (*Time is a Trick of the Mind*, 1998, *Song for Lupita*, 1998, *De Fluitier (The Whistler)*, 1999 and *The Last Clown*, 2000). All illustrate a simple and singular act of larger allegorical significance, which in *Bolero*'s case is a shoe shine set to a short musical phrase whose melody and lyrics are written by Alÿs. In contrast to the saturated production values of today's digital animation, Alÿs' output is resolutely artisanal. While its vogue in the sphere of the visual arts could be attributed to the rise of video and digital media, animation has always been tethered to the fine arts through the practice of drawing even as technical proficiency in figurative rendering was relegated to the professional illustrator/cartoonist. Tellingly, *Bolero* is animated in a style of spare line drawing whose clarity belongs to commercial illustration. In that regard, *Bolero* is indebted to Alÿs' rotulista (sign painter) paintings, a body of work executed between 1993–1997 in which he collaborated with Mexico City sign painters to translate his small figurative compositions into the sign painters' larger, stylized tableaux.

But more important, *Bolero*, as an exhibition of process and product, converts animation into a site where drawing is not only privileged for harboring artisanal skill, but for translating that skill into a display of labor that, like that of its subject matter, has been marginalized. Here, as with other work, Alÿs' penchant for futility cannot help but mirror the plight of an artistic labor that since the early twentieth century remains haunted by the anxiety of its obsolescence. In form and content, *Bolero* represents the crafting of a self-worth that is being insisted upon through a manual repetition now substantially devalued by automation. Yet despite its

monumental scope of over five hundred drawings, *Bolero*'s subject lends it a humility recalling animation's roots in the flipbook. More than simply capture, *Bolero* dissects the palindrome-like polishing movement, as the back and forth action is synopated to the signature rise and fall of the musical form that is its namesake. Though set to lyrics that center upon the invisibility of shiner and shining, *Bolero* is actually a motion study in which Alÿs makes visible, a labor usually classified as far less than skilled. He even went so far as to give the movement sculptural form where it resembles a diagrammatic structure declaring the shiner's act a sort of molecule on which a macro-economy is built.

If, however, the Mexico City shoe shine trade qualifies as invisible, it does so only through its ubiquitousness, making it a trenchant example of that city's ever burgeoning informal economy which some experts say accounts for half of the city's jobs. Whereas those who make a living through unstructured and unregulated activity are by most accounts considered "passive economic agents" who "lost out in the struggle for jobs," clearly Mexico City is pause for thought. The relationship between its formal and informal economy is such that they are complementary. The informal economy is not something outside of the city's economy, it is the city's economy, and something with and to which Mexico City officials must reckon if not resign themselves. Given its size and the crucial role of many of its services, they have no choice. Distrustful of the formal economy, many informal sector workers are proud of having survived Mexico's various economic crises—1976, 1982, and 1994 being the major ones—not to mention the earthquake of 1985. While the shoe shine trade cannot fail to signify the relationship between have and have-not, for Alÿs it also represents an ethos's survival that performance becomes an one's defining the character of his adopted city. But as an allegory of globalization, the shoe shine trade hardly speaks to Mexico City alone. It could just as well be Cairo, Jakarta, or Karachi to name but a few cities where poverty knows no line and wages know no minimum.

Francis Alÿs: *Bolero (Shoe Shine Blues)* and *Politics of Rehearsal* which inaugurates The Society's 93rd season and its 29th in the Bergman Gallery, is dedicated to the memory of Edwin Bergman. Through his commitment to new and provocative art, Ed championed all The Society stands for. We remain grateful for his outstanding example, friendship, service and support.

This exhibition has been made possible with funding from Alphawood Foundation; the CityArts Program of The Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs, a municipal agency; Christie's; The Danielson Foundation; the Illinois Arts Council; a state agency; The MacArthur Fund for Arts and Culture at Prince; The Peter Norton Family Foundation; the Provost's Discretionary Fund at The University of Chicago; Pritzker Foundation; The Siragusa Foundation; and our membership.

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AMERICAN AIRLINES is the official airline of The Renaissance Society's 2008-2009 season.

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Politics of Rehearsal, 2005–2007
video still

[that side]
Bolero (Shoe Shine Blues), 1997–2007
drawing on velum

Francis Alÿs

Bolero (Shoe Shine Blues)* and *Politics of Rehearsal

September 28 – December 14, 2008

Opening Reception: September 28, 4:00–7:00 pm
Featuring a talk with the artist from 5:00–6:00 pm

Related Events

OPENING RECEPTION
Sunday, September 28, 4:00–7:00 pm
featuring a talk with the artist
from 5:00–6:00pm in Cobb Hall Room 307
(directly below the gallery)

CONCERT
Thursday, October 2, 8:00pm

Bradley Brickner, clarinet
James Falzone, clarinet
Tomeka Reid, cello

For his first Society concert, Brickner, a Hyde Park native, aced a bill of Twentieth Century solo clarinet classics by the likes of Vincent Persichetti, Shulamit Ran, Burton Beerman, Elliot Carter, Paul Harvey and Igor Stravinsky. That was a warm up. This time he is back with friends who constitute greater fire power. Falzone, an outstanding clarinetist and composer, will be on hand to co-perform his work *Sema* for two clarinets. Reid, having appeared on bills and recordings with a who's who of the young Chicago Jazz scene, is a bona fide staple on a scene bursting with talent. This concert will take place in Bond Chapel, 1025 E. 58th St. (One building east of Cobb Hall on the main quadrangle of the University). FREE

CONCERT
Saturday, October 4, 8:00 pm

Polwechsel
Burkhard Beins, drums, percussion
Martin Brandlmayr, drums, percussion
Werner Dafeldecker, double bass
Michael Moser, cello & computer

Over the course of five releases, this Austrian Quartet has crafted a sound all its own by blurring the line between improvised and composed music. With an incredibly delicate and textural sound that could be discussed equally as a space, their last release, *Archives of the North*, still has this writer recovering from a bout with the sublime. This concert will take place in Bond Chapel, 1025 E. 58th St. (One building east of Cobb Hall on the main quadrangle of the University). FREE

LECTURE
Tuesday, October 7, 6:00 pm

Alma Guillermoprieto
The New Narcocultura: A Talk About Mexico

The author of three books and recipient of numerous awards, Guillermoprieto has written about Latin America for more than 20 years. She is a frequent contributor to *The New Yorker Review of Books* and *The New Yorker*. Organized by the Center for Latin American Studies and co-sponsored by the Katz Center for Mexican Studies. Sponsorship provided by the Tinker Visiting Professor endowment at the University of Chicago. This event will take place in Social Sciences room 122 (1126 E. 59th St.) FREE

CONCERT
Friday, October 10, 8:00 pm

The Millennium Chamber Players
Works by Latin American composers

Carlos Chávez
Silvestre Revueltas
Rubén González

Paquito D'Rivera
Gustavo Leone
Gabriela Frank

This concert will feature a stellar range of styles by contemporary Latin American Composers. Led by Maestro Robert Katkov-Trevino, the Millennium Chamber Players are Chicago's newest critically-acclaimed chamber ensemble. This concert will take place in Bond Chapel, 1025 E. 58th St. (One building east of Cobb Hall on the main quadrangle of the University). FREE

LECTURE
Sunday, November 9, 2:00 pm

John C. Cross
¿Somos Piratas y Qué? Survival and Resistance on the Streets of Mexico City

Cross is Sociologist and expert on the informal economy, Mexico City's in particular. His oft cited, 1998 book *Informal Politics: Street Vendors and the State in Mexico City*, is used by any number of disciplines including economics, urban studies, and political science. His recent work *¿Somos Piratas y Qué? Globalization and Local Resistance, The Case of Cultural Piracy in Mexico* examines the global campaign against "piracy"—the theft of intellectual property rights—as it relates to NAFTA and other multi-lateral and bi-lateral trade agreements with the results being a popular backlash against globalization itself. This event will take place in Cobb Hall room 409

CONCERT
Sunday, November 16, 8:00 pm

Frances-Marie Uitti, cellist

The Society is excited to host Uitti who has performed definitive interpretations of works by some of the late 20th century's greatest composers including Kurtag, Scelsi and Nono. In 1975, she developed a double-bow technique that transformed her cello into a truly polyphonic instrument capable of sustained chordal and intricate multivoiced writing. With any luck, her custom, 12 gauge, stringless, electronic cello will be completed and we can exploit her eagerness to show it off. This concert will take place in Bond Chapel, 1025 E. 58th St. (One building east of Cobb Hall on the main quadrangle of the University). FREE

CONCERT
Wednesday, December 11, 8:00 pm

Teodoro Anzellotti, accordion

Anzellotti is recognized as one of the world's foremost accordionists with a solo repertoire of incomparable scope. More than 300 new works having been written for him by the likes of composers such as Luciano Berio, George Aperghis, Brice Pauset, Heinz Holliger, Toshio Hosokawa, Mauricio Kagel, Michael Jarrell, Isabel Mundry, Gerard Pesson, Matthias Pintscher, Wolfgang Rihm, Salvatore Sciarrino, Marco Stroppa, Jörg Widmann and Hans Zender. This concert will take place in Bond Chapel, 1025 E. 58th St. (One building east of Cobb Hall on the main quadrangle of the University). FREE



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Bolero (Shoe Shine Blues) and
Politics of Rehearsal

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