



FABULATION AS DESIGN

Germana Konrath¹
Paulo Edison Belo Reyes²

Objective: In urban planning, the idea of designing not only space but also time is fundamental and transformative, given its implications for the way we think and produce cities. In this sense, the article seeks to explore different methods of urban design based on a temporal matrix.

Method and theoretical framework: We bring forth two poetic actions developed by the contemporary artist Francis Alÿs, where the concepts of fable and project are present. Alÿs's poetics (empiricism) are discussed here and intersected with theoretical concepts from a literature review, highlighting the notion of the right to the city from Henri Lefebvre, the understanding of utopia from Ernst Bloch, and the concept of politics from Jacques Rancière.

Results and conclusion: Alÿs's works borrow from literature their quality of adaptation. Oral accounts can both intensify and reiterate a story and allow each part to accommodate itself in new contexts. Thus, fables adapt to each situation where they are told, like nomads. Empiricism opens up possibilities that span literature, visual arts, philosophy, and urban planning.

Implications of the research: The text enhances a dialogue between poetics, aesthetics, ethics, and politics. It is not a methodology for improving or presenting projects; rather, it is a possible path to initiate new thoughts and design practices for the contemporary city.

Originality: The understanding of fabulation as urban design within a broader perspective of design practice and its impact on the built environment.

Keywords: Fabulation, Urban Design, Right to the City, Francis Alÿs.

FABULAÇÃO COMO PROJETO

RESUMO

Objetivo: Em urbanismo a ideia de projetar não apenas o espaço, mas o tempo, é fundamental e transformadora, visto suas implicações para a maneira como pensamos e produzimos cidades. Neste sentido, o artigo busca explorar diferentes métodos de projeto em urbanismo a partir de uma matriz temporal.

Método e referencial teórico: Trazemos duas ações poéticas, desenvolvidas pelo artista contemporâneo Francis Alÿs, onde o conceito de fábula e de projeto se fazem presentes. A poética de Alÿs (empíria) é aqui discutida e atravessada por conceitos teóricos, oriundos de revisão bibliográfica, destacando-se a noção de direito à cidade, de Henri Lefebvre; o entendimento de utopia para Ernst Bloch e o de política para Jacques Rancière.

Resultados e conclusão: Os trabalhos de Alÿs tomam emprestado da literatura sua qualidade de adaptação. Relatos orais tanto podem intensificar e reiterar uma história quanto permitir que cada parte se acomode em novos contextos. Assim, as fábulas se moldam a cada situação onde são contadas, como nômades. A empíria abre possibilidades que atravessam literatura, artes visuais, filosofia e urbanismo.

¹ Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil,
E-mail: germana.konrath@gmail.com Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1676-8199>

² Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil,
E-mail: paulo.reyes@ufrgs.br Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0198-1800>



Implicações da pesquisa: O texto potencializa um diálogo entre poética, estética, ética e política. Não se trata de uma metodologia para melhor finalizar ou apresentar projetos, outrossim um possível caminho por onde iniciar novos pensamentos e práticas projetuais para a cidade contemporânea.

Originalidade: O entendimento da fabulação como projeto, dentro de uma perspectiva mais ampla da prática projetual e seu impacto para o ambiente construído.

Palavras-chave: Fabulação, Projeto Urbano, Direito à Cidade, Francis Alÿs.

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1 INTRODUCTION

In urbanism and, specifically, in urban planning, the idea of designing not just space, but time — and with time — is fundamental and essentially transformative, given its implications for the way we perceive, produce, experience and record the urban environment. In this sense, it is worth exploring different ways and methods of facing the project. One of them, defended in this article, is the understanding of fabulation as a project, within a broader vision of projectual practice.

The text starts from a philosophical and poetic vision to debate the distinct temporalities of the current (and current) urban project. In this research the project is studied not as a product or synthesis, but mainly as an exercise of problematization and critical production and knowledge policy in the urban environment. Some principles guide the research from which this article is extracted: the idea of project as process; the crossing between theory and practice to create new ways of thinking about the city; the non-segmentation between disciplinary fields for a better understanding and creation of new urban practices - especially the contributions of poetic productions - and, finally, the political vision of the design processes and their transforming potential for the socio-economic and cultural environment of the cities in which we live today.

Within this perspective, the article introduces the idea of fabulation from two poetic actions developed by the Belgian-Mexican artist, Francis Alÿs, as an invitation to critical reflection on the theme. The first work to be debated is called *Quando la fe mueve montañas*, dating from 2002 and was carried out in the city of Lima, Peru; the second, *Barrenderos*, is from 2004 and took place in Mexico City. It is hoped that these two works may bring a type of thinking about the project that recovers a more open and less deterministic dimension, incorporating time and fictional narrative as constituent elements of projectual making while updating and making sense of what is to come in our cities.

This text is based theoretically on a vision of design as an open process, as difference, heterogeneity and constituted by a future. The analysis of two artistic actions will bring new ramifications on the understanding of fabulation in the initial theoretical structure, mainly with regard to its ways of manifesting, representing and, above all, presenting different possibilities, necessarily multiple and dissensual, in the thinking of the project. Or, as Jacques Rancière would say, referring to the aesthetic regime of the arts: "possible ways of doing, forms of visibility, modes of thinking, their possible and their modes of transformation" (2009, p. 13).



2 THEORETICAL GROUNDS

The political vision of the city is based on three authors: Henri Lefebvre and his conception of the right to the city; Ernst Bloch and his understanding of utopia; and finally Jacques Rancière and his understanding of aesthetics, politics and sharing. The right to the city emerges as a value of experience of public space and utopian content will be linked to the capacity of fabulation as a design power. The project - be it architectural or urban - in this case, it comes loaded with power: launching power of the new, the dissensual, the heterogeneous. The fable arises here as the creation of other possible scenarios, others thinkable and others imaginable in our cities. The project as fabulation is opposed to the idea of *genius loci* and comes to question the perception that a given place has a unique and consensual vocation to be explored by the project. To explore this hypothesis, we will address the multiple projectual possibilities that present themselves in the urban situations worked through the poetic actions of Alÿs.

Henri Lefebvre, in analyzing the historical course of post-industrial cities, passing through the so-called consumer society, which he reinterprets as a "bureaucratic society of directed consumption", argues that "the human being needs to accumulate energies and the need to spend them, and even to waste them in the game" (2008, p. 105). The author points out that far beyond the specific needs, met minimally by functional urban equipment, there persists and stands out a need not foreseen in the planning, absent in the projects, a fundamental need for creative activity, playful, generating works of art and symbolic goods, imaginary and not just material goods, objectives and consumables.

According to Lefebvre, urbanists, architects, sociologists and politicians are not capable of creating social relations — at the most, they can facilitate or make difficult their formulation. These relationships, when produced, take place from the *everyday praxis*, being promoted in our living spaces-times, in our social life, in the public space. Lefebvre argues that the isolation and classification of knowledge in the piecemeal sciences do not reflect the needs of the city and of urban life, the results of which must encompass possibilities of encounters and exchanges not directed by consumption, not regulated by market value, but rather by its more subjective set. The author believes that the object of science called urbanism — which is to say, the city — is also not a determined, static object. On the contrary, it involves the past, the present and the possible at the same time. It declares that the city is a virtual object.

It is relevant to this research its placement, which links *future* to the idea of *possibility* and the of *city* to that of the *virtuality* to be updated constantly. The author suggests a possible role for architects, urbanists and other professionals who are usually in charge of planning the cities, indicating that, individually or in a group, these professionals could "clear the way, propose, try, prepare forms and [...] inventory the experience obtained, draw lessons from the failures, help the delivery of the possible through the nurtured maieutic of science" (2008, p. 109). The author thus signals the hope of a rescue by means of art that could be occupied precisely with this future, in creations not only artistic, but urban, on a social scale, transforming daily practices into ways of living the city as a work of art, of belonging to the urban thing.

Here comes the artistic production of Alÿs, who plays in his works with the idea of failure, the myth of Sisyphus³, undermining the moralistic notion of happy ending. In distinct poetic actions, Alÿs ironizes the project of modernity imposed on the Latin American countries, which seem to be always in search of its peak without ever reaching it, falling back on what many call failure or even absurdity. This irony is present

³ Sisyphus is a Greek mythological character who is condemned to push a stone to the top of a mountain in a cyclical and continuous manner. Every time it is about to reach the summit, the rock rolls again to the foot of the mountain, in a repeated movement, driven by irresistible and invisible forces that make Sisyphus's work and effort go. Alÿs evokes the Greek narrative in works such as *Rehearsal* and *Politics of rehearsal*, *The last Clown*, among others, beyond those studied in this article.



in *La fe mueve montañas*, as we will see, and in so many other works of the artist. Here it is worth asking the following questions, to be confronted with the works of Alÿs: what contribution can we point, from the point of view of the urban project, in artistic actions whose background is tied to the idea of "failure" or "childbirth of the possible" as prescribed by Lefebvre? What possibilities do we have to keep alive the meaning of symbolic and political participation in the city?

Lefebvre's thought finds intersection with some of Bloch's ideas about the utopian impulse and the future. Bloch, a German philosopher recognized for his legacy regarding the concepts of utopia and hope, works with the idea of *desiderium* (very close to the fundamental needs described by Lefebvre) and rescues the complexity that the meaning of the term utopia requires, fleeing from restrictive and castrating classifications.

In view of the scope of interpretations to which the concept of utopia has been submitted since its creation in 1516, as the title of the book by Thomas Morus, it is worth reproducing here one of Bloch's definitions, for whom "utopia is not something fanciful, simple product of the imagination, but has a real basis, with functions open to the restructuring of society, obliging the militancy of the subject, engaged in concrete changes, aiming at the new society" (2005, v. 2, p. 36). This perspective differs from the usual conceptions that identify the utopian impulse with escapism or absence of real substrate and that tend to fall into the trap of the term that, when detaching itself from the surrounding reality, also ceases to commit itself to its unfolding in time, magically connecting itself to an ideal tomorrow, in a vague and comfortable hope, alienating the subject that precisely wants to mobilize.

The philosopher uses the ideas of utopian impulse and active waiting as transforming matrices to overcome what is presented to us as the natural course of events. For him, these are concepts that must be operated in such a way that the linearity of the historical narrative does not impose itself as if by chance. Based on Marxist theories, the author states that often the function of utopia is to create projections in a "non-place" (*u-topos*), but only to overcome the obscurity of the instant that imposes itself before us. This would be one of the possible functions of a project.

The utopian impulse does not identify itself with the depreciative meaning of that which is unfounded, unreflective, but rather with a daytime dream or, even, to dream forward. By using these terms, the author announces a state of consciousness, vision and projection, arguing that such vision seeks, precisely, to escape from the blind spot that conceals the authentic present. Bloch, when he characterizes utopia, identifies it with an activating feeling, motivating people to take part in the process and not accept the facts as if we were living in a palace of fatalities. In the words of the philosopher, "man is someone who still has a lot ahead of him. In his work and through it, he is constantly remodeled. He is constantly at the forefront, overcoming limits that are no longer limits; becoming aware of them, he overtakes them" (2005, v. 1, p. 243). It is, therefore, a collective exercise of projection towards what may come to be beyond possible immediate and circumstantial blockages that may hinder our projectual vision.

Daytime dreams therefore anticipate what is possible, are proactive in satisfying desires and circulate in what "has never been experienced as a present" (BLOCH, 2005, v. 1, p. 116). Here it is worth asking whether Alÿs, in saying that he is driven by a profound inability to understand, is in a way producing artistic fables from utopian impulses. Bloch encourages this development in the direction of the new, which demands a real and individual participation, which emancipates the individual so often captured in the wake of clichés from our society. Such an approach reveals to us the power of utopian impulse as a force opposed to propaganda, to prefabricated images, to agreements of the established order. After all, it is a liberating, transgressing feeling, very potent as part of a genuinely creative process.



In Alÿs's book *In a given situation*, we can read, right on the front pages, the following words "*The meaning of things is never stable. Anything can mean anything*⁴." This idea of non-restriction is further reinforced by the artist when he mentions that "the concepts are timeless. Open, therefore lasting, continuous. That cannot be said, that they are merely enactable" (ALÿS, 2010, s.p.). It is this kind of understanding of the concepts, including that of utopia and that of the right to the city, that interests us in this article, which aims to update these terms and conceptions from the actions of Alÿs to extrapolate its field of action and then propose fabulation as a possible way of projecting in urbanism.

This perspective of Bloch, in which utopia is a kind of impulse of desire in the present tense, is allied with the notion of heterotopy in Foucault. For Foucault heterotopia is another space: the materialization of other times in real spaces, for example, which find their update in the present. Heterotopias would be spaces completely alien to the rules and conformations that dictate all the rest of the space system where they are inserted, obeying parameters "foreign" to their environment, often linked to heterochronies. Some heterotopies have emerged as places to harbor moments of biological crisis, such as the onset of puberty, pregnancy, old age or, more contemporaneously, crises of behavioral deviation such as prisons and hospices; others, still, to support spaces where time does not flow following the daily chronology (in the case of museums, cemeteries etc.). Heterotopies would, as a rule, be isolated systems, not integrated into society, whose inputs and outputs are always controlled.

Simultaneously, Foucault tells us that there are heterotopies that seem open, but that as we enter them, we realize we are in an illusion.

This is where we find, without a doubt, the most essential thing that exists in heterotopias. They are the contestation of all other spaces, a contestation that can be exercised in two ways: either as in the houses of tolerance that Aragon spoke of, creating an illusion that denounces all the rest of reality as illusion, or, on the contrary, creating another real space so perfect, so meticulous, as well disposed as ours is disordered, badly placed, disarranged. FOUCAULT, 2013, p. 28.

Here, it is worth redeeming the question that Alÿs self-imposes: "is it possible that an artistic intervention truly brings an unforeseen way of thinking, or is it more a matter of creating a sense of 'nonsense' that shows the absurdity of the situation?" (ALÿS in FERGUSON, 2007, p. 39, our translation). Both Alÿs and Foucault point to those actions that, by creating something extremely out of context, end up demonstrating the absurdity or illusion of the very surrounding reality in which we are immersed to the point of even perceiving them. The creation of utopias or heterotopies is first and foremost a criticism of those situations which are present and which seem to us to be inadequate and undesirable. This was certainly Morus' primary intention in writing about the island of Utopia as opposed to his (still feudal) England of the 19th century. XVI.

From this theoretical legacy, we propose to investigate, in the artistic production of Alÿs, elements that can be identified with the utopian (or heterotopic) impulse. We ask the following questions: would Alÿs' works be closer to the presence of an active waiting, a waiting position (really utopian and mobilizing) or projections that keep us in an inert position, of false participation? What are the contributions and consequences of the poetic actions for those who come into contact with them and who keep themselves beyond the discourse of the artist?

The artistic actions of Alÿs that we will see next have this ability to provoke utopian impulses collectively, generating political thought. It is a sensibility placed at the service of the

⁴ Whose translation presented in the book is "The meaning of things is never stable. Something may want to say something," but the translation that we think best expresses the idea would be, "The meaning of things is never stable. Anything can mean anything."



common, of what Rancière would call *sharing the sensitive*, in the sense of sharing, but also of highlighting differences and exclusions. Rancière argues that aesthetics is the basis of politics and that it is not defined as the theory of art but rather as a specific regime of identification and thoughts of the arts: a way of articulating ways of doing and ways of reflecting their relations.

The philosopher speaks to us about aesthetic acts as provocateurs and inducers of new experiences of political subjectivity and defines "art as witness of the encounter with the unrepresentative that baffles all thought" (2009, p. 12). The author also argues that the esthetic regime of the arts is responsible for determining possible - possible ways of doing, modes of visibility and modes of thinking - and their modes of transformation. Such a perspective corroborates our defense of fabulation as a project, given its multiple narrative possibilities, creating power for the project in its most distinct forms (of making, presenting and, mainly, being thought).

Rancière starts from the premise that every act is political and that before any rationality there is a sensibility. Aesthetics, therefore, would permeate all the political process and art would be the field most accustomed to this exploration of the possible, of the creation of contours for what until then is unnameable for the intelligible and for the rational, being an anticipator of what may come to be and of what the sensibility has already intuited. He therefore aligns himself with Bloch's view of the future when he comments on the social and political need for utopian projects.

Rancière advocates the existence of two forms of political understanding: the first as a construction by agreement and the second as a development based on dissent. The author questions the notion of politics as a consensus and that we are all starting from a common sensibility. According to him, "aesthetics and politics articulate themselves by giving visibility to the hidden, reconfiguring the division of the sensitive and making dissent evident" (2012, p. 136). Here the philosopher opens the discussion about dissent, indicating that it is not only a lack of shared goals or affinities, but rather a previous step, in which the very data of the situation, the subjects involved, the forms of inclusion or exclusion, which is sensitive to a situation, after all, is liable to disagreement.

By coining the term *sharing the sensitive*, Rancière poses the following question: what is common and what is shared, in the sense of excluding the aesthetic experiences of a community? Who is excluded by the system (either because they do not have the time, are not in the space in question - the *poli* - or because they do not have the tools or even the language required)? In this sense, is it worth questioning whether aesthetic actions such as the ones proposed by Alÿs that we will see below would be able to create contours and evidence disagreements or even suspend agreements? In what way? And in what way are the notions of politics, of common knowledge and of sharing the sensitive in the works of the artist intermingled?

3 METHODOLOGY

Alÿs' poetic actions are considered, within the context of this research, to be empiria. This empiria will be debated in the light of the theoretical concepts, by crossings from an exhaustive bibliographic review of the authors already mentioned and their main concepts, updated here in order to make them operational to the study. The empirical approach is mostly based on direct sources (first person, from professional experiences in the field of arts, curation, management and cultural production). To this less mediated approach are added other layers, by means of reading the critical fortune of the artist, both through exhibition catalogs and books produced by the artist with curators and intellectual partners, which help to contextualize and deepen the poetic actions presented here.



Francis Alÿs was born Francis de Smedt in Antwerp in 1959. He graduated as an architect in Belgium and, in the first half of the 1980s, moved to Venice in order to develop his doctorate in Urbanism. During his time in Italy, Francis came across the town of Palmanova, known for its star-shaped design typical of fortified military settlements. The site had been used during the Republic of Venice (around 1593) as a defense warehouse. In studying the city and thinking about possible interventions in the place, absolutely isolated, crystallized and desolate, Francis had a sort of epiphany: he realized that, in a city like that, which he classified as a dysfunctional utopia, no material should be added, whether it be for the sake of architecture, art or urbanism. The apathy of its inhabitants nor the external perception about Palmanova would be truly altered by summation interventions, especially in the present. What could be transformative in that place would be an intervention in the past or, more precisely, in the history of the city. Thus Francis created a fable to be grafted into the memory of the place.

Ten years later, in 1995, already established in Mexico City, the artist created the following subtitle for one of his projects, called *Fairy Tales*: "While the highly rational societies of the Renaissance felt the need to create utopias, we of our times must create fables". In this project, Alÿs walked through the Mexican capital making his jacket shade, in such a way that in his trajectory he left a trail behind him, formed by a thread of wool, while his clothes fell apart. He thus created his fable, coming close to other stories about processes of recognition and loss (or possibility of return), such as the tale of the brothers Grimm, *John and Mary*, or the Greek myth about the Ariadne thread and the labyrinth of the Minotaur.

Fiction plays a fundamental role in Alÿs's trajectory from an early age, and the creation of fables arises as a possibility of urban intervention in different forms, through distinct insertion and application tactics. For Alÿs, fiction does not occupy a smaller space or subordinate to reality. On the contrary, reality is necessarily shaped by our imagination and by our memory. Thus, the future can be changed if we intervene in the past, but not in the past, or in the narratives about the past, transforming them. A fable inserted into the memory of the city would be capable of altering, in the present, the *modus operandi* and the vision of its inhabitants about it.

After finishing his doctorate in Venice, Francis moved to Mexico in 1986. Aiming to escape the army, he opts to participate in a Belgian government aid program to the country, which had been drastically affected by the 1985 earthquake. He worked as an architect in southern Mexico for a few years, and in 1989, he was captured by the immense and chaotic City of Mexico, where he has lived ever since. Francis de Smedt, architect, becomes Francis Alÿs, creating for himself not only a new name, but a new activity. He became more and more an artist and, to the extent of his possibilities, more and more Mexican. This is how a long trajectory begins, marked by both physical and conceptual displacements. Alÿs moves away from European standards of harmony, planning, urban hygiene and culture, to dive into the unknown, plural and disturbing Mexican context, as the artist himself comments (ALÿS in FERGUSON, 2007).

His initial propositions are strongly influenced by the feeling of non-belonging, by the figure of the foreigner, referring to the fact that Alÿs is always the "Other" in the Latin American metropolis that he chose to live. In this regard, the artist himself sentences "the first works - I would not call them works - my first images or interventions were, to a large extent, a reaction to Mexico City itself, means to situate myself in this colossal urban entity" (ALÿS in FERGUSON, 2007, p. 8, our translation). Alÿs starts not only from his need for identification, albeit by contrast, but also observes how the other inhabitants of the city create "characters" for this purpose, seeking to differentiate themselves and, at the same time, to be located in the city. The artist understands the creation of identity and urban personages as an unfolding of the fables and narratives that interest him so much.



For Alÿs, what occurs between the bodies is more relevant than isolated authorial propositions. The artist himself is the one who sentences that "I would rather not start at the beginning or at the end. I would have to work from some point in the middle, because it is the middle point, the between, the space where I work best" (ALÿS in FERGUSON, 2007, p. 42, our translation). There is also a clear positioning of Alÿs refractory to modern imagery with its often positivist scientific premises. The figures of the essay that never becomes a presentation and of non-teleological projects are behind all of his poetics. Alÿs reinforces a position of not working in search of results or the conclusion of his propositions. It's as if he used tautology to refute teleology.

His posture is to launch short scripts, usually just a clear and concise utterance, without further explanation. A statement that can survive, however, all possible mutations and gain a life of its own, starting from collaborations and developments that may come about. In this way, each project starts from a quick script or a unique image, but the development of each action depends on the interpretations of those who are included in the creative process, from conception to execution or in the registration of the work. Some operations are orchestrated by Alÿs, but open enough that they are coordinated by the invited collective to participate in the project, in a rhizomatic structure and in constant transformation.

The process comes close to what Reyes (2015) defends by talking about the project he does not designate. Reyes states that, contrary to design and design that are made by the imposed trace, from outside to inside, creating edges and therefore exclusion, the design processes that do not designate would be paths to a form of sustainability. A utopian breath in the thinking of professionals of urbanism, for example, when they place themselves in the position of participating proponents, of provocateurs of situations that take place dynamically, creating the conditions necessary for the form to result from internal tensions in the process, and not from a drawing made *a priori*.

Within the trajectory of Alÿs we selected two actions that seem to us to better address this and the other issues raised in this article. We start from the intention of consolidating the points most pertinent to urbanism and the possible fruits of this production for the right to the city, through utopian impulses identified in such contemporary artistic practices capable of creating new common spaces, sharing the *polis*. We seek, in this way, to relate the poetic work of the artist with a possible way of doing a project, starting from the idea of fabulation.

3.1 Cuando la fe mueve montañas - Lima, 2002

Arriving at Ventanilla, a landscape unfolds between mountains, formed by dunes and arid fields. The place, without electric light or running water and with the most polluted air among all the Latin American capitals, could be a setting of the *Mad Max* film series, with its dystopian and post-apocalyptic cargo. But it is a district of Lima, the Peruvian capital: it is part of its periphery. More than 70 thousand people live there in 2002. It is in this context that Alÿs proposes his action.

The artist creates a short script, a kind of fable, inviting 500 volunteers among local residents and university students to come together, armed with shovels, to move a dune, approximately 500 meters in diameter. The idea is that, in line, each one occupies his meter of dune and moves, with his shovel, the sand that is in front of him. All together, in a collective rhythm, exhaustive, under the sun, all day long, advance.

By nightfall, the intention to move the dune a few inches forward is estimated to have been reached. At the end of the day, no penny was earned, 500 tired volunteers and a dune half a kilometer long that, in a few seconds and at the taste of the winds, could recede the ten centimeters advanced. None of the more than 70,000 residents have been relocated; on the contrary, they remain part of the population of 2,623,000 people who live in slums in Lima



(equivalent to 31% of its population), in one of its more than 2,000 *young pueblos*, as these peripheral settlements are called by the Peruvians. Alÿs and his collaborators, however, seemed accomplished.

Alÿs plays with the paradoxes to open up new reading keys to the urban realities found and, perhaps, create new realities in this quixotic work commissioned by the Lima Biennale from the artist a few years earlier. The artist turns to the periphery, walks towards the edges of the city, reaches the limits of the urban. From a new point of view, Alÿs stresses this tension between the extremes, this duality when the structuring of the system reaches its maximum, causing effects opposite to its objectives. Speaking of the place he chose to carry out his collective action, Alÿs stresses the importance of Ventanilla as an icon of a convulsed city, of political and socioeconomic tension, but also cultural and urban.

According to him, "Lima kept pushing these dunes along for decades. This constant enlargement of the city's extremities is the result of its inevitable conversion into a megalopolis" (ALÿS; MEDINA, 2005, p. 49): process that would naturally make it exile its landscape, in the words of the artist. Thus, the Latin American metropolises have become a burden for themselves: cities that weigh on men and on the ground. As a reverse effect of the promised development, progress generates "potholes" and wedges of the urban meshes, physical and subjective voids. Images of lightness and mobility, like the sand of the desert, appear in this scenario almost like mirages.

It is worth remembering that it was from the difference perceived by the artist in the interim that separated his first from his second visit to Lima, between 2000 and 2002, that Alÿs glimpsed the processes of gentrification of urban centers in a more evident way, as the artist tells us (2007). In relation to this movement of the proletariat and the poorest layers in the capitalist economy, Lefebvre says that the ideology that brings with it a total urbanism, a unitary system to be implemented through a global strategy, is nourished by the primacy of technique over the human factor, as he calls it. This scientific pretension will justify the processes of creating centers of power and their peripheries.

The peripheries would thus be orbiting these centers, starting from a dispersed distribution or distribution, though not random; apparently chaotic, but resulting from coercive forces foreseen and in a high degree predetermined by the system. As Alÿs identified: the matrix of cities in Latin America seems to be the very absence of planning. When confronted with this reality, the artist sought to produce new common spaces: neither imposed urban planning nor nihilistic deurbanization, something new, at the height of the universe. Thus, he resumed the political sense of aesthetics and art defended by Lefebvre and Rancière.

In Lima, Alÿs again performs an apparently meaningless action, a move by moving, and this time, summoning hundreds of people. It turns waste into excess. Excessive force, participation, views, affections, alterations and expectations. With her quixotic poetics, Alÿs works from a real situation to institute in her a world, something that is not yet configured or not yet known, but that the artist installs through a condition of possibility, fabulous.

By engaging the volunteers and moving the dune a few centimeters into Ventanilla, Alÿs reveals the lack of meaning of that imposed classification of social misery. It does not intend to fill this void, which can be an emptying of the cities, as Lefebvre understands, or of the absence of meaning of our routines and works, generating an agenda where we are all extras of our own lives. Or even the transformation of our time into an empty and alienating concept of domestic or peripheral work, which excludes us from public life, as Rancière criticizes. The artist does not replace emptiness with images, he does not esthetize a social and political situation through a work of art. On the contrary, it creates a new social situation from the proposed aesthetic experience - a kind of social sculpture - and, through it, it clears avenues of possibilities, allows to channel energies and hopes to create new truths and shared senses for that context.



In *Cuando la fe mueve montañas*, Alÿs proposes the collective invention of a fable that creates a void from a situation saturated to the extreme. This operation allows the generation of inaugural spaces, game spaces that make it habitable, precisely in those places where the system generated an overload, making them suffocating. Ironically, the place called Ventanilla (little window/doorway) seems to have no openings, to be buried between dunes and mountains, to be left over in the city, which tries to hide it and bury it. Alÿs and his group air this place, making it a breathable space. The accounts diversify the story, in such a way that the memory becomes an anti-museum, precisely because it is neither perceivable nor localizable. This is the intention of Alÿs when he seeks to create his fables; and if he records his actions through different media, it is so that these accounts can circulate, spreading his range of activity beyond the traditional limits of the artistic milieu.

3.2 Barrenderos - Mexico City, 2004

Every day hundreds of street vendors and camels occupy the central streets of the Mexican capital. Its presence is massive and its practices are part of a street trading tradition rooted in local culture. Every night these peddlers and camels leave the center, taking with them their carts, tents, tents and products. But they leave waste, bark, refuse behind them, as a testimony of their existence. Every morning, the garages that transform these remains into cleaning, in absence, come into action. One more day begins, the scene repeats itself: presence-residue-cleaning-absence. The cycle is interrupted when, one night, an invitation is issued to the scanners found along the way. The proposal, made by Alÿs, is that the garris organize themselves in a group and the group in a line, pushing the remains with their brooms, forming a single, large and dense block of garbage, to the point where they can no longer move it.

We can think of Alÿs's proposal regarding the right to the city from a reading that points to the processes of expulsion of the proletariat and "odd jobs" of urban life and its centers of power. It is evident, in *Barrenderos*, that the government institutions failed, already in the year 2004, to implement their project of "revitalization" of the center of the Mexican capital that started in the 1980s. The same process that, at the beginning of the 20th century, used names such as improvement plans, sanitation, sanitation or urban embellishment. Names that sound, at the very least, ironic in the face of Alÿs' poetic action with her scanners. Alÿs shows us the reverse side of this urban "requalification" project, through the accumulation of garbage in the streets of the heart of the city, attesting not only to the presence of those it was intended to exclude, but to their undesirable waste.

In *Barrenderos* "a line is formed, a form of representation that evokes a collectivity and that, for Alÿs, seemed the most effective way of expressing the idea physically" (ALÿS; MEDINA, 2005, p. 30). The idea of a line is present in most of Alÿs' projects, both individually (as in his walks) and collectively. These are lines that draw no limits, on the contrary, they often just blur, subvert these limits, or displace them beyond. So many times are contour lines that the artist draws to make visible something that until then was not put, did not seem revealed or was in latency, as a poetic imminence.

Here we are dealing with a double line: first an alignment of bodies placed side-by-side with their brooms. The line of garris forms a second, garbage. The longer the second line becomes, the more difficult it becomes for the first line to advance, until the second line becomes insurmountable and its volume exceeds that of the first. In the end, creature becomes bigger than creator, so to speak. The process can be read as an allegory to the very *modus operandi* of Alÿs, who in his poetic trajectory seems more and more to allow himself to be contaminated by the collaborators and processes that trigger off.

The operation follows a script initially released by the artist, but is now coordinated by the group itself: from a certain point one loses the notion of a subject or hierarchy. A common



sharing is organized, a collective *agenciamento* that is conformed throughout the process. At the end of the video recording it, Alÿs comments that the action had a much more beautiful unfolding than he had imagined in his project.

Barrenderos (as well as another work by the artist called *Los siete niveles de la basura*) refers to the successive cycles (or levels) involved in the production-consumption-use-disposal process in capitalist cities considered underdeveloped. In them, the very process of discarding and collecting the garbage takes place in a very informal manner and often depends on the work of the garbage collectors. At no point does Alÿs' stance in investigating these proceedings sound moralistic, less even defeatist. It is not a whistleblower. Alÿs reveals the tension between anonymous and subtle operations, carried out by the population individually and strategic actions carried out within institutionalized rules, through works that propose other forms of appropriation: garbage, public space, time in cities.

Alÿs contributes to pointing out dissensions present in that scenario, by creating a fictional script that later takes place in the public space, exposing its idiosyncrasies and revealing subjects, uses and forms of expression hidden or not yet explored in this political *locus*. Here fictionality is, as Rancière states, "the power of significance inherent in things that change and the potentialization of discourses and levels of significance" (2009, p. 55). The artist generates with the *garis* and other participants of the action a way of sharing the sensitive, around one more of its absurd, quixotic proposals; but that reveals itself extremely political in its displaced beauty.

It is disconcerting to see the joy or sense of gratification present in the faces and testimonies gathered both as part of the documentation of *Barrenderos* and *Cuando la fe mueve montañas*. Disconcerting because we know that the practical result of Alÿs' action has little to do with the continuously pursued image of a "happy ending". It is challenging to think how strenuous work that requires dedication, time and physical strength, plus a participation without any material gain, can still generate such a positive sensation by resulting in an unsurpassable mountain of garbage or the ephemeral displacement of a few inches of sand. But this is exactly what these actions are about: in their movements of existing or created mountains, they go in the opposite direction to the happy ending of the novel.

According to Bloch, this happy ending made of illusion is easily captured by capitalism and simultaneously easy to absorb by the population, who feel attracted by its brightness and image of happiness that requires no change of reality to be achieved. "However, by covering with shame the indolent optimism, knowledge does not cover with shame also the urgent hope of the happy ending. For this hope is founded on the human impulse to happiness and can hardly be destroyed" (BLOCH, 2005, v. 1, p. 430). The author postulates that it is enough for this impulse to be endowed with clarity and a certain awareness (daytime dreams) to turn itself into the motor of society and to create reasons for a struggle that change the monotonous course of the dominant narratives.

For the philosopher, this utopian impulse was strong enough to create, in various historical episodes, paradoxes and to provide victories of joy over perversion. This seems to be the impulse to move Alÿs and create this rewarding sensation in those who engaged in the movements provoked in *Barrenderos* or *Cuando la fe mueve montañas*. According to Lefebvre, "there is no doubt that knowledge of urban reality can affect the possible (or the possibilities) and not only the finished or the past" (2008, p. 43).

When he leaves the urban centers and walks towards the periphery, to the edges of the city or to the margins of a nation, Alÿs carries out in practice what Lefebvre sketches in theory, perhaps in an even more provocative way, if it makes sense to make such a comparison. It is not content with registering, questioning or problematizing the emptying of the traditional nuclei of the *poli*, the gentrification of its centers, the peripheralization or the banishment of part of the population of the urban agora. He also seeks, in his poetic trajectory, to realize the



opposite movement: instead of remaining in the center complaining about the presence of those who were excluded, he goes to meet them, encouraging their participation, creating new public spaces, new centers and possibilities for inclusion in the city, beyond those established. Alÿs states that "nothing has changed, but the possibility of change has been introduced for a few hours, beyond the absurdity and futility of the act" (ALÿS; MEDINA, 2005, p. 105).

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

When Alÿs began his artistic career, he started small interventions in building windows, then in the street, in the city's central square, until he reached the edge of the urban, and finally on the land-sea border. It is not a linear outward movement in a single, one-way process. Alÿs continues to reterritorialize, return and produce more "circumscribed" works in urban space throughout his career. It is noteworthy, however, the expansion in the range of work of his projects. Rather than encompassing geographical territories that are increasingly moving towards the periphery, this movement raises questions as to the conceptual limits that delimit what the city and the public space are.

We accompanied the artist in this movement and started to perceive the urban public space not only as the street, the sidewalk, the square constituted in the center of the city: we widened our conception to encompass the perimeter of the megalopolis with its indefinite edges. We are moving towards an understanding of the sand dunes, of the beaches, as common spaces. The city becomes that space-time where society projects itself, both physically and symbolically. As Lefebvre writes, the city "[...] is also a time, or several times, rhythms [...] the city as being the set of differences between cities." (2008, p. 62).

If Alÿs walks towards the borders, we follow him and take the concept of the city - of what is urban - with us, supported by the legacy of Lefebvre. Often, the city also grows in radial expansion movements, almost by circles, from its former nuclei. The idea of the periphery is always relative, and as the city advances, what used to be a frontier can become a periphery, what used to be a periphery is often transformed into a center, and so on. The megalopolis alters the relations between nucleus and margin, between urban and non-urban, thickening and dispersion.

Here it is worth stressing the second aspect present in the description of Lefebvre, which finds echo in the poetic production of Alÿs: the city is not only the space, it is also the time in which social actions project themselves. By moving forward in physical urban space, moving outward from its initial radius in terms of temporal occupation, the artist takes us to a level beyond. Not only dilatations or radial enlargements - the passage of time for Alÿs appears to be infinitely cyclical, dimensionless. While the territory of his actions may be gradually expanded, the duration of his works is shown to be amenable to eternal repetition, but a repetition that each time brings a new quality, to the point that it cannot be measured or summed in its spaces and durations. Identifying the beginning and the end of the artist's actions therefore becomes a vain work, siphon. The projects connect to each other, generating a continuous and simultaneously multiple universe, which changes nature each time, like a fable or tale from the book *The Thousand and One Nights*.

We can even understand this process as part of a story about utopia, which also needs, from time to time, to have its concept and its limits updated, recontextualized. Alÿs' actions, driven by utopian impulses, develop on the scale of the city. The artist dialogs with the surrounding reality: part of daily life, and not of an image projected in a distant space-time as before. The basic structure changes, the scale goes from the global utopia to the urban micro-utopia and the questions become different: we move from a directed emphasis on *what* to inhabit to a look at *how* to inhabit.

Alÿs' contribution in this panorama may be his way of inhabiting the city, always placing



himself on the threshold: between observation and participation, between local and foreign, between work and leisure, between author and spectator, between central and peripheral. The artist spatializes both the city and its banks, its voids and deserts. By creating lines with the thread of his sweater, with ice traces or with volunteers, Alÿs reminds us that the politico-geographical traces are arbitrary in the majority and that it will be the use over time to reinforce or blur these lines, as will occur with those produced by the artist and his collaborators in their travels. How can we, in our urban practices, cancel or ignore the existence of lines that aim to control our circulation and our access? When he ignores, transposes or crosses limits, Alÿs does not suppress the frontiers, but defatalizes their existence, questions their permanence and duration, allows a less reverent attitude in the face of the imposed limits - in art, in the very idea of fields of knowledge, in the limits of the urban and in the national frontiers. Maybe that's one way.

Alÿs opts, from the beginning of his career, for projects that become fables. The artist favors the process in relation to the final product and, when choosing by a means of circulation of ideas based on orality, underlines this non-patrimonialist intention of his actions. By choosing an alternate story - that of orality - Alÿs opts once again for a story made of flesh and not of skeletons. Rumors and rumors that go from mouth to mouth make up and reflect narratives made of duration, of gifts that do not muse or crystallize, but rather contextualize and update.

By adopting the fable (in the style of Aesop) as the first source of dissemination and contamination of his work, Alÿs breaks down, for different reasons, the colonialist logic and makes possible a common sharing. The first is the realization that all civilizations and all human beings are endowed with speech. There is, in this sense, no alphabet, writing or something to be learned - no filter is created to have access to some information. The only premise of this sharing is the common capacity of speech and listening. The second reason starts from this very point: for an oral narrative to circulate, sharing is necessary. Fables are transmitted orally and therefore require an exchange. Unlike writing, which can be individual, the creation of stories that spread through rumors is imminently collective and procedural, being activated every time it is told. Finally, while writing still presupposes a surface under which to shape the text, sound propagates through means that are around us all the time, such as air or water.

Alÿs indicates that its trajectory can be read as a single narrative that builds on the invention of languages, in which each work is a part of the composition of the city that is continuously mapped and invented. Here we understand that fictionalization can serve to create a name or meaning for something that is not yet set. Something exists in latency and, being invisible to our senses, escapes rationality and hides when we seek to illuminate it in the light of consciousness. This is what ultimately deals with the relationship between Alÿs' poetic actions with the city: the possibility of the artist creating cities, founding spaces, resignifying scenarios. Individually or collectively, Alÿs generates sculptural situations that shape the relationships between different agents, in a dynamic and transformative design exercise.

Alÿs creates, with different weights and resources, narratives with high symbolic and political potential, capable of making us, even momentarily, imagine. They are tactics for thinking utopically, mentally drawing stories, glimpsing narratives and possibilities from platforms set in the here and now, like cities with their common spaces and times. When he makes critical notes in an indirect way, seeking allegorical resources, the artist makes possible an inaugural approach to a given theme, as Morus did in his time.

Put another way, in a world saturated with images and information that aim to reiterate hegemonic discourses, the small immaterial insertions of Alÿs allow us a less protected reading and less burdened with certainties in the face of their actions and records. This is less catchable production by control systems - increasingly impregnated in our relations with the world. From



short statements, devoid of declared morals, or by means of simple - almost childish - designs, Alÿs flees from standardized communication channels and socially prepared blocks, but also from those individual ones, with their tacit prejudices. It's as if the artist were to redeem our capacity for getting close to these images and messages without so many previous filters, in a more porous manner.

With lightness, Alÿs tackles subjects impregnated with commonplaces and forged consensus, such as the dogmas of progress, the processes of urban gentrification, the peripheralization and deurbanization of current cities, as well as conflict situations. The artist resorts to playful imagery, escaping from the usual vocabulary of the media. It thus escapes clichés and spectacularization that often end up dampening the facts, given the accumulation and intensity of images transmitted and the recurrent use of packaging to label those events that do not fit the existing standards. This outpouring of information that we swallow daily, without even digesting, leaves little room for critical reflection.

Starting from a production of aesthetic experiences free of meanings, Alÿs projects allow another type of approach to the questions raised: they deterritorialize the images and vocabularies present in a given situation and thus de-anesthetize our perception, creating bridges. We are faced with a possible exploration of the resource of the fable, with its personages that depersonify the situations, pay the names, allow us to face only what exists behind the veil of previous classifications. It is as if Alÿs managed to access a critical and subjective potential by diverting simulacra and the gratuitousness of ready-made, normative and doctrinal images and speeches. Their actions remove the concepts of inertia, extracting situations of banality and violence forged on the consensus and launch us towards new possible time-spaces and sharing.

5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Finally, Alÿs's works borrow from the literature their quality of adaptation. Oral reports can either intensify and reiterate a story or allow each party to settle into new contexts and be updated to each new situation that presents itself. Thus fables shape themselves to every situation where they are counted, as nomads. Not for nothing, Michel de Certeau is mentioned by the artist, whose trajectory is marked by approximations between the enunciations of speech and of the pedestrian, of grammar and of urban planning. The spaces of enunciation and appropriation between both are similar and assist in the proposed analogies, opening the study to possibilities that traverse literature, visual arts, philosophy and urbanism. The text sought to maintain in tension and dialog these fields, which in some way can mirror the relations between poetics, aesthetics, ethics and politics.

This is perhaps the great utopia of contemporary artists such as Alÿs: to create situations and social sculptures in which the individual and the city are being shaped simultaneously. When we allow ourselves to be heterogeneous, mutable, when we realize that the world's transformations affect us in dynamic and constant agendas, we take a first step towards this understanding of how the city might come to be. At the very least, we have become more permeable to what may arise again in the world and we have allowed ourselves inaugural approaches on certain scenarios. In other words, it is not a methodology for finalizing or presenting projects better, but rather a possible path by which to initiate new thoughts and project practices.

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