Lessons in Futility
Francis Alÿs and the Legacy of May ‘68
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INTRODUCTION

Something very like a theoretical canon, in its influence and uniformity, has emerged in Euro-American art writing over the past decade and a half, informed by the rapprochement between neo-conceptual art practice and poststructuralist theory during the 1990s. It is based on a series of tactical inversions directed at the traditions of Western metaphysics and subjectivity. These include the privileging of dissensus over consenus, rupture and immediacy over continuity and duration, and distance over proximity, intimacy or integration. Other significant features include an extreme scepticism concerning organised political action and a hypervigilance regarding the dangers of co-option and compromise entailed by such action, the ethical normalisation of desire and somatic or sensual experience, and the re-coding of political transformation into a form of ontic disruption directed at any coherent system of belief, agency or identity. It is the specific task of the artist or intellectual to supervise this process through the composition of axiomatic texts (theory, poetry, film, objects, performances, etc) that seek to destabilise the viewer or reader through an essentially individual hermeneutic engagement. Importantly, the work, whether it is a painting, installation or event, is conceived by the artist beforehand and subsequently set in place before the viewer, while the artist’s relationship to the viewer is necessarily distanced and custodial.

This discourse typically operates through a juxtapositional logic in which a ‘good’ form of subjectivity, defined as fluid, open, shifting and incapable of violence, is contrasted with an antithetical form of ‘bad’ subjectivity, defined as fixed, closed, coherent and violently instrumentalising. It is linked in turn with debates in political theory (eg Giorgio Agamben, Jean-Luc Nancy) over the relationship between collective or communal identity (assumed to be always already oppressive and universalising) and a radical singularity that is seen as intrinsically liberatory. Nancy’s writing is emblematic in this regard. Community, for Nancy, can only be ethically constituted if it arises in an instant, in a moment of
‘unworked’ epiphany. As soon as the experience of community involves a durationally extended process of social exchange it descends into mythic essentialism. Thus, Nancy’s ideal community is a ‘workless and inoperative activity. It is not a matter of making, producing or instituting a community’ and ‘Community is given to us – or we are given and abandoned to the community; a gift to be renewed and communicated, it is not a work to be done or produced’.¹ In his understandable desire to foreclose the potential violence of direct inter-subjective exchange, Nancy reduces all human labour (‘work’, ‘making’, ‘production’) to a simple expression of conative aggression, functioning only to master and negate difference. The result is a fetishisation of simultaneity in aesthetic experience (the sublime, shock or disruption), and a failure to conceive of the knowledge produced through durational, collective interaction as anything other than compromised and totalising.

The critique of community has been taken up with particular enthusiasm in recent site-specific and installation-based practices. This passage from Marcus Steinweg’s text for an installation by the Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn rehearses the conventional poststructuralist opposition between a transgressive, uncanny singularity and the universal, logocentric ‘we community’:

We Hyperboreans also means: we, the community of those who are without community, without we-community. We solitary ones. We singularities. We who touch the limits of the Logos that represents the principle of the Western we-community. We who have fallen out of the we-cosmos. We who have separated from the universality of a transcendental community, from the habitable zone of transcendental we-subjectivity. We homeless ones. We arctic natures.²

English critic Claire Bishop writing in the journal October reiterates this juxtapositional logic, contrasting an abject community-based or ‘relational’ art practice with the ‘tougher, more disruptive’ approach of European biennial stalwarts Hirschhorn and Santiago Sierra. ‘The model of subjectivity that underpins their practice’, as Bishop writes, ‘is not the fictitious whole subject of harmonious community, but a divided subject of partial identifications open to constant flux. If relational aesthetics requires a unified subject as a prerequisite for community-as-togetherness, then Hirschhorn and Sierra provide a mode of artistic practice more adequate to the divided and incomplete subject of today’.³ As Bishop’s quote suggests, those forms of identity that appear incoherent, singular, fragmented or partial are viewed as intrinsically superior (regardless of their situational orientation); necessarily preferable to those that are premised on a more coherent, stable or collective sense of self. Here the problematic synchronic bias of poststructuralist theory asserts itself, leading to a tendency to reify states of being. Identity is treated as either static or fluid, coherent or incoherent, stable or de-stabilised, porous or impermeable, singular or collective. In each case ethical privilege is assigned to only one of two fixed positions (an entirely benign, ceaselessly changing, pre-subjective desire on the one hand, and a violent and objectifying drive on the other), and only disruption and fragmentation are seen as epistemologically productive.

There is an implicit linkage here between the fear of more direct forms of social engagement in art and the erosion of authorial autonomy

2. Marcus Steinweg, *WORLDPLAY (Integrated text for Thomas Hirschhorn, Utopia, Utopia = One World, One War, One Army, One Dress)*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, 2005, unpaginated
represented by collaborative or collective practices. The fear stems in each case from a concern that the specificity of art is under assault. In fact, the past decade has witnessed a remarkable proliferation of collaborative, collective and transdisciplinary approaches to art-making. For some commentators this represents a threatening dissolution of art’s cultural status, and its privileged role as an agent of critique. I would describe it instead as evidence of a paradigm shift within the field of art, even as the nature of this shift involves a re-articulation of aesthetic autonomy and an increasing permeability between art and other zones of symbolic production (planning, activism, social work, etc). The growing interest in collaborative and collective practices has highlighted certain disjunctions in the dominant theoretical discourse of contemporary art. I will examine these disjunctions in the following essay, using a project by the Belgian artist Francis Alÿs as a case study to explore some of the operative tensions between the textual paradigm sketched above (the work of art as an event, object or image fabricated by the artist for the viewer’s consumption) and forms of collaborative production that mobilise very different forms of intersubjective affect, identification and agency.

MAY ’68 AND THE THIRD WAY

This ultimate, Utopic, generation is by far the most revolutionary one the system has ever produced.

Angelo Quattrocchi and Tom Nairn (1968)

We encounter a defensive notion of aesthetic autonomy, and a deep-seated suspicion of the tastes and proclivities of the untutored masses, in the early history of cultural modernity. Friedrich Schiller’s *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794), written in the aftermath of the French Revolution, is in large measure a meditation on the impossibility of progressive political change. As demonstrated by the recent ‘events’ in France, man has not yet developed the moral character necessary to overcome his animal nature. As a result, the moment that the iron hand of political domination is lifted he descends into lawlessness and violence. Of course it is not man qua man Schiller is evoking here, but rather, the ‘lower and more numerous classes’ who are possessed by ‘crude, lawless instincts’. ‘We must continue to regard every attempt at political reform as untimely’, Schiller writes, ‘and every hope based upon it as chimerical, as long as the split within man is not healed’. The split is between the ‘cultivated classes’, possessed by a cold, calculating rationality, and the violent, impulsive lower orders, lacking in self-discipline and reason. The state cannot impose a reconciliation of these two opposed forces via external compulsion. Rather, it requires a subtler re-programming; a form of experience that reaches us through our senses and feelings, providing a point of mediation between the rational and the sensual. It requires, in short, an aesthetic education that will simultaneously bring compassion to the cultivated classes and self-discipline to the lower orders.

The *Letters* present all the conventional features of modern aesthetic autonomy. They are less discrete terms than serial moments in an unfolding syllogistic chain, each leading inexorably to the next. First we have
the postulation of a singular moment of historical decline or degradation (the new ‘reign of material needs’). Second, we encounter a profound scepticism regarding the ability of the people to transcend these constraints, and the presumption that any form of conventional social or political action will founder on the shoals of an undeveloped human nature. And finally we have the contention that the solution to this impasse involves a fundamental reconfiguration of the human spirit, which can only be provided by aesthetic experience. It requires, more specifically, an encounter with a work of art that is radically autonomous. In order to produce this transformation the work of art must refer to nothing but itself and make no concession to the knowledge, experience or interest of the reader or viewer. Sufficiently insulated from the exigencies of daily life, the work of art will provide a quasi-religious experience of undetermined freedom (in the virtual realm of aesthetic play), training us to act more responsibly in the ‘real’ world of daily life. ‘The psyche of the listener or spectator must remain completely free and inviolate’, Schiller insists. ‘It must go forth from the magic circle of the artist pure and perfect as it comes from the hands of the Creator.’ The lack of determination or predication by external forces is essential to the operation of an autonomous aesthetic, producing in the viewer or reader a kind of therapeutic regression. Man must ‘momentarily be free of all determination’, Schiller writes, returning ‘to that negative state of complete absence of determination in which he found himself before anything at all had made an impression upon his senses’.

The work of art trains us for social interactions that we are not yet prepared for in real life. Actual social or political change is deferred to an indefinite and idealised future, when the aesthetic will have finally completed its civilising mission. It is not simply the belief that artistic experience is in some essential ways distinct from political experience, but the more extreme proposition that any form of political action is premature until humanity allows itself to be guided by aesthetic principles. The Aesthetic Education provided a template that has been followed by subsequent critics and theorists with remarkable devotion. The ongoing relevance of this tradition is evident in Jacques Rancière’s recent attempt to resuscitate Schiller. We might also consider the parallel with critic Clement Greenberg’s notion of formal ‘movement’ in the development of avant-garde art in the post-Second world War period (as the sublimated expression of a currently unrealisable political movement). For Greenberg, and many American artists during the early years of the Cold War, substantive political change was blocked by the impasse between a tarnished Communism and a reviled capitalist consumer culture. As a result, the only option was retreat into the protected enclave of the canvas, where the artist could preserve the freedom necessary for unconstrained aesthetic play. Schiller’s aesthetic finds a more contemporary expression in the dilemma of French intellectuals and artists in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Here the impossibility of positive political change (embodied in the perceived failure of May ’68) legitimised a withdrawal into a zone of subversive textual play and écriture. Each of these cultural moments proceeds via a conservational displacement or deferral of political critique into a more abstract critique of epistemology per se, evident in Greenberg’s attack on representational art and Roland Barthes’s attack on conventional forms of signification.
As Peter Starr argues in *Logics of Failed Revolt*, the underlying lesson of May ’68 was based on the twin principles of ‘specular doubling’ and ‘structural repetition’, in which all attempts to challenge entrenched power end up inadvertently reproducing it. In Starr’s account, each principle ‘begins with the uncovering of a pseudo-opposition between the principles or structures of the established social order and an oppositional force whose action is found to be deeply complicitous with those principles or structures (repeating them and/or being recuperated by them)’. The ‘back to back dismissal’ of these terms provides the ‘pretext for articulating a “Third Way”’ that is ‘neither the Gaullist establishment nor its communist pseudo rivals in the PCF and CGT, but May’s “authentic” revolutionism...’.

The third way constitutes a new form of oppositional intelligence that would abjure the mechanisms of the state, the party or the union, assuming an entirely new counter-institutional form. It was embodied by the student protestors who refused to ‘take’ power and instead engaged in a series of exemplary gestures in the streets of Paris, seeking to spread the spirit of the revolution through sheer contagion rather than conventional forms of political organisation and action. Here we rediscover the autonomy of the aesthetic: of a political expression that remains gloriously free and insulated from the contaminating influence of existing power structures and of an ‘education’ that communicates itself to us through a consensual enthusiasm beyond words or doctrine.

But the very refusal to organise, to coordinate and to negotiate created a further impasse. In order to actually initiate change it was necessary to accept some level of engagement with extant institutions and policies and to translate across conflicting forms of discourse, but this required, in turn, abandoning the liberating purity of the poetic gesture. ‘If one undertakes direct political action’, Starr writes, ‘then the logics of specular doubling and structural repetition apply, but if one refuses such action, as the student revolutionaries had tended to do, then one’s revolt will at best be hopelessly marginal, at worst, a reinforcement of institutional power’. The result was a compulsive effort to remain continually ‘outside’ the circle of compromised legitimacy, leading to a mise en abyme trumping of exteriority and an almost paranoid fear of cooption. ‘We push our refusal to the point of refusing to be assimilated into the political groups that claim to refuse what we refuse’, as the Student-Writers Action Committee wrote in a statement on 20 May.

It was necessary then to identify yet another ‘third way’, another mode of action that could preserve the requisite revolutionary spirit without risking the inevitable compromise that would result from direct involvement with the mechanisms of social or political change. The solution was a tactical withdrawal into the protected field of the text. The novel, the poem, the film, the work of art and theory itself would become the site for a process of ‘subtle’ or ‘discrete’ subversion. The revolutionary would decamp to the institutional margins of political life, the university, the gallery and the publishing house to create a heterotopic space of experimentation. As Starr describes it, the revolutionary impasse or ‘double bind’ (compromised engagement or surrender) had the effect of ‘displacing the political field toward the cultural in general and toward specifically transgressive forms of writing in particular’.

Political change here and now is impossible because existing society is
saturated by repressive forms of knowledge at the most basic level of human consciousness. Language itself polices and regulates our desires. As Roland Barthes famously claimed in his Inaugural Lecture at the Collège de France, ‘Language is neither reactionary nor progressive; it is quite simply fascist.’

Here we find echoes of Schiller’s scepticism and one of the key linkages between the poststructuralist theoretical tradition and early modern aesthetic philosophy: political action or change here-and-now is intrinsically futile. Existing systems of power and resistance to power are so corrupt, so inhumane, so irredeemably compromised that one must reject any accommodation with, or proximity to, them. The only possible way to move forward and to retain the purity and integrity of the revolutionary message is to work indirectly, via the insulating protection of ancillary, quasi-autonomous institutions (the arts, higher education), to develop covert, subversive ‘interventions’ in the cultural sphere which will reproduce the contagion logic of the street action at the level of the individual reader, viewer or student. May ’68 failed because existing modes of human consciousness and political agency were simply incapable of sustaining an authentic revolutionary impulse. Until we disrupt the fascism of language, until we purge the human psyche itself, all attempts at political change in the ‘real’ world will remain ineffectual and even destructive. ‘If the world could not be changed’, as François Dosse observed of the intellectual aftermath of May ’68, ‘the self could be’.

Just as Schiller insisted that a proper aesthetic education could only come about through exposure to a work of art that remained radically autonomous, resisting all forms of external determination, Barthes will call for forms of writing that refuse the utilitarian demands of conventional signification: ‘to write can no longer designate an operation of recording, of observing, of representing, of “painting”’. The very playfulness of the signifier, ‘unimpoverished by any constraint of representation’, will model for the reader a new non-instrumentalising consciousness.

We cannot yet be trusted with the freedom that would result from a total revolution. Instead we must practise this freedom in the virtual space of the text or artwork, supervised by the poet or artist. Like Schiller’s ideal aesthetic subject, ‘momentarily free of all determination’, Barthes’s reader is ‘a man without history, without biography, without psychology; he is only that someone who holds gathered into a single field all the paths of which the text is constituted’. Barthes attaches an almost mystical significance to the gesture of dissolving or disrupting the signifying process (‘writing ceaselessly posits meaning but always in order to evaporate it’). Thus, literature ‘liberates an activity which we might call counter-theological, properly revolutionary, for to refuse to arrest meaning is finally to refuse God and his hypostases, reason, science, the law’.

The collapsing together of the entirety of religion, law, science and reason into a single, monolithic expression of man’s inherently instrumentalising nature is symptomatic. The shibboleth of reason can only be defeated by a full-scale assault on any and all forms of coherent meaning – narrative writing, historical continuity, collective identity and conscious agency – waged through the daunting weapons of experimental literature and new wave cinema. Fascism will finally be undone by Robbe-Grillet novels and Godard films. Barthes’s concept of textual jouissance carries with it the characteristic contradiction of modern
aesthetic autonomy, evoking a monadic art practice that occupies a position of radical exteriority while able to act back on the world with the most uncompromising ethical authority. This contradiction is anticipated by Schiller’s contradictory concept of a Spieltrieb; precisely a play drive that is simultaneously free and yet driven or orientated towards an ethical telos. The tension between an open-ended aesthetic experience and the conative energy of a play drive is reiterated at a second level in the conflict between an aesthetic encounter that claims to liberate or empower the reader precisely by subjecting him or her to a shattering ontic dislocation. The frustrated militancy of the street protest is displaced and transposed to a symbolic aggression enacted against the viewer or reader who stands simultaneously for the forces of rationalist reaction and their benumbed accomplices, in need of both a punishing attack and a cathartic awakening. Thus Maurice Blanchot, a central figure for the poststructuralist tradition, celebrates the violent ‘combat’ that occurs between the writer and the reader.21 While for Lyotard language and linguistic communication can only ever be a field of battle, populated by ‘opponents’ engaged in a series of strategic ‘moves’ and ‘countermoves’ intended to advance their position relative to the ‘balance of power’.22

The basic linguistic operation of signification, the linking of a given sign with a given referential object, was simply the Urform of a much broader and more insidious system of consensual meaning that ran like a fault line through Western modes of thought and being. Just as the relationship between signifier and signified implies a sort of linguistic agreement (the shared assumption that this word or image ‘stands for’ a given idea), any social formation that depends on the interdependence, reliance or predication of one subject on another became suspect, whether in the guise of a family, a community, a union, a party, civil society or the state. The revolution will begin, then, not with collective experience but with a single ‘dissident’ subject; the monadic individual whose consciousness must first be wiped clean of the contaminating influence of conventional modes of signification and identity. ‘What has emerged in our postwar culture’, Julia Kristeva wrote, ‘are singular forms of speech and jouissance’. The poet and the intellectual will:

... give voice to the singularity of unconsciousness, desires, needs. Call into play the identities and/or languages of the individual and the group. Become the analyst of the impossibility of social cohesion.23

It is precisely when we come together (in collective forms of action and identity) that we are most at risk of succumbing to our instrumentalising nature.

**FAITH CANNOT BE BOUGHT**

*Every now and then a chorus could be heard from the top of the dune: ‘Water, water, water’. But the camera kept rolling.*

When Faith Moves Mountains24

The rhetoric of failure plays a central role in Francis Alýs’s *When Faith Moves Mountains*, a project he created in 2002 with a cast of several
hundred volunteers in the sand dunes of Ventanilla, outside Lima, Peru. The event, commissioned for the Lima Biennial, generated a great deal of interest in the artworld and helped to consolidate Alÿs’s international reputation. *When Faith Moves Mountains* elaborates on a concern with the symbolism of wasted or futile labour that was evident in Alÿs’s earlier performances, but on a much grander scale. At the same time, the emphasis that Alÿs placed on the experience of collaborative interaction in this project marked a significant departure from his previous works. While he employed participants in performance-based pieces such as *Song for Lupita* (1998) or *Rehearsal 2* (2001–2006), their primary role was to ‘act out’ certain scripted gestures designed to convey a symbolic meaning. The volunteers in *Faith* were also assigned a fixed task by Alÿs (the shovelling of the dune), but he now contends that the execution of the task itself had the effect of transforming the consciousness of the participants (‘it did, maybe just for a day, provoke this illusion that things could possibly change’).25 Critic Jean Fisher suggests that the process of moving the sand dune catalysed a ‘spirit of conviviality’ capable of:

... initiating and uniting community as a shared experience of a thought, from the group of mostly engineering students who participated in the event at the site, to the people of the pueblo joven who took it upon themselves to protect the site while the work was in progress, to the art world.26

Drawing on Heidegger and Agamben, Fisher argues that the performance revealed a ‘new thought of the political, here understood ... as “conviviality”, or the founding moment of community’.

The creation of this performance involved weeks of effort and the composition of a complex social and organisational network. The museum presentation, however, focused primarily on the spectacle of the volunteers shovelling in the sand. The installation which I saw at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles (September 2007-February 2008), centred on the projection of a fifteen-minute film documenting Alÿs’s initial scouting of the location, the arrival of the volunteers, and the actual labour of the shovelling. In addition, photographs of the performance, along with several short texts and email exchanges between Alÿs and his collaborators, Cuauhtémoc Medina and Rafael Ortega, were displayed under plexiglas on a set of low tables. The images include a signed photograph of Alÿs, Medina and Ortega standing together at the site of the performance with bullhorns and cameras as they prepare to direct the labour of five hundred volunteers, mostly young college students from Lima, wearing matching shirts emblazoned with the project logo.

Although the video includes comments by several (unidentified) student volunteers, Alÿs’s installation does little to convey the nature of their participation, or their particular investment in the Sisyphean task that he has assigned them. They have been summoned by Alÿs not as collaborators but as bodies to illustrate a ‘social allegory’ about the inevitable failure of Latin America to modernise successfully.27 Thus, in Medina’s words, *When Faith Moves Mountains* represents the:

... application of the Latin-American principle of non-development: an extension of the logic of failure, of the programmatic dilapidation, the

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27. *When Faith Moves Mountains*, op cit, p 18
utopic resistance, the entropic economy and the social erosion of the region. But moreover, the action was conceived as a parable of short productivity: a huge endeavor whose major achievement was no achievement at all.28

Images of failure and futility run throughout Alys’s work, from the ageing Volkswagen trying unsuccessfully to mount a Tijuana hill in Rehearsal 1 (1999–2003) to the Mexico City sweepers in Barrenderos (2004) paid to push garbage through the streets of the city until its accumulated mass is impossible to move. Progress in Latin America is always failed, compromised or postponed. No matter how hard Alys’s street sweepers or student volunteers work they will never be able to gain access to the benefits of modernity precisely because modernity, as a process led by the North, depends on the strategic underdevelopment of the economies of the South.

The fact that Alÿs uses human labour as the vehicle for his allegory is symptomatic, linking two main vectors of his practice. The first, as noted above, is based on the correlation between labour and productivity. The very ‘failure’ of Latin America to successfully modernise is registered as a kind of melancholic protest against the imperatives of efficiency. Latin America chooses to stay in a ‘sphere of indeterminate action’, as Alÿs writes, in order to ‘define itself against the imposition of Western modernity’. Hence the struggling Volkswagen, the idled Barrenderos, and the shovelling volunteers are all engaged in a conspicuous expenditure of wasted labour (‘maximum effort, minimal result’ as Alÿs writes of Faith). For his part, Medina justifies his involvement in the project by contrasting it with his own history of failed militancy at the University of Mexico in the 1980s: ‘What made me go back and do this at the age of thirty-six was that we were making a metaphorical political comment instead of just undertaking another futile political action.

This notion of futility and waste brings us back to the ambivalent lesson of May ’68. Political or social progress is always already destined for frustration and deferral, impurity and compromise, due to the inevitable co-option of the forces of organised resistance. The improvements in social justice and economic equality that have been achieved in the Latin America polity through a century or more of contestation against the logic of modernity and the forces of neo-colonial exploitation fall away in this narrative, which reduces critique to a simple logic of inversion: modernity’s demand for efficiency and productivity will be subverted by a deliberate embrace of inefficiency and futility.

The symbiotic relationship between efficiency and inefficiency in Alÿs’s work is paralleled by a second set of oppositional terms associated with its critical and theoretical framing in the artworld. This opposition is neatly captured by Jean Fisher in the essay cited earlier. Activist art, according to Fisher, operates on the basis of a naïve faith that ‘words and images are directly communicable’. Alÿs, for his part, refuses the semantic labour of meaning and engages instead in a Heideggerian ‘suspension of signification’, producing a ‘heretofore un-thought configuration of reality’.

We encounter a similar argument in Russell Ferguson’s catalogue essay on Alÿs for the Hammer Museum exhibition. Alÿs’s work ‘refuses closure’ and ‘rejects conclusions’, according to Ferguson, and embraces instead an ambivalent ‘politics of rehearsal’. Alÿs reiterates this claim in his own account of the project, arguing that the ‘poetic act’ entails the deliberate ‘suspension of meaning, a brief sensation of senselessness that reveals the absurdity of the situation and, through this act of transgression, makes you step back or step out and revise your prior assumptions about this reality’.

On the one hand Alÿs associates art with a poetic ‘suspension of meaning’. On the other, his desire to address the impact of modernisation in Latin America obliges him to retain a conventional system of signification in which modernisation is represented by various allegorical substitutes. To the extent that his goal is to suspend signification this strategy fails (we know precisely what the Volkswagen or the Barrenderos are ‘supposed’ to mean because Alÿs and his commentators have told us). Meaning is less negated in this gesture than it is displaced. The ambiguity required of a poetic text is then collapsed into the content of the work,

29. Ibid, p 79
30. Installation text at Hammer Museum, 2007
31. When Faith Moves Mountains, op cit, p 104
32. This claim of futility is all the more striking given the numerous examples of organised resistance to neo-liberalism in South America over the past fifteen years, ranging from Sem Terra, the Brazilian Landless Workers’ Movement, to the Zapatista Army of National Liberation in Mexico, to Argentina’s Unemployed Worker’s Movement, to PRATEC (the Andean Project of Peasant Technologies) in Peru.
33. Russell Ferguson, Jean Fisher and Francis Alÿs, op cit, p 116
34. Ferguson and Alÿs, Politics of Rehearsal, op cit, p 10
35. Ibid, p 40
through the metaphorical staging of Latin America’s ambivalent relationship to modernisation and development.

The central role played by physical labour in Alýs’s work, at the symbolic level, is thus reiterated by a concern with semantic labour in the work’s reception as an allegorical image. Productive labour, whether the linking of signifier and signified or the removal of trash from the streets of Mexico City, is always already complicit with the totalising forces of modernity. Alýs thus projects a form of textual politics that operates through the valorisation of semantic failure (the refusal of narrative closure, the suspension of signification, the negation of meaning) onto the geopolitical situation of Latin America. Given the relentless instrumentality of modernisation, and the ostensible failure, or complicity, of Leftist political resistance to this process, the artist has no choice but to operate through a form of poetic withdrawal and allegorical distanciation. In his writing for the Faith installation, Alýs seems cognisant of the problematic nature of this transposition and his tendency to poeticise Latin America’s ostensibly futile resistance to modernisation, leaving it to ‘future minds’ to decide if ‘this attitude is more cynical than siding with the evils of development’.

The arduous process of moving the sand dune clearly functioned as an imagistic resource for Alýs. This is evident in the careful attention given to the visual staging of the event: the deliberate arrangement of the workers’ bodies in a single line across the face of the dune, the matching shirts with logos, the detailed storyboards outlining the shot-by-shot composition of the film, and perhaps most significantly in the particular location Alýs selected as the site for the performance. The dune is directly in front of a large shantytown with a population of over 70,000 immigrants, displaced farmers and political refugees. Few if any of the shantytown residents were involved in the project as volunteers (although some apparently witnessed the performance itself). Instead, the town and its population function as a kind of backdrop; an image of the political real (the impoverished, marginal space left to the victims of development and modernisation) against which the metaphoric gesture of fruitless labour could take on added resonance. Alýs appears to have made a deliberate choice not to engage the residents of the shantytown directly in his performance, fearing perhaps that any possible interaction would literalise his critique of modernisation and collapse the distance from the site of the political necessary to produce a properly metaphoric meaning, even as it risked the accusation that he was engaging in a further symbolic exploitation of the landless workers who lived there. The gap between figure and ground, performance and shantytown, thus acts as a spatial expression of the poetic autonomy that Alýs views as central to the integrity of his work. It preserves the crucial distinction between art and mere activism even as it protects the political Other from instrumentalisation at the hands of the artist. It also reveals the double movement of this gesture: on the one hand, a necessary scepticism regarding the pitfalls of political engagement, and on the other a reduction of the political to the realm of the impure, the compromised and the co-opted.

In Faith the referent of modernisation is spatially proximate, in the dilapidated, overcrowded houses of the favela that form the backdrop of the performance. Despite the proximity of the favela, Alýs cannot
represent or reference the landless workers directly without sacrificing the nominally poetic distance produced by allegorical substitution. Instead, the college students were bussed in from Lima as surrogates for the absent landless workers. Their deployment as a symbolic vehicle is, presumably, less problematic due to their relatively privileged status. But precisely in refusing to engage the residents of the shantytown, by excluding them from the labour of the performance, they are all the more easily reduced to a generic abstraction (the ‘landless worker’) whose mute presence lends the work its aura of political authenticity. It seems difficult in fact for Alÿs to imagine a form of creative interaction with the favela’s residents outside the ethical constraints imposed by a textual paradigm (either to enact or suspend a representational relationship). He is clearly more comfortable with Faith as a poetic image or narrative that has been ‘freed’ from its referential dependence on the event itself.37

In a letter to theorist Susan Buck-Morss (published in the Faith catalogue), Alÿs modestly cedes authorship of the original event, and the complex social interactions that led to its realisation, claiming responsibility only for its subsequent re-presentation in the artworld in the form of a film. ‘That second part of the work [the film] belongs to me clearly’, according to Alÿs. ‘Whether the first part, the day itself, belongs to me, to the volunteers … to Cuauh or Rafa … or to the dune itself, I would personally find difficult to tell.’38 Alÿs’s generous renunciation of singular authorial possession (even the sand dune is allowed some creative autonomy) is complicated by two factors. First, the action performed by the participants was predetermined and choreographed by Alÿs himself. Their agency in the project was reduced to the simple act of either bestowing or withholding their physical presence and cooperation. This reproduces the binary structure evident in his relationship to the favela (either consent or refusal; the enactment or suspension of representation). Second, it is precisely in the circulation of the event-as-image before a ‘global audience’, as Alÿs writes, that he is able to accrue the symbolic capital necessary to enhance his career as an artist. Thus, his willingness to surrender authorship over the event entails no particular sacrifice of his authorial autonomy or prestige. I am less interested here in the ethical issues that this gesture might raise (Alÿs is certainly entitled to claim or renounce authorship over the event or the video without necessarily diminishing the significance of either one) than in its implications for our understanding of collaboration as a form of artistic practice.

When Faith Moves Mountains suggests some of the challenges that artists accustomed to a textual mode of production face when they seek to embed their practice more fully in a given social context through a collaborative or reciprocal relationship to site. The complexities of these relationships, the contradictory forms of negotiation and solicitation, recognition and disavowal, projection and transference produced through inter-subjective exchange, are evident in the treatment of Faith’s student volunteers. While Alÿs is reluctant to identify the event qua event with his own artistic practice, he does acknowledge its creative or generative capacity which he associates with the voluntary nature of the students’ participation (‘they could have ended the piece simply by leaving the line’, as he writes). By volunteering for the project their involvement was insulated from baser motives and inclinations. Neither

37. Ibid, p 143
38. Ibid
compelled nor rewarded, it could maintain the purity necessary to func-
tion as a poetic symbol. Their labour thus possessed a dual nature,
expressing both the failure of Latin American modernisation and the
presence of an underlying human capacity for joyful selflessness:

The *sine qua non* condition of the action was voluntary collaboration, ie,
an exercise of generosity. One of the piece’s intentions was to explore
alternative methods of action to those of the capitalist system and its
mass media. To pay people for their participation would have contra-
dicted the concept of the piece by involving economic coercion instead of
a conflux of individual wills. Faith cannot be bought.39

While faith cannot be bought it can apparently be strongly encouraged.
In his account of the actual process involved in recruiting volunteers,
Medina describes walking through the corridors of Lima’s universities,
megaphone in hand, ‘rallying’ the students with the soft coercion typical
of Latin American political demonstrations.40 In an interview with Alys,
Ortega and Medina, critic Gerardo Mosquera remarks on the significance
they attach to the experience of the participants (‘It’s worth noting how
the three of you value the physical act of moving the dune, while to me as
a spectator it doesn’t seem as important.’). ‘It could be due to guilt’,
Medina replies, ‘We had five hundred people stupidly working on the
action. It wasn’t about an act of generosity, about volunteers offering to
cooperate in the making of a work of art. It was half a day of brutal,
murderous work under a relentless sun. You bear the responsibility of
having involved people in an unreasonable effort.’41

Medina’s response provides an instructive contrast to the image of
*Faith* as a festival of ludic conviviality. For Alys the ‘infinitesimal
displacement’ of the sand dune was ‘a tiny miracle’.42 ‘We were trying to
suggest the possibility of change. And it did, maybe just for a day,
prove this illusion that things could possibly change’.43 The ‘illusory’
nature of this experience, in Alys’s account, is symptomatic. The only
hope for a positive form of action, capable of resisting cooption and
complicity, lies in the orchestration of a singular moment of joyful
collectivity that is so brief, so ephemeral, so utterly disconnected from
any broader or more sustainable narrative of resistance or emancipation,
that it vanishes almost at the moment it is expressed. Thus, the only pure
moment, the only *poetic* moment (and here aesthetics is very much a
discourse of purity) must occur prior to the contaminating, predicative
constraints of practice, application or engagement. Alys’s work returns
us to the ethical normalisation of desire and the logic of an infinite
regression. The goal of art is to reproduce that most preliminary and
unadulterated expression of liberatory desire before it achieves coher-
ence or articulation: to be decanted and preserved for some potential
future use.

*Faith* reveals both the possibilities and the aporia of contemporary
collaborative art practice. Its attempt to convey a kind of ‘degree zero’ of
community (Fisher’s ‘founding moment’ of conviviality) speaks to the
necessity that many artists feel to start over, at the most basic level, in
understanding the embodiment and constitution of collective interaction
in the post-Cold War era. Yet it also demonstrates the impoverished
notion of praxis that is often evident in site-specific projects. Alys’s work,
with its poetic celebration of the futile, the failed and the incomplete,
offers itself as a critique of modernisation at the very moment when the success of modernisation has never appeared more inevitable, and the presumed futility of resistance to it more habitual. It combines a necessary historical consciousness of the myriad ways in which political change has failed, or can fail, with a conspicuous blindness to those moments of success in the past and the present from which artists might learn or gain inspiration. The experience of the volunteers, which no doubt exists somewhere between the extremes of coercion and unfettered desire, is significant, even if it is difficult to gauge in the museum presentation of *Faith*. But the students were set a task over which they had no real control. The experience of a conative autonomy, the power to envision and carry forward a creative action, remains the singular province of the artist.

What bearing does this fact have on the status of *Faith* as an artwork? At the very least, it suggests that the rearticulation of aesthetic autonomy outlined at the beginning of this essay raises significant questions about the evaluative criteria appropriate to collaborative art practices. For some critics this shift marks the surrender of all legitimate aesthetic standards and their replacement by a crude calculus of ethical or political efficacy. Leaving aside the accuracy of this description, it assumes that one can confidently differentiate between aesthetic and ethical imperatives in contemporary art. In fact, avant-garde art practice has consistently constituted itself around a set of essentially ethical principles (resistance to the instrumentalising drive of modern rationality; cultivation of transgressive or subversive forms of knowledge; etc). Moreover, there is no clear consensus today regarding what precisely would constitute a properly ‘aesthetic’ set of evaluative criteria in the first place. We encounter instead two equally reductive caricatures. On the one hand, we find an interpretation of contemporary collaborative art practice as instantiating a naive and even reactionary model of community in which all difference and dissent is smothered under a totalising and compulsory consensus (a description encountered most often in the work of critics who are dismissive of this work). And on the other we encounter an equally tendentious account of ostensibly ‘authentic’ avant-garde practices that disrupt or destabilise the perceptions of artworld viewers (an account which all too often elides the highly conventional nature of this disruption). In each case, the complex and shifting processes of reception and participation, immersion and distanciation, and collective and singular identification at work in any given project are neglected. The fact that agency is not fully and equitably distributed in the *Faith* performance does not invalidate it as an art practice any more than the fact that Thomas Hirschhorn’s installations may reinforce, rather than disrupt, the self-perception of artworld viewers. The more relevant question, and the question that can help us grasp the complex and necessary interdependence of the aesthetic and the ethical, is to what extent the work remains mindful of the violence of community and of representation itself.