Symbolic Deterritorialization: the Case of Francis Alýs
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Abstract: In the global context the artistic production has developed its critical processes from the inclusion and participation of audiences in the works of art. Somehow the expansion and compression of space-time is reflected in the characteristics of many artists whose work is based on the fact of occupying, mapping and reinterpreting the spaces that they appropriate. This article tries to analyze the spatial and temporal turn defined by the works of artist Francis Alýs. The individual and collective memories, spaces of history, politics and culture are signified by the act of symbolic deterritorialization and reterritorialization. In this text is outlined the narrative turns of the fable and rumour in the work of Francis Alýs that confront symbolic deterritorialization as a resource of his artistic production.

Keywords: Space, time, deterritorialization, symbolic, Francis Alýs

I. Introduction
In recent decades we have witnessed a blurring of boundaries between art and everyday life and driven by a sense of event that generated a kind of new art, artist and viewer conceptions. The new aesthetic paradigms that emerge from this transitivity obey largely to what Appadurai Arjun (2001) [1] has termed: immigration audiences and deterritorialized viewers. Gestating transnational conception in shaping contemporary identity that is organized around multiple changing and interconnected mobile subjectivities. This hybrid culture as defined by García Canclini (1990) [2] brings new locations in which their mapping allows to articulate new dialectics.

The purpose of this essay is to define a specified mapping of the frequencies that interrogates us around what Huyssen (2002) [3] has called the “memorializing turn”, where globalization of memory in transnational movement, has converted the Holocaust in a kind of metaphor applicable to any local trauma. This “memorializing turn” is articulated in the work of artists like an oxymoron of collective memory that is expressed through exploration and symbolic processing.

In this frequency we found the artist Francis Alýs that performed a systematic exploration of urban poetics where everyday gestures and actions often acquire social and political dimensions. His works take on a deep personal commitment of political significance that takes place in the public space of discussion. Through actions and performances scrutinizes the social space and its public register, in order to transform its symbolism. However, the political status in his work is deprived from all political imagery for perching on a poetic exploration of the contemporary individual as a true interpreter of the society that we produce. Ethical and political values are embodied in a parable or fable that takes a strange form of agonist passion from which is emerging an antagonistic dimension offering a discussion with terms like: power, sovereignty, hegemony, territory and identity.

The time frame of this collective memory develops a proposal that focuses on daily activities. These are presented as subtly acts that break into the social space and transform it temporarily. This timing suggests a time dilation; a “heterocronic” fracture that disagrees with the rhythms of production and consumption that capitalism imposes. The capitalist economy overrides all experience time as is expressed by José Zamora (2008)

The acceleration of all social changes produces a feeling of unstoppable speed. But at the same time the events and facts submitted at that speed are lacking the duration in the sense of lasting consequences. We live with the feeling that nothing essential changes, it does not happen nothing really new (…) the acceleration process is accompanied by an almost insatiable hunger experience of the world (…)

However the same process only allows a relationship mediated with the world (Zamora, 2008, p. 84) [4]. Alýs runs a deregulation in time and its productive consequences through symbolic-allegorical “heterochronies”. He advocates epic actions that become useless and unproductive within the capitalist system. However, these actions develop a temporality, a “lost time “ that is revealed as the most accurate weapon for removing linear and historical time of modernity and its production and consumption records. Alýs somehow summons a kind of dialectic of symbolic production through a strategy of temporary suspension fracture and “monochromic” linear time of modernity.
Francis Alÿs: the power of the fable, de-territorialization and re-territorialization of symbolic imagery.

The work When Faith Moves Mountains (2002) of Francis Alÿs is basically a project of geological movement. On 11 April 2002 Francis Alÿs summoned five hundred volunteers to form a human line that moved with the help of shovels, a dune of five hundred meters in diameter located on the outskirts of the city of Lima. This human comb pushed a certain amount of sand at a distance, moving the dune a few centimeters from its original position. The physical disturbance was barely noticeable, but not the metaphorical resonances. According to Alÿs:

*When faith moves mountains tries to translate social tensions into narratives that interfere with the imagery of a place. The purpose of the action is to infiltrate local history and social mythology (…) “When faith moves mountains” strips the romance of land art. When Richard Long made the treks in the Peruvian desert, he was proposing a contemplative concept, but distancing himself from a social context. When Robert Smithson built the “Spiral Jetty” in Salt Lake, was transforming civil engineering into sculpture and vice versa. Here we were trying some kind of land art for the landless, and, with the help of hundreds of people build a social allegory (Buck-Morss et al., 2005, p. 25) [5].*

Placing us in the execution of the work and the political and social conditions in Peru we need to contextualize this artwork under very specific conditions. Geographic expansion of Lima is determined by peasant invasions that coalesce in the capital due to the bankruptcy of the rural economy and civil war. That mass of population is under authoritarian projects of Fujimori and Montesinos. From this position the 1997 Lima Biennial is organized as a highly politicized space for a common purpose. The cultural pull down of the dictatorship. The proposed model is limited to the direct action, which takes to the streets an artistic development based on the public environment intervention for a “democratic praxis to return the city to the citizens” (Buck-Morss et al., 2005, p. 43) [5]. Peruvian dictatorial regime is based on effective public perversion in all its orders, also in the symbolic. This generates a counter-response where the struggle for the symbolic power in the public sphere allows the reconstruction of civic self-esteem that the dictatorship had undertaken to inoculate to the symbolic producer, to the artist, in a psychic way, by self-censorship. The liberating process undertaken by artists is a fundamental reference in Peru in the “Colectivo Sociedad Civil” (CSC). From a symbolic praxis the artistic experience is socialized, creating situations in which the citizens abandon the passive role of the spectator to lead in the form of a ritual the very experience usurped by political repression. As noted Gustavo Buntinx:

*As in certain interventions of the “Avanzada Chilena” in the plebiscite against Pinochet, or in the symbolic strategies of the “Madres de la Plaza de Mayo” and its mystical libidinal slogan to fight for “live appearance” of those who disappeared during the military dictatorship of Argentina (…) What in these experiences matters is not the artistic condition but the (...) critical redefinition of power and politics (Buck-Morss et al., 2005, p. 45) [5].*

Therefore we must not fail to take into account that the work functions here not as autonomous purpose, but as a laboratory of critical experiences in which the criterion of truth lies radically outside art. And what really matters is not the artistic status but changing their aesthetic resources for critical redefinition of the power and the politics. The strategy of Alÿs is to generate an expanded symbolic counterpart through its absurd and desperate gesture, for an urgent situation that became a fact of social statement. But we have a public artwork that handles political ingredients without the literalness of what is meant by “political art”. Alÿs himself responds to Gerardo Mosquera in an interview:

*I have literally not a political speech, or a “position”, but I think that it is a dimension in which the story is mainly through a poetic imagination, with all the paradoxes and conflicts that usually this is meant. Now, in an extremely raw and immediate political situation, I introduce a palliative treatment, a kind of balm (Buck-Morss et al., 2005, p. 95) [5].*

This, in the context of art in Latin America and particularly in Mexico may seem a contradiction, because American culture has been built on the state, in terms of power, and not on the questions where the social demands revolve around the politics. The critic and historian Cuauhtémoc Medina speaks of

* (...) My interest in the work of Francis has to do with the awe or envy that I feel that he has not the Latin American neurosis of “political art”. It seems that, first of all the Latin American artist has to decide whether it is political or not. So it becomes so absolutely necessary to choose between the ideological-illustrative and the abstract-irresponsible (...) (Buck-Morss et al., 2005, p. 97) [5].*

What is claiming with this statement Cuauhtémoc Medina is a Latin American artist's involvement in the public sphere and their multiple interventions, from the occupation of the urban space to the incidence of gregarious economy in building a political identity.

In this sense one might ask what is making this a political public work of art? The immediate response upon the considerations deployed in this work, would be to generate a sense of hope as a political category in itself. In
this way, articulating a political action without any concrete target we transfer to the emotional field a palpable “utopian experience”, whose ethical and political transformation is the guarantor of a certain justice, perhaps as “moments of faith”. This obviously is deployed in a very accurate way in When Faith Moves Mountains (2002) because what it is about is to generate, by an insignificant experience of moving a dune in some millimetres, a social allegory in public space that reaffirms the ability of the individual to change things, politics, and the greedy developmental plans etc. In short, pressing an active conscience to the individual.

The dune there certainly would occupy that place within years of wind action on it. But the fact of mobilizing five hundred people for an insignificant action leads us to propose a symbolic burden in this process that is talking about other completely different things to this absurd gesture. In this sense the change and transformation of public space boldly assumes something that usually goes unnoticed in public art, which is no more than the recipient of such parts, actions or works. This recipient is the citizen.

Here is a rigorous commitment towards an idea of society, with a sense of the individual, to the point of resting all the symbolic burden of the action in the very process that shapes the people themselves. Which is developed and executed by them, and at the end the result is certainly unimportant. The important thing is the collective action and the common good. The important thing here is to achieve an idea of democracy and citizen self-esteem by this common action. Just as national emblems and values and shared belonging emerged among citizens.

This is something related with the needs of a country like Peru —with the dictator Fujimori— trying to find an idea of sovereignty. The symbolic power struggle in the social space has become one of the most valued of public art. This is why the symbolic praxis naturally assumed appropriation by the citizenry, who abandons their passive role of spectator to become a regenerative co-author of the symbolic experience.

In this sense every work of public art is inserted into an area of the political-symbolic negotiations that requires a transformation of their cultural status. So When Faith Moves Mountains (2002) activates the emotional memory of a citizenship in construction tries to do it for an unsuccessful national identity. The Peruvian shovelers translate metaphorically, an idea of the reversal, the motion and the movement that serves as an allegory of national identity, of their own land that is displaced by themselves.

As noted by Cuauhtémoc Medina “When faith moves mountains is an application of the Latin American non-developmentalist: an extension of the logic of failure, programmatic dilapidation, utopian resistance, economic entropy and social erosion of the region” (Buck-Morss et al. 2005, p. 179) [5]. Indeed, the action itself reflects the low productivity with a titanic effort that speaks directly to the South American economies, which are the constant expression of failed modernization. However it could be agreed that the purpose of works such as When Faith Moves Mountains (2002) displays moments of collective illusion in a perpetual crisis. These artistic interventions contribute at most a critical or utopian operation that dialogues with a daily reality in the agonizing tragedy of a country.

The moral and political bankruptcy whose reflection is manifested in the economic crisis and widespread poverty stigma has prompted the artistic producers to use postmodern allegory as exemplary figure. This figure allows them to signify the emotion and the moment, and put into play the social contradictions that have led to this untenable situation. In this sense, the questions asked are: is the art able to perform social change? And above all, what an artistic intervention is relevant in a particular situation? And a bit more lengthening the question, in what way you calibrate the addition of a piece of art in a specific space attending to their social and political demands?

Obviously these questions make sense if we consider art as an act or gesture of the social statement. And so and pulling a little more What sense does a work like When Faith Moves Mountains (2002) in the contemporary art market structure? Questions, all of which have been made the artist and collaborators who participated in the piece and that have been resolved with the relevant acceptance of art as an agitator of emotional interstices of the individual. Always with a sober assessment of this in the society that makes us as individuals.

However they venture into this execution process as moments of faith. This logic of the fable that questions the public space through the intervention of the individual in the city has been described by Alýs as “a kind of discursive argument composed of episodes, metaphors or parables, staging the experience of time in Latin America” (Medina, 2007, p. 40) [6]. If we carefully analyze some other works by this artist in relation to public space: the city, and the intervention of the individual or groups, we will realize that any action undertaken within these parameters have a desire to tell stories that draws a whole socio-political awareness. This is clearly evident in The Collector (1990-1992). As Russell Ferguson points out:

*It's a small dog-shaped object and rubber tires, with a magnetized body, which Alýs drags along the streets to collect as it progresses bits and pieces of metal. Here we see a rising preference for the random, for the remains of the city, instead of sweeping modernist rationalism, which had been the first Alýs education as an architect. In addition in this seemingly simple piece, we can see the origins of Alýs's future as a creator of rumors, of urban myths: man driving a magnetic toy dog along the streets of the city (Ferguson, 2009, p. 5) [7].*
In *The Collector* (1990-1992) there is an approach to a kind of environmental sculpture that recovers memory as a dialogic tool between the involved public space and the piece becoming itself. In this regard the abolition of all pretended monumentality and the dynamic character of the piece, when it is displaced around the city, makes it to create a “narrative structure that replaces the iconographic and formal concept of public sculpture by the interaction in the urban context” (Medina, 2001, p. 17) [6].

Then, one would expect from an intervention of this kind that were configured symbolically and socially by the fragments attached to the city. And so in this way make reversible the citizen participation, positioning it as additive, residual to action in itself, and not as constructive of it. Since the symbolic adhesions in *The Collector* (1990-1992) are configuring a civil action with no pretensions to be one. As expressed by Michel de Certeau, “Stories about places are improvised things and are made from the waste of the world” (Ferguson, 2009, p. 6) [7]. Similarly in the action *Tourist* (1996), Alÿs appears in a row with four other men looking for work. Their jobs are written on posters glued to their briefcases: electrician, plumber, gas, painter, plasterer and tourist. The paradox here is obvious. Alÿs himself has described as follows:

> At that moment I think it was about to question or accept the limits of my foreign status of “gringo”. To what extent I can belong to this place? To what extent I can judge? By offering my services as a tourist I oscillated between leisure and work, contemplation and interference. I was checking and denouncing my own condition. Where actually do I find myself? (Fergusson, 2009, p. 4) [7].

Likewise the transgression of art, public space and civic participation reaches high doses of challenge in the work *The Ambassador* (2001). Invited by Harald Szeemann to the XLIX Venice Biennale (2001) and aware of the attention being given to the event in the artistic establishment, Alÿs sent an ambassador, Mr. Peacock (a real peacock) which was housed in a hotel room and was assigned an assistant to attend the Biennnal inaugural festivities. Naturally, this piece makes direct reference to the game of the vanities deployed in the characteristic events. But there is something more important than this defiant gesture, which is the staging of the idea of “the decadent rumour” in an obsolete mythology inherent to the infrastructure and constitution of the Venice Biennale itself. This lies not in the act of sending a peacock to a massive event with very specific characteristics, but the very act of staying away, to admit his inability to intervene in vitiated situations that do not have actual impact in the social space. So his physical reject and his impersonation of a live fable calls into question the very existence of that type of event, and its effectiveness with respect to a particular type of personal project for the social affirmation of its premises. As it is noted by Russell Ferguson: “Given the dogma of modernity, progress and efficiency, he has anecdotes, gestures and parables” (2009, p. 14) [7]. Similarly in 2002 Alÿs made for the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA), the book *Modern Procession* (2002), designed for the occasion of the provisional transfer of the museum from downtown Manhattan to the suburb of Queens. To this end, he organized a procession in the traditional Catholic way, but with icons of modern art, accompanied by horses, a Peruvian live orchestra of musicians, women throwing rose petals and the works of *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, of Picasso, *Femme debout*, of Giacometti, and *Roue de bicyclette*, of Duchamp, on platforms loaded by volunteers. Evidently the wink, here to popular culture and the debate about high and low culture is served with acuity so characteristically present in the works of Alÿs. Similarly the transit and the metaphorical displacement of this “high culture” from the city center to the margins displays the debate on cultural decentralization strategies in which contemporary art is immersed. However, others have seen in this work a complacent desire by Alÿs to preserve the tenets of the institution. In any case the idea of “assisted readymade” seems to throw many doubts about conceptual stability inserted in the social context of this piece. Finally something fundamental that shows Alÿs works, which is the advent of the public to assist in his pieces, by creating the myth. As he points out:

> The myth has nothing to do with the veneration of ideals—or pagan gods, or a political ideology—but rather with performance practice made by the public, which should give the work its meaning and social value (Antón, 2002, p. 147) [8].

**II. Conclusion**

The work of the artist explored here is based on the idea of space and time to set up his artistic articulations and interventions where the fact of cartography, mapping and occupying the space symbolically occurs. Sometimes it is literally as is the case of Francis Alÿs journeys and movements of objects, landforms, and erosions. In spatiotemporal configurations according to David Harvey (1989) [9] the idea of conflict is a continuous process, and there is no grammar, laws or whatever that may govern the development of these spaces in our capitalist society as the conflict may extend thanks to the different clashes of interests extended in time and within the interests of individuals. Then the idea of conflict in the artistic proposals discussed here becomes an act of deterritorialization and symbolic reterritorialization that is observed as inherent dynamics in the process of occupation of space by the artist. Somehow from the appropriation of existing spatiotemporal discourses the work of Alÿs produce what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) [10] have termed a deterritorialization: Because the “absolute deterritorialization” doesn’t exist if there is no a reinterpretation, a reconsideration of space-time, that is a symbolic reterritorialization.
References


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