

PERFORMING THE DOCUMENT IN FRANCIS ALÿS'S  
*RE-ENACTMENTS* (2001)

by

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## STATEMENT OF THESIS APPROVAL

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## ABSTRACT

In Francis Alÿs's two-channel video *Re-enactments*, the artist is filmed as he walks through the streets of downtown Mexico City with a loaded gun in his hand until he is arrested. Managing to avoid charges, Alÿs repeats the same series of events, replicating the performance based on the footage captured by his collaborator, artist Rafael Ortega. "Real" and "Re-enactment," the two videos that comprise *Re-enactments*, juxtapose the footage of these two performances, taking two divergent approaches to filming the event. In *Re-enactments*, the performance and the documentation are thoroughly interwoven and mutually dependent; the footage of the initial performance shapes its recreation, which likewise produces another video.

In this thesis, I consider *Re-enactments* both as a live performance that is responsive to and contingent on its setting in Mexico City's downtown, or Centro, and as a video performance that carefully constructs the scene for the viewer. I argue that this work challenges the conventional relationship between performance and its documentation with video by embedding the documentation into the structure of the work. While the current scholarship on this work disregards its documentation as a formative element in the work, I show how the video documents in *Re-enactments* do not merely refer back to the live performance, but rather act as a crucial counterpart to it. Additionally, by situating *Re-enactments* in the context of Mexico City at the turn of the

twentieth century, I show how this work responds to its environment as well to widely circulated media representations about the city. In rehearsing an act of crime that is then circulated internationally, *Re-enactments* both generates and critically responds to stereotypes of Mexico City as a center of violence and corruption. While *Re-enactments* draws on clichés of violence in Mexico City, the videos also attest to how such images are constructed, deliberately highlighting the ways in which the footage has been manipulated. Rather than acting as records of the events of the performance, the videos that comprise *Re-enactments* demonstrate the performative qualities of documentation.

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## INTRODUCTION

On November 4, 2000, Francis Alÿs illegally purchased a gun from a shop in downtown Mexico City.<sup>1</sup> He then left the shop, loaded gun in hand, and walked through the streets of the city. Twelve and a half minutes later, Alÿs was pursued by the police – he was quickly apprehended, pinned against the police car, searched, and taken away for his arrest. This event constituted the first part of Alÿs’s *Re-enactments* (2001) – a work in which the artist sought to execute a performance and then carefully recreate it based on the documentation of the performance. The script was simple: he was to buy the gun and move through the streets until something occurred to interrupt him. Alÿs’s initial performance, from his first grasp of the gun until his arrest, was filmed by his collaborator, artist and cameraman Rafael Ortega, and this footage became the basis for the performance’s reproduction. Alÿs and Ortega replicated the initial performance the following day, a project only possible because Alÿs managed to evade punishment for his

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<sup>1</sup> Alÿs’s purchase was illegal both because of the type of gun he bought, a 9 mm Berretta which is restricted to military use in Mexico, and because he purchased it outside of Mexico’s one legal gun store, the Directorate for the Commercialization of Arms and Munitions – a military-run store on a base just outside Mexico City. Further, openly carrying a gun is only legal with a special permit issued by the Secretariat of Defense under special circumstances. For a summary of Mexico’s gun laws, see Philip Alpers and Marcus Wilson, “Guns in Mexico: Facts, Figures and Firearm Law,” Sydney School of Public Health, The University of Sydney, GunPolicy.org, <http://www.gunpolicy.org/firearms/region/mexico> (accessed August 1, 2013).

crime.<sup>2</sup> Alÿs was able to both negotiate his release from police custody – ostensibly through bribery, a common practice in negotiating with the police in Mexico City – and persuade the officers to participate in the staging of the second performance. In the re-enactment of the performance, the policemen acted out their roles in the scene of Alÿs’s arrest. This time, however, Alÿs used a fake gun and Ortega took a significantly different approach to filming the performance. In the two-channel video, the footage of Alÿs’s performances are juxtaposed; the two videos, labeled “Real” and “Re-enactment,” play simultaneously, comparing the footage of the initial performance and its recreation.

This work demonstrates several characteristics that are common to Alÿs’s practice. A Belgian-born artist who has lived and worked in Mexico City since 1986, Alÿs is well known for his ambulatory urban interventions in which he walks through the streets, often in the Centro, Mexico City’s historic center, disrupting the daily operations of the city’s public spaces. Alÿs’s works prior to *Re-enactments* most frequently involved modest interventions into the fabric of the city in which he acted out fable-like narratives in the streets. In *The Collector* (1990-2), for example, Alÿs pulled a small magnetic toy dog through the street, accumulating metal detritus along the way, and in *Fairy Tales* (1995), Alÿs unraveled his sweater as he walked, leaving a trail of thread behind him until the sweater had unraveled entirely. His actions, though idiosyncratic, tended to be unobtrusive and inconspicuous, receding fairly easily into the commotion of the street. *Re-enactments*, however, stands apart from the bulk of these projects as it is markedly

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<sup>2</sup> While the videos in *Re-enactments* are dated November 4<sup>th</sup>, there is a discrepancy over when the second performance occurred in the labeling of the work in various exhibition catalogs – some claim that the second performance was executed the following day.

more aggressive, incorporating a criminal offense and the real possibility of danger for both the artist and the surrounding public.

Although it differs in tone, this work does take up one of the most salient themes of Alÿs's body of work: unproductive labor. Alÿs has often engaged in projects that enact fruitless or inefficient labor that deliberately defy the doctrine of productivity so essential to concepts of progress and modernity. Art historian Grant Kester has written that Alÿs's work metaphorically stages "Latin America's ambivalent relationship to modernization and development," which is "always failed, compromised, or postponed."<sup>3</sup> Alÿs's insistence on futile effort allegorizes the complex relationship Mexico has had with modernity – in Alÿs's work as in Mexico, enormous effort often leads to minimal result. These ideas crystallize in *The Paradox of Praxis I (Sometimes Doing Something Leads to Nothing)* from 1997 in which Alÿs was filmed while pushing a large block of ice through the streets of Mexico City for more than nine hours. Alÿs's immense labor yields nothing; instead, at the end of the short video, we witness the last of the ice block melt into the street.

Just as in *The Paradox of Praxis*, Alÿs's labor in *Re-enactments* is unproductive – although Alÿs seems to walk with purpose, as he moves quickly and forcefully through the streets, he does not use the gun to accomplish any particular objective beyond the action of carrying the gun itself. Although in *Re-enactments*, like in *The Paradox of Praxis* and many other works, Alÿs performs nonproductive labor, it is important to note that these works do in fact produce material results by generating an abundance of documents that refer to his performance. Although the block of ice dissolves in response

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<sup>3</sup> Grant Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2011): 72, 69.

to Alÿs's strenuous labor, the performance produces the video and photographs of his performance, material consequences of his labor. These documents are crucial to Alÿs's practice. As he commonly performs in locations remote to art world settings, Alÿs relies on the documentation of his live performances – videos, photographs, sketches, notes, and the like – to exhibit his work in galleries, where the majority of viewers encounter his work. When *Re-enactments* has been exhibited, most recently in the retrospective “Francis Alÿs: A Story of Deception” shown at the Museum of Modern Art in 2011, it had been categorized as the video documentation of a performance.<sup>4</sup> In *Re-enactments*, Alÿs explicitly takes up the issue of conveying performance through documentation, which has played a vital role in his body of work. In speaking about the conceptual frame of *Re-enactments* Alÿs has said,

I wanted to address the practice of the “performance” which is characterized by something that is quite unique: its underlying condition of immediacy. I wanted to question the rapport we have today with the practice of the performance, which is usually transmitted by way of another medium, mediated exactly, and thus “delayed” by the document.<sup>5</sup>

Here Alÿs describes one of the central issues in the critical debate surrounding performance and its documentation: the tension between the immediacy of performance, which is responsive to and contingent on the specificities of its setting and its public, and the remoteness of documentation, which reaches its audience only after the performance has ended, and is therefore detached from the conditions of the live performance.

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<sup>4</sup> This show originated at the Tate Modern in 2010 and also traveled to the Weils Contemporary Art Center in Brussels in 2011. *Re-enactments* has also been included in major exhibitions at the Hammer Museum and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in recent years.

<sup>5</sup> Francis Alÿs, “La Cour des Miracles: Francis Alÿs in Conversation with Corinne Diserens – Mexico City, 25 May 2004,” in *Walking Distance from the Studio* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2004), 93-95.

*Re-enactments* brings this tension to the foreground by merging the live performance and the document as central axes that are both fundamental to the structure of the work and shape its outcome. The design of the work as a whole requires both performance and the video documentation – the filming of the initial performance facilitates its recreation, which likewise produces a video; the two are interwoven and mutually dependent.

Alÿs’s choice of such a dramatic and potentially hazardous narrative, that of an armed “criminal” walking the streets, stresses the role of risk in live performance and the possibility that the response of the viewer can have a substantial impact on the performance itself. Alÿs invites this interference by designing the performance to solicit a response in order to reach completion – in his preface to “Re-enactment” Alÿs explains that he walked the streets “waiting for something to happen.”<sup>6</sup> Speaking about the intensity of Alÿs’s performance in *Re-enactments*, curator Russell Ferguson has said “Alÿs heightened the risk factor immensely, not to make a spectacular performance, but primarily to explore the degree to which the documentation of the performance itself would dissipate that element of risk.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, *Re-enactments* demonstrates how viewership of this performance is dramatically altered by its mediation through video. The viewer of the videos is removed from the possibility of danger as well as the ability to influence the work.

In the remainder of this thesis, I will explore the ways in which *Re-enactments* appraises the status of the documentation, specifically video documentation, in relation to the live performance, problematizing the conventional relationship between the two

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<sup>6</sup> At the start of both videos in *Re-enactments*, Alÿs and Ortega offer an explanatory statement of the video. I cite this quotation in its entirety at the start of the next section.

<sup>7</sup> Russell Ferguson, *Francis Alÿs: Politics of Rehearsal* (Los Angeles: Hammer Museum and Steidl, 2007), 40.

categories. My analysis includes both an examination of the content and context of the live performance in *Re-enactments* and an inquiry into the roles of the document as it affects our understanding of the work. I argue that the live performance and the video documents are thoroughly intertwined in *Re-enactments*, demonstrating how they work collaboratively while still acknowledging their essential differences. By showing the interconnectedness of the live event and its documentation in *Re-enactments* I propose that the videos that comprise this work operate beyond the documentary mode; they are not merely records of the events but are in fact formative components of the artwork. Rather than framing the videos as documents *of* a performance, which privileges the live performance as the site of the artwork that the document tries to recuperate, I argue that the documentation in this work functions as a counterpart to the performance that is fundamental to the work itself. In *Re-enactments*, the documentation does not act as a surrogate for the live performance; rather, the work serves to highlight the performative aspects of documentation more broadly.

## CARRYING A GUN IN MEXICO CITY

Reflecting on *Re-enactments* a few years after its creation, Alÿs has remarked, “I made a fundamental mistake choosing the scenario I used. I should have picked something much more banal, like someone tripping on a banana peel...”<sup>8</sup> In reality, *Re-enactments* offers a far more risky score, as Alÿs’s preface to “Re-enactment” makes clear: “On 4 November I bought a 9 mm Beretta in a gun shop on Palma Street. At ten past one I left the shop holding the loaded gun in my right hand, and started wandering downtown waiting for something to happen...”<sup>9</sup> The conditions of this performance, although less humorous, are nearly as simple as staging a banana peel slip-up – there are very few controls and much is left to chance. With no end goal in mind, Alÿs’s performance was governed by few parameters: the purchase of the gun and his stroll through the streets with the weapon visible in his hand. Alÿs has lamented his choice of subject matter because it plays into stereotypes of rampant crime and police corruption in Mexico. The videos show the artist easily procuring a gun illegally and openly carrying it through crowded streets without consequence until his arrest – in the videos, the pedestrians who seem to notice the weapon do not respond or take action to stop him. Upon his arrest, Alÿs is able to negotiate his own release from the police – even though

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<sup>8</sup> Francis Alÿs, “La Cour des Miracles: Francis Alÿs in Conversation with Corinne Diserens – Mexico City, 25 May 2004,” 95.

<sup>9</sup> This statement is delivered at the commencement of “Re-enactment” and is reiterated in a sheet of Alÿs’s notes, a document that accompanies the two-channel installation in its exhibition.

his actions constitute a felony – and solicit their help in recreating the whole event.<sup>10</sup>

*Re-enactments* seems to validate these clichés, and it is this facet of the work that has been the focal point for many critics who have read the work as an allegory for life in Mexico City’s downtown, a point I will expand on later in this thesis.

Alÿs has said that the choice of such a dangerous scheme was a reference to Chris Burden’s famous 1974 performance *Shoot* in which Burden appointed an assistant to shoot him in the arm.<sup>11</sup> However, the circumstances of Alÿs’s performance are considerably different: whereas Burden was the recipient of a gunshot wound, Alÿs wielded the weapon himself, and while Burden brought violence into the sanitary conditions of the gallery, Alÿs performed in the tumultuous environment of Mexico City’s downtown, the Centro.

This neighborhood, the city’s historic center, is the setting of many of Alÿs’s urban interventions – it is also where he lives and keeps his studio. The Centro was once the artistic, commercial, and political hub of the city and it has a rich aesthetic history. The Centro was once the heart of the Aztec city of Tenochtitlan, housing the major state buildings, palaces, and great temples of the city. Under Spanish colonization, these structures were leveled and a new landscape of decadent colonial architecture replaced them. In the early twentieth century, the state buildings in the Centro became the site for many of the most celebrated works by the Mexican muralists. The fortune of the area, however, began to shift midcentury. In the 1950s, the government froze rents in the area,

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<sup>10</sup> Cuauhtémoc Medina, “Zones of Tolerance: Teresa Margolles, SEMEFO, and Beyond,” *Parachute* 104 (Winter 2001): 48.

<sup>11</sup> Francis Alÿs, “La Cour des Miracles: Francis Alÿs in Conversation with Corinne Diserens – Mexico City, 25 May 2004,” 97. With this reference Alÿs meant to evoke the way in which the charged live performance becomes crystalized into the images of its documentation. I will discuss the role of the documentation in the following section.



resulting in the deterioration of many of the neighborhood's buildings. By the final decade of the twentieth century, the Centro had transformed into a poverty-stricken neighborhood with high crime rates; it became an area riddled with squatters, street vendors, and dilapidated colonial buildings.<sup>12</sup> Rubén Gallo, a prominent cultural studies scholar, has characterized the Centro as “one of the most crowded, chaotic, and animated neighborhoods in the world.”<sup>13</sup>

At the time Alÿs was working on *Re-enactments*, the Centro, as well as Mexico City more broadly, was experiencing a surge in violent crime. Mexico was undergoing important political changes; the single-party rule of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which had maintained power in Mexico for seventy years, officially came to an end in 2000 when Vicente Fox of the right-of-center National Action Party was elected president. In his essay “Corruption, Drug Trafficking, and Violence in Mexico,” Stephen Morris has argued that although corruption has been a longstanding systemic problem in the Mexican government, the PRI was able to maintain some control over the most powerful criminals by maintaining stable, though illegal, agreements with criminal organizations. Morris claims, “Whereas corruption once coexisted and seemingly facilitated peaceful operation of drug trafficking in Mexico, today it coexists with and arguably facilitates a far more violent species of drug trafficking.”<sup>14</sup> Beginning in the 1990s, as oppositional parties begin to threaten the PRI's monolithic power in

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<sup>12</sup> The Mexican government has since funded revitalization projects in the Centro, see “Centre of Belated Attention: An Effort to Revive a Historic Slum,” *The Economist*, September 12, 2002 and Geri Smith, “Mexico City Gets a Face-Lift,” *Business Week Magazine*, May 23, 2004.

<sup>13</sup> Rubén Gallo, *New Tendencies in Mexican Art: The 1990s* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) 93.

<sup>14</sup> Stephen Morris, “Corruption, Drug Trafficking, and Violence in Mexico,” *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 18, no. 11 (Spring/Summer 2012) 35.

government, the centralized state could no longer unanimously “guarantee its side of the corrupt bargain.”<sup>15</sup> Local police and officials began acting more autonomously, and criminal organizations, no longer protected under the informal agreements that had previously offered impunity, sought new pacts. This organization of corrupt political alliances often led to violent competition.<sup>16</sup> The number of murders, arrests, and extraditions of cartel members skyrocketed in the late 90s, and a series of high-profile political assassinations proved that violent crime was not limited to low-level cartel violence, but rather reached the very center of the government.<sup>17</sup>

Along with the shifts in political power, the final decade of the twentieth century saw major changes in economic policy, most significantly the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994. Although the Salinas government assured the Mexican people that NAFTA would propel Mexico into the developed world, the years immediately following its initiation were economically devastating. Instead of prosperity, Mexico experienced an economic crisis, a major devaluation of the peso, and massive inflation. Widespread unemployment and underemployment resulted in more Mexicans turning to the drug industry for income, which in turn boosted violent crime.<sup>18</sup>

It is in this context of political instability and increased violence that Alÿs walked through Mexico City’s streets carrying a loaded gun. Despite Alÿs’s lament in endorsing stereotypes of violence and corruption in Mexico, his choice in subject matter cannot be

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 36

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 37. In the mid-90’s Cardinal Posada, the Archbishop of Guadalajara, Luis Donaldo Colosio, the PRI presidential candidate, and José Francisco Ruiz Massieu, the PRI’s secretary general, were all assassinated.

<sup>18</sup> Julien Mercille, “Violent Narco-Cartels of US Hegemony? The Political Economy of the ‘War on Drugs’ in Mexico,” *Third World Quarterly* 32, no. 9 (2011): 1642.

easily cast aside as this work both arises out of and responds to these turbulent conditions. Further, as an artist who works internationally, Alÿs's work is circulated broadly in many countries, perhaps most heavily in the U.S. and Europe, the images of crime in Mexico City that *Re-enactments* produced and disseminated are not exempt from the discourse that constructs popular stereotypes of Mexico as a center of violence.<sup>19</sup> *Re-enactments*, however, takes a critical lens to these representations of criminality by demonstrating the staging involved in media depictions of crime. As I will discuss later in this thesis, Alÿs plays on the dramatic construction of his actions, demonstrating the manipulative power of mediation.

The predominant critical readings of *Re-enactments*, by both Rubén Gallo and Cuauhtémoc Medina, two of the foremost scholars of contemporary Mexican art, take this work to be in some way a direct result of its context, although their readings differ in focus. Gallo characterizes Alÿs's work from this period as a series of exercises in “practicing” Mexico City – a method of coming to understand the city by operating within it and paying close attention to its processes.<sup>20</sup> According to Gallo, “Alÿs ‘practices’ the modern city by wandering through the impoverished streets of the Centro and identifying with the plight of its residents.”<sup>21</sup> Identifying with the residents of the Centro is something that Gallo asserts needs to be “practiced” since Alÿs is not native to the area – he moved to Mexico from Belgium in 1986. Alÿs, whose height and European appearance mark him as a foreigner in the context of Mexico City, has often explored his

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<sup>19</sup> Alÿs is represented by David Zwirner gallery in New York and London.

<sup>20</sup> Gallo, Rubén, *New Tendencies in Mexican Art: The 1990s* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004): 91-92. Gallo adopts the concept of “practicing” a city from Salvador Novo, a Mexican poet in the 1940s.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

peculiar position as both an outsider and a resident of the city. In his photograph *Turista* (1997), for example, Alÿs stood among a group of day laborers that advertise their skills – Alÿs holds up a sign that read “Turista,” offering his services as a professional tourist, an outsider with a vested interest in careful observation of his new surroundings (another example of unproductive labor).

Gallo positions *Re-enactments* as a continuation of the same concerns initiated in many of his earlier performances, in which the artist acted out the roles of various Centro characters.<sup>22</sup> Regarding Alÿs’s practice of accumulating debris from the streets in *The Collector*, Gallo argues that Alÿs was acting metaphorically as a *pepenador*, a garbage picker who scours the streets of the Centro for scraps to recycle for a small profit. In paralleling the activity of a *pepenador*, generating income from waste – Alÿs did indeed sell his collection of scraps to an art collector – Gallo claims that Alÿs reveals the similarities between the artist and the garbage picker: ultimately, “both trades consist in taking things out of their cultural context and inserting them in another.”<sup>23</sup> Gallo interprets *Re-enactments* as Alÿs’s identification with the Centro’s residents; he says, “Since some of those residents are thugs, the artist had to experience walking through life – even if for a few minutes – as a thug.”<sup>24</sup> In *Re-enactments*, Alÿs neither heroicizes nor condemns the criminal, but his reference marks the criminal as a characteristic element of this context.

Gallo’s reading of Alÿs’s urban interventions frames Alÿs’s actions as allegorical – Alÿs embodies the characters that make up the Centro in order to reflect on the

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<sup>22</sup> Gallo, *New Tendencies in Mexican Art: The 1990s*, 93.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

narratives of life in this area. One must keep in mind, however, that Alÿs is not only acting out a role as one of the Centro's cast of characters; he *is* one of the Centro's residents. If in Gallo's terms Alÿs's artistic practice in *The Collector* mimicked the *pepenador*'s labor as a way to emphasize the similarities between the two practices, applying this argument to *Re-enactments* would suggest that Alÿs's actions symbolically erased the divide between the artist and the criminal. However, Alÿs's actions were not *only* metaphorical. Just as Alÿs symbolically acted as a *pepenador* with the result of a real profit for his artwork, Alÿs's embodiment of a thug posed a real threat of danger – carrying a loaded weapon through the streets endangered the surrounding public as well as the artist himself.

While Gallo's reading highlights how Alÿs responded to the city by metaphorically embodying its residents, the art critic Cuauhtémoc Medina is less concerned with the symbolic meanings of Alÿs's actions than with the conditions that enabled the performance to occur in the first place. For Medina, the work's radicalism does not lie in its hostile character, but rather in how it charts a "permissive zone" within the city by testing the limits of tolerance of criminal behavior in Mexico City.<sup>25</sup> Medina writes,

It seems to me that the whole piece would have been impossible to realize in almost any other place. Had Alÿs tried to do the same action in Los Angeles or New York he probably would not have only been arrested, but also shot. ... The whole action and its documentation is ... a remarkable testimony of the laxness of the security forces in Mexico City, and the ability of artists to opportunistically take advantage of their historical situation.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Cuauhtémoc Medina, "Zones of Tolerance: Teresa Margolles, SEMEFO, and Beyond," *Parachute* 104 (Winter 2001): 48.

<sup>26</sup> Medina, "Zones of Tolerance: Teresa Margolles, SEMEFO, and Beyond," 48.

That Alÿs was able to successfully commit a crime without penalty and to re-enact this crime with the support of the police is not only a reflection of the negligence of the police, but also a product of it. Alÿs's actions diagram this gap in law enforcement and exploit it. Interestingly, in viewing *Re-enactments*, we do not witness Alÿs's negotiation with the police after his arrest. We do not know exactly how he was able to achieve his release or persuade the police to help him recreate his performance – although Medina has suggested bribery is likely.<sup>27</sup> In fact, without the additional information provided in the label, the viewer of *Re-enactments* might not even be aware of what role the police played in the performance. The fact that these moments, which were key in successfully duplicating Alÿs's original actions, are missing from the video documentation suggest that the narrative we witness depends on another series of actions, fraudulent negotiations with the police, that remain undisclosed in the videos. This behind-the-scenes labor positions the actions shown on-screen as cinematic constructions rather than as the whole truth of the performed actions, a point I will return to later.

Both Gallo's and Medina's interpretations of *Re-enactments* demonstrate how closely this work is linked to its place of production. Gallo emphasizes the symbolic weight of carrying a gun in Mexico City, while Medina stresses the framework that facilitates Alÿs's ability to commit a crime without serious consequence. When considered together, these readings show the various ways in which the work responds to its environment – it creates a narrative of the Centro that both makes reference to crime in the area and maps its tolerance.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 51

*Re-enactments* has also addressed its environment in another way – its design allowed for the setting to play an important role in the outcome of the performance itself. As Alÿs has explained, *Re-enactments* employed “a kind of staging in which the context of the production becomes the catalyst for the setting off [of] a series of reflections and events...”<sup>28</sup> Alÿs was interested in testing how a particular setting might determine the performance, and his open-ended score allowed for a wide range of possible outcomes in response to the actions he performs. Although Alÿs carried the gun in his hand, he never attempted to use it. He postured as an armed criminal, but remained passive – as he says in the preface to “Re-enactment,” he was “waiting for something to happen.” This passivity allowed for the context, that is, the Centro, to become an active participant in the performance. Alÿs’s actions begged a reaction and they could have provoked any number of consequences. Alÿs has described this performative strategy, which he has employed in a number of his performances:

“Once the axiom has been posed and the location set, the development and the outcome of the piece happen within an open field of possibilities, in the sense that any outcome of the event becomes a valid answer to the premises of the piece. Once the action is launched, there is no longer any strict or unilateral plan to be followed.”<sup>29</sup>

This principle allows the performance to be both engaged with and defined by its environment. Beginning with a premise, in this case with Alÿs’s purchase of the gun and his walk through the Centro, the performance is then subject to the circumstances of its environment – the place indeed acts as a catalyst in spurring a sequence of events. Alÿs’s walk is uninterrupted, his authority to yield a weapon unchallenged, until his arrest. His

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<sup>28</sup> Alÿs, “La Cour des Miracles: Francis Alÿs in Conversation with Corinne Diserens – Mexico City, 25 May 2004,” 93-95.

<sup>29</sup> Alÿs, “Russell Ferguson in Conversation with Francis Alÿs,” *Francis Alÿs*, ed. by Cuauhtémoc Medina, Russell Ferguson, and Jean Fisher (New York: Phaidon, 2007): 25.

release from police custody and the cooperation of the police determined the shape of this performance. The context of the performance is a decisive factor in the outcome of the work as whole, but it is only in complement with its documentation that the work takes shape. In the following section, I will closely examine the two videos of *Re-enactments* to show that the documentation of the action acts as another catalyst in the work, meant to generate additional performance.



## UNFAITHFUL DOCUMENTS: “REAL” AND “RE-ENACTMENT”

The two videos comprising *Re-enactments*, “Real” and “Re-enactment,” are projected side by side and play simultaneously. Though they begin at the same time, “Real” sustains a solid black screen for nearly fifteen seconds while “Re-enactment” offers a preliminary statement, written in scrolling text in Spanish and subtitled in English: “The following is a re-enactment of a real event that happened in Mexico City in 2000.” Following the statement, the videos begin with a short account of the performance, each from a different narrative perspective. Ortega introduces “Real” with the statement, “On 4 November Francis asked me to meet him in a gun shop on Palma Street. I watched him buy a 9mm Beretta, load it and leave the shop holding the gun in his right hand. I trailed him with my Sony Handycam and filmed the following scenes,” which is both read aloud in Spanish and captioned in English in yellow text. In the same format, Alÿs statement introducing “Re-enactment,” cited in the previous section, corroborates Ortega’s description, this time speaking of his own actions, “On 4 November I bought a 9 mm Beretta in a gun shop on Palma Street...”

“Real” opens to a still image of a woman’s hand offering a gun from across the shop counter with the handle toward the viewer [Figure 1]. The scene is frozen as Ortega’s statement courses across the screen, in tandem with his speech. A timer, suspended at zero, sits at the bottom of the screen. Upon the statement’s conclusion, the frame unfreezes and the timer begins clocking time. Alÿs’s hand reaches for the gun, he

cocks the weapon with an audible click and exits the shop, moving out into the street. The camera, operated by Ortega, follows Alÿs as he walks – it sways and shakes violently with every step. Ortega’s position relative to Alÿs shifts continuously as they navigate the busy streets. Most often, Ortega is several feet behind Alÿs, and at some points, he even films from across the street as traffic passes between them [Figures 2, 3]. This distance is broken, however, at one point – just as the timer reaches three minutes, Alÿs and Ortega cross paths, and the camera lingers on the gun, shooting a close-up of the weapon in Alÿs’s hand that is sustained for almost fifteen seconds [Figure 4]. The camera then pulls back again, and the remainder of the video is filmed from its usual distance. When the police pursue Alÿs, at nearly twelve minutes on the timer, Ortega films from the street corner over the top of a car, which conceals him from the view of the police [Figure 5]. Alÿs is arrested and forced into the police car. As the car, sirens and lights ablaze, drives out of view the screen fades to black.

“Re-enactment” opens to the same still frame of the woman’s hand offering the gun over the counter that initiates “Real” – however, in this case, the camera has zoomed in closer to the gun, which takes up nearly the entire screen [Figure 6]. In sync with “Real,” Alÿs reaches to grasp the gun, and commences the performance. Even though both videos show the same sequence of actions, the two videos diverge stylistically. Most immediately, in “Re-enactment” the timer prominently displayed in “Real” is absent. Instead, “Re-enactment” is marked by small white text in the upper right hand corner of the screen that reiterates its label, “RE-ENACTMENT.” Additionally, “Real” uses only diegetic sounds, the noises that occur in the streets, while “Re-enactments” incorporates a soundtrack of eerie melodic whistling in addition to the sounds of the street.

The videos also differ in the position of the camera relative to Alÿs's actions. Whereas "Real" primarily tracks Alÿs from behind and appears to be excerpted from one continuous take, "Re-enactment" employs a variety of camera angles which change rapidly, often stitching together quick shots from a variety of perspectives. In "Re-enactment," the camera is periodically stationary, positioned to film Alÿs as he approaches the camera or moves away from it. When Alÿs exits the shop in "Re-enactment," for example, the shop is shown straight on while Alÿs emerges from its doors [Figure 7]. At several other points, Alÿs is shown as he approaches the fixed camera, offering a head-on perspective of Alÿs's action that is altogether absent in "Real." These scenes require more staging than the improvised, trailing shots that comprise "Real" – the camera must be set up and they may even require more than one take. In "Re-enactment," Alÿs "acts" in a more traditional sense, as he performs within carefully constructed frames, which contrast with the impromptu shots that make up "Real."

"Re-enactment" also devotes much of its screen time to close-up shots of the gun in Alÿs's hand, exaggerating the short segment in "Real" where Ortega zooms in on Alÿs's gun-carrying hand [Figure 8]. In "Re-enactment," nearly half of the video shows exclusively the lower half of Alÿs's body – the camera is low to the ground and trained on the gun. This perspective recurs frequently and with many variations. In the video's conclusion, the scene of Alÿs's staged arrest, Ortega no longer stands at a distance. This time, the arrest is shot alternately in extreme close up and from a few feet away, the two perspectives interlaced together in a fast-paced montage [Figure 9]. The effect is disorienting. In a rapid sequence of shots, we see a policeman apprehend Alÿs, the

chamber of the gun emptied, and Alÿs dragged by his shirt collar to the police car. As Alÿs is thrust into the car, the perspective momentarily shifts so that the camera is in Alÿs's position, entering the back seat of the police car. Just as suddenly, the car is shown from the outside and the police officers shut Alÿs inside. In another jolt in perspective, we watch the police car drive away from the same corner from which Ortega initially filmed the arrest [Figure 10]. Just as in "Real," the video ends as the police car turns out of view.

In comparison with "Real," "Re-enactment" appears contrived – it indulges in a variety of dramatizing cinematic devices, like its frequent use of jump cuts and close up shots, its abrupt changes in perspective, and its excessive foregrounding of the gun. On top of these embellishments, "Re-enactment" makes the viewer repeatedly conscious of its status as a secondary recreation; the video is prefaced with a disclaimer about its remove from the original event, and its title is printed on the screen throughout its duration. In contrast to the apparently amateur filming of "Real," with its shaky camerawork and spontaneous cinematography, "Re-enactment" seems particularly fabricated. Beyond stylistic concerns, "Re-enactment" incorporates artifice at every level – even Alÿs's gun is fake and his arrest is simulated.

In a cursory reading of the two videos side by side, one might perceive "Real" to be a more genuine record of the live performance, a more credible account of what might have happened. Upon closer examination, however, the deceptiveness of "Real" is revealed. Despite its appeal to authenticity – its bid to prove the "real time" of the performance via the timer, its lack of dramatizing cinematic devices, and, most overtly, its title – "Real" is also subject to manipulation. The timer at the bottom of the screen on

“Real” may at first glance appear as a testament to its reliability, not least because of its visual parallel to surveillance footage, but this clock also exposes that the film has been highly edited. Running at five minutes and twenty seconds, the video is missing more than half the twelve and a half minutes of logged time of the performance. A careful observer can track every jump the timer makes, the first after only thirty seconds of footage. Further, the timer is specifically a timecode reading, labeled “TCR” at the bottom of the screen, a tool used in filmmaking to log and identify specific frames in recorded material for editing purposes. It is this tool that allowed Alÿs and Ortega to edit and carefully recreate the footage in producing “Re-enactment.”

Although in their side-by-side comparison “Real” may appear to be a more faithful chronicle of the live performance, neither video offers a complete or unadulterated record. Both are subject to postproduction editing and have been carefully composed to present themselves as either a factual or fictional document by exploiting the aesthetics associated with each category. The footage in “Real” suggests the testimony of an amateur witness by following the action from a distance, seemingly without an ulterior agenda, which contrasts sharply with overwrought composition and editing in “Re-enactment.” The title of the work as a whole, *Re-enactments*, is plural – hinting that both videos, despite their individual titles, are reproductions of the original performance. “Real” is a deceptive designation, as it is just as susceptible to the manipulative forces of editing. The missing minutes of Alÿs’s walk made evident by the timer in “Real” raise the point of other absent labor, like Alÿs’s negotiations with the police in evading criminal charges and in seeking their collaboration in the re-enactment. That the videos present seamless narratives unhindered by this political labor further

demonstrates that the accounts presented in the videos are cinematic constructions bolstered by behind-the-scenes work, rather than purely documentary accounts of an event. After all, “real” is not synonymous with “live.”

In arguing that neither video is a neutral record of the live event, I do not mean to suggest that an unedited document could more faithfully communicate the original performance, but rather I want to highlight that the video documents comprising *Re-enactments* do not attempt to naturalize their mediation or to render it invisible. We are ever aware that what we view is a representation of an action, not the action itself. By foregrounding the markers of their manipulation – most obviously, the timer in “Real” and the label “RE-ENACTMENT” in “Re-enactment” – the videos extricate themselves from direct accountability to the original performance. Since they cannot claim objectivity, they do not need to prove their fidelity to the live event. Their potential deficiencies in recording the event allow a shift in focus. Rather than asking to what degree these videos offer an account of what occurred in the live performance – an impossible task, as the performance is long over – the more productive question might be to address how the document might function when it does not simply point back to the live performance. Can the document of performance art accomplish more than attempting to narrate a performance that has already ended?



Figure 1: Francis Alÿs, *Re-enactments*, 2001. Film still from “Real,” time stamp 00:20. © 2011 Francis Alÿs.



Figure 2: Francis Alÿs, *Re-enactments*, 2001. Film still from “Real,” time stamp 00:56. © 2011 Francis Alÿs.



Figure 3: Francis Alÿs, *Re-enactments*, 2001. Film still from “Real,” time stamp 01:46. © 2011 Francis Alÿs.



Figure 4: Francis Alÿs, *Re-enactments*, 2001. Film still from “Real,” time stamp 01:57. © 2011 Francis Alÿs.





Figure 5: Francis Alÿs, *Re-enactments*, 2001. Film still from “Real,” time stamp 05:00. © 2011 Francis Alÿs.



Figure 6: Francis Alÿs, *Re-enactments*, 2001. Film still from “Re-enactment,” time stamp 00:21. © 2011 Francis Alÿs.



Figure 7: Francis Alÿs, *Re-enactments*, 2001. Film still from “Re-enactment,” time stamp 00:49. © 2011 Francis Alÿs.



Figure 8: Francis Alÿs, *Re-enactments*, 2001. Film still from “Re-enactment,” time stamp 01:03. © 2011 Francis Alÿs.



Figure 9: Francis Alÿs, *Re-enactments*, 2001. Film still from “Re-enactment,” time stamp 04:50. © 2011 Francis Alÿs.



Figure 10: Francis Alÿs, *Re-enactments*, 2001. Film still from “Re-enactment,” time stamp 05:03. © 2011 Francis Alÿs.

## THE ENTANGLEMENT OF PERFORMANCE AND DOCUMENTATION

In the past two decades, the role of the document in relationship to the performance artwork has been a contested topic amongst historians of performance art. I will outline some of the major debates over the conventional functions of the document, and its limits, primarily focusing on the claims made by two influential scholars in the field of performance studies, Peggy Phelan and Philip Auslander. I will then consider these claims in relation to *Re-enactments*, showing how the video documents that comprise this work operate beyond the traditional conception of performance documentation.

In her influential publication *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, Phelan has taken up the issue of documentation in writing about the ontology of performance art.

She writes,

Performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance. To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology. Performance's being... becomes itself through disappearance.<sup>30</sup>

The ephemerality of performance is widely understood as one of its essential characteristics, and here Phelan has highlighted this feature by contrasting it with the

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<sup>30</sup> Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* [London; New York: Routledge, 1993], 146.

longevity of documentation – the document endures beyond the moment of performance, and is thus held separate from performance itself. In this definition, the document is entrenched in the very idea of the performance, although by way of exclusion. The performance and the document are set up as opposing forces in a strict binary – either the performance lives only in the present or it is “something other than performance.” In Phelan’s view, the performative moment exists in a particular time and space for a specific duration, after which it is lost. Disappearance is crucial for Phelan’s ontology as it privileges the moment of performance as a “maniacally charged present,” in which the co-presence of the artist and viewer allow for potential “mutual transformations” of the artwork.<sup>31</sup> For Phelan, the document “is only a spur to memory, an encouragement of memory to become present.”<sup>32</sup> The document is separate from and subordinate to the performance; it is merely a way to recollect the original event. It continuously points back to the performance, never fully capturing it.

The conventional task of the performance art document, in line with Phelan’s characterization, has been to provide a record of the live performance that both verifies its occurrence and allows future visual access to the past performance.<sup>33</sup> Because performance is transient and always at risk of being forgotten, documentation has traditionally been used as a strategy of salvaging performance from its slide into oblivion, securing the performance a place in history. As art historian Amelia Jones has stated, it is

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<sup>31</sup> Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, 148; Peggy Phelan in Marquard Smith, “Performance, Live Culture and Things of the Heart: Peggy Phelan (in conversation with Marquard Smith),” *Journal of Visual Culture* 2, no. 3 (December 2003): 295.

<sup>32</sup> Phelan, *Unmarked*, 148.

<sup>33</sup> Philip Auslander, “Toward a Hermeneutics of Performance Art Documentation,” *Kunsten A Falle: Lessons in the Art of Falling*, ed. Jonas Ekeborg (Horten, Norway; Preus Museum, 2009).

through documentation that performance can “attain symbolic status in the realm of culture” – the performance must survive its moment of occurrence in order to be culturally meaningful, and relies on the document to accomplish this.<sup>34</sup>

However, the task of archiving performance has posed a number of complex problems. As art historian Kathy O’Dell and others have argued, the documentation of the performance is always fragmentary and incomplete.<sup>35</sup> The record can never be a comprehensive retelling of the performance, as it can never fully replicate the specificities of the spatio-temporal context of the live performance. Despite the inability of documentation to wholly articulate the performance, it has often been employed to refer to a past live performance in consequent exhibitions and scholarship.<sup>36</sup> In fact, documentation of an artwork often becomes the principle way a work is viewed by a broad audience, as many more spectators have access to the documentation over time than could have witnessed the live event. This grants the performance document a great deal of power, and many scholars have noted the ways in which the document of the performance can recuperate the performance itself. For example, as O’Dell has argued, “performance art is the virtual equivalent of its representations;” over time, the documentation can come to replace the performance.<sup>37</sup> It is precisely this recuperation that Phelan hoped to avoid by maintaining an ontological divide between the performance and any representation of it.

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<sup>34</sup> Amelia Jones, “Presence in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation,” *Art Journal* 56, no. 4 (1997): 13.

<sup>35</sup> Kathy O’Dell, “Displacing the Haptic: Performance Art, the Photographic Document, and the 1970s.” *Performance Research* 2, no. 1 (1997): 73-74.

<sup>36</sup> Philip Auslander, “The Performativity of Performance Documentation.” *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 28, no. 3 (2006): 1.

<sup>37</sup> O’Dell, “Displacing the Haptic: Performance Art, the Photographic Document, and the 1970s,” 77.

Philip Auslander has challenged Phelan's arguments, contesting the basis of her claim – that the document and the performance can be held as separate entities. In Phelan's construction, the performance event precedes its documentation and is privileged as an authentic moment, subject to contamination by mediation. Auslander destabilizes this binary by insisting that the live and mediated are not opposing forces, but rather coextensive and mutually dependent. Auslander argues that we cannot understand the live without the possibility of technological mediation – rather, it is the possibility of mediation that creates opportunity for the live. The live is, he says, is “that which can be recorded.”<sup>38</sup> Auslander rejects the sequencing implied by Phelan's ontology. Instead, he has argued:

That the mediated is engrained in the live is apparent in the structure of the word *immediate*. The root form is the word *mediate* of which *immediate* is, of course, the negation. Mediation is thus embedded within the im-mediate; the relation is one of mutual dependence, not precession. Far from being encroached upon, contaminated or threatened by mediation, live performance is always already inscribed with traces of possibility of technical mediation... that defines it as live.<sup>39</sup>

In restructuring the temporal relationship of performance and document, Auslander shows that the document is not restricted to referring back to the original performance, as a record to which we must compare the event. The document is released from the responsibility of fidelity to the live performance, and endowed with the possibility of functioning beyond the descriptive mode. Drawing on linguistic philosopher J.L. Austin's concept of the performative utterance, in which the statement is itself the enactment of an action rather than merely its description, Auslander argues that “the act of documenting

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<sup>38</sup> Philip Auslander, “Liveness: Performance and the Anxiety of Simulation,” in *Performance and Cultural Politics* [London; New York: Routledge, 1996], 198.

<sup>39</sup> Auslander, “Liveness: Performance and the Anxiety of Simulation,” 199.

an event as a performance is what constitutes it as such.”<sup>40</sup> Whereas for Phelan the document is a hazard to the ontological purity of the performance, Auslander claims that it is through documentation that we can understand a performance as an artwork.

In arguing this point, Auslander begins with the premise that “no documented performance is performed solely as an end itself: the performance is always at one level raw material for documentation.”<sup>41</sup> Here Auslander positions documentation not as a secondary effect of the live performance, but as an integral factor in the performance’s design. This is particularly clear in the case of artworks that have no audience at the time of the original performance who understand the work *as performance*. Auslander cites the example of Vito Acconci’s *Photo-piece* (1969), in which Acconci walks down a city street snapping photographs each time he blinks. Auslander argues that the documentation in this performance accomplishes more than merely the conventional tasks of the document. On top of proving the performance occurred and allowing the viewer to reconstruct it, the photographs are also “produced *as* (or perhaps *by*) the performance.”<sup>42</sup> The photographs do not merely depict Acconci performing, but instead show the result of the performance. In this way, the photographs are thoroughly ingrained into the structure of performance itself, and the viewer of the photographs is the privileged viewer of the performance, despite their physical absence at the time of the performance. In fact, as Auslander points out, the photographs show that there were no witnesses to the live performance – according to the images the street was empty. Even if

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<sup>40</sup> J. L. Austin, “Lecture I in How to Do Things with Words,” *Performance: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. Philip Auslander. London: Routledge, 2003, 93; Auslander, “The Performativity of Performance Documentation,” 5.

<sup>41</sup> Auslander, “The Performativity of Performance Documentation,” 3.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.



there had been bystanders, Auslander claims that it would make no difference, as Acconci “provided no metacommunication to tell that audience he was performing, not just walking and taking pictures.”<sup>43</sup> The audience to which Acconci is responsible is the audience of the documentation.

Like Acconci in *Photo-piece*, Alÿs does not explicitly communicate to the people he encounters in the streets that he is performing. In fact, the performance is premised on a slight deception of the public, that Alÿs is not an artist performing an action with no real intent to use the gun for harmful purposes, but rather just a person on the street, and one that is potentially dangerous. This, however, is at times complicated by the proximity of Ortega, with video camera in hand, to Alÿs; their closeness might suggest that Alÿs is acting for the camera. Nevertheless, as the physically present audience is incidental, and may not understand Alÿs’s actions to constitute an artwork, the audience to which the work claims responsibility is the one that encounters it through its mediation. In line with Auslander’s arguments, it is the documentation that frames the performance *as an artwork* that an audience can understand and analyze this performance. The viewer of the video installation is offered a privileged view of the performance, as no spectator present for the live performance could witness its entirety – Alÿs winds continually through the streets with no pre-established routes and thus does not provide a stable viewpoint. However, the initial audience cannot be altogether disregarded. As I have previously mentioned, those who were physically present during the live performance were both subjected to the potential hazards of the performance and endowed with the unique opportunity of potentially shaping its outcome. Alÿs’s actions differ from Acconci’s in

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<sup>43</sup> Auslander, “The Performativity of Performance Documentation,” 6.

*Photo-piece* in that Alÿs meant to provoke a disturbance in the street and solicit a reaction, implicating the present audience as a necessary and determinative factor in the outcome of the performance. Further, although the present audience might not have recognized his actions as a work of performance art, their experiences of the performance could have spawned a series of alternative narratives about Alÿs's actions, extending the reach of the performance beyond conventional art circuits.

*Re-enactments*, though, does share another commonality with *Photo-piece*: the use of documentation as a structural element. In both cases, the production of the document is internal to the performance itself. In *Re-enactments*, the second performance and its documentation are based on the footage of the first. This is evident in the many sketches exhibited alongside the two-channel video, which show the storyboarding of the second video based on the timecode readings of the first video [Figure 11]. The first film becomes a springboard for the propagation of further performance and further documents. In fact, "Re-enactment" is more accurately a re-performance of the documentation of the first performance, rather than a recreation of the performance itself. In attempting to mimic the footage of "Real," the actions in producing "Re-enactment" would have differed dramatically from the actions of the first performance, as Ortega set up the camera to capture Alÿs from many different angles. Alÿs does not re-perform the sequence of actions precisely, but rather accommodates the filming of those actions to simulate the footage. The performance and the document are intricately connected – performance generates documents, and the documents generate more performance.

The entanglement of performance and document in *Re-enactments* is further demonstrated in the performative approach to the filming of the live performance.

Although his body is unseen in the footage, we cannot forget that Ortega is co-present as Alÿs performs. Ortega traces largely the same path as Alÿs, typically within a few meters, and like the performer, he also holds an instrument with which to “shoot,” the Sony Handycam he films with. His presence is perhaps most noticeable in “Real.” It is Ortega’s voice at the start of the video where he corroborates Alÿs’s statement describing the actions in the video, and it is his step that jolts the camera as he moves through the streets. Ortega’s actions are so close in kind to Alÿs’s it is difficult to designate him as merely a documentarian. A more apt classification of his role might be a co-performer, as his actions are vital to both the live performance and its mediation.

The dividing line between the performative gesture and the documentary gesture dematerializes here, as Ortega performs *through* the act of documenting. Likewise, Alÿs performs *to be documented*. As I have mentioned, the parameters of the work are simple – the filming of the performance is one of the few constraints of an otherwise open-ended schema. From its outset, the performance was conceived to be filmed; it is this very factor that facilitates the meticulous re-staging of the performance for the second video.

In this light, we can view the videos of *Re-enactments* as more than just documents of Alÿs’s performance, as they are produced by the performance and through a performative act, parallel to Alÿs’s. The document in *Re-enactments*, then, does not function simply as a spur to memory, as per Phelan’s claim. With an absence of a physically present, informed audience, whose memory would it spur? Following Phelan’s argument, one assumes there is some special knowledge of the performance available to those physically present, but *Re-enactments* offers less to its first witnesses, those on the street, than those who see the mediated performance in video.

While in Phelan's conception *Re-enactments* might be better suited strictly to the category of video art rather than performance, as she argues that the document of performance art belongs to the medium of its transmission rather than to the genre of performance, I argue that Alÿs's live performance does not need to be held separate from *Re-enactments* as a video work. Rather than framing the videos that comprise *Re-enactments* as documents of the performance, we can instead consider how the live performance works in tandem with the videos and how the documentation, in this case, completes the performance.



## CONCLUSION

In the Museum of Modern Art's 2011 exhibition "Francis Alÿs: A Story of Deception," Alÿs displayed an assortment of other documents alongside the videos of *Re-enactments*, including photographs, the artist's notes and sketches, and a handful of news clippings. While the photographs and notes both refer directly to Alÿs's performance, the news clippings stand apart – each show an image of a criminal cropped from a newspaper [Figure S 12-15]. The photographs are cut out from their respective sources without citation and exclude any accompanying text aside from the image's caption. Three of the four news clippings feature images of Mexican criminals, each anonymous, captioned only by their accused crime. In one photograph, a man stands in the center of the frame wearing a black vest and grey hood pulled over his head [Figure 12]. The caption reads, "Así, con estos modos, este individuo se la abalanzó a otra persona y ni tardo ni perezoso la apuñaló; los hechos, en Naucalpan; el lesionado se debate entre la vida y la muerte" (So, with these methods, this individual rushed at the other person and neither slowly nor lazily, he stabbed her; the events took place in Naucalpan; the injured is hovering between life and death.) The man smirks, looking directly forward with his hands held out menacingly as if threatening to lunge at the viewer as he did at his victim. Another clipping shows two men with the headline, in bolded, capitalized font: "ELLOS MATARON A LAS HERMANAS EN IZTAPALAPA" (They killed the sisters in Iztapalapa) [Figure 13]. These men stand with their backs against a wall, clothing disheveled, and

hold their palms toward the viewer as if to attempt to halt the pursuit of the photographer. Yet, their faces are firm – unfazed and unrepentant. These news clippings offer a sampling of sensational headlines that publicize violent crimes. They each frame the criminal as hostile and unapologetic, defined only by the horrific deeds of which they are accused.

The fourth image contrasts with the rest. The photograph shows President Clinton, the U.S. president at the time the work was made, standing before a podium flanked by a captive, smiling audience [Figure 15]. The photograph is captioned: “Bill Lann Lee and his wife, Carolyn Yee, laughing in the Oval Office as President Clinton described his puppy.” Although Clinton has been accused of criminal behavior, he was famously impeached during the second term of his presidency under charges of perjury resulting from the investigation of his affair with White House intern Monica Lewinsky, his inclusion in this array of photographs does not suggest a relationship of equivalence with the Mexican criminals; rather, this juxtaposition suggests a causal relationship. As I have discussed previously, Clinton’s signing of NAFTA in 1994 marked a shift in the country’s economic fortune. Despite the promises of economic development, the years immediately following the signing of NAFTA saw skyrocketing unemployment, and correspondingly, a surge in crime.

With the inclusion of these images, which are dated a year after *Re-enactments*, Alÿs explicitly addresses the characteristic of this work over which he has since expressed regret – the “ingredient of urban violence” that endorses the stereotype of

Mexico City as a hotbed of crime.<sup>44</sup> This assembly of these images calls into question the ways in which these stereotypes about criminality are constructed and reinforced in the media. The images all share a formal similarity; in each photograph, the criminal stands with his hands reaching outward in some manner, either as a threat or an expression of bravado. Just as the videos that comprise *Re-enactments* exaggerate the markers of their mediation to call attention to their framing, this collection of photographs stresses the hands of these criminals, not just as the instruments of their offenses, but to foreground their theatrical quality.

The images of Mexican criminals that Alÿs presents are grotesque portraits that stage the criminal as hostile and unremorseful. Positioning these images alongside the videos of *Re-enactments* extends the scope of Alÿs's investigation into the function of the document within the artwork to comment on the effects of mediation more broadly in popular mass media. If *Re-enactments* brings to light the determinative force of documentation in shaping a viewer's understanding of an event, these images further demonstrate the performative function of media by stressing the staged quality of these images. These photographs perform the cliché of the criminal that buttress the stereotypes of Mexico as a hub of violent crime.

The critical readings of *Re-enactments* by Gallo and Medina that I have outlined in this thesis consider the cultural implications of Alÿs's performance – both how the judicial system responded to this criminal behavior and what symbolic meanings this action carries – but neither offers a formal or in-depth reading of the videos comprising

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<sup>44</sup> Francis Alÿs in "Russell Ferguson in Conversation with Francis Alÿs," in Francis Alÿs, ed. Cuauhtémoc Medina, Russell Ferguson, and Jean Fisher [New York: Phaidon, 2007], 42.



the work. Gallo and Medina comment exclusively on *Re-enactments* as a performance acted out in Mexico City; neither writer takes the videos into serious consideration in their analysis. Disregarding the documentation, which I have argued is integral to the work, severely limits the possible readings of this work. Beyond the symbolic consequences of Alÿs's performative criminal act, this work also functions as a study in the representation of criminality.

In the two-channel video, we encounter two familiar models in the portrayal of crime in the media. "Real" visually invokes both surveillance footage, via the timer, and the amateur footage of a first-hand witness, which is increasingly included in mainstream news broadcast. "Re-enactment" draws on the model of dramatized recreations of crime, popular in entertainment programs that take on sensational crimes as subject matter. As I have pointed out, neither of the videos in *Re-enactments* can be held as a faithful record of events to which they refer; rather, they reveal the staging involved in any method of documentation. Additionally, *Re-enactments* rehearses the repetition and proliferation of images of crime in popular media, as news broadcasts commonly disseminate the same images of crime and replay video clips of crime repeatedly. *Re-enactments* plays out the crime in double and on a loop; we watch as the crime is committed over and over again. The videos are supplemented by even more images of the same crime in photographs and video stills, demonstrating how a single crime often propagates a mass of repeating images.

The news clippings exhibited with *Re-enactments* highlight the theater of sensational crime as it is played out in the media. The association of *Re-enactments* with these images demonstrates, to some degree, Alÿs's collusion in circulating spectacular

images of crime. The still images of the performance exhibited alongside, for example, feature dramatic images of Alÿs from his performance – in one, a diptych, Alÿs is shown from behind, the silhouette of the gun is cast in shadow [Figure 16]. Below that is a close-up image of the gun in Alÿs's hand, held at his waist. However, Alÿs's works bring to the fore the performative qualities of these images – they are not presented as transparent documents, but rather as staged scenes. In dialogue with the videos of *Re-enactments*, these documents are presented not as evidentiary records of crime, but rather as materials that likewise perform their manipulation.



Figure 12: Francis Alÿs, *Untitled*, 2002. Newspaper clipping exhibited with *Re-enactments* in “Francis Alÿs: A Story of Deception” at the Museum of Modern Art, New York in 2011. © 2011 Francis Alÿs.



Figure 13: Francis Alÿs, *Untitled*, 2002. Newspaper clipping exhibited with *Re-enactments* in “Francis Alÿs: A Story of Deception” at the Museum of Modern Art, New York in 2011. © 2011 Francis Alÿs.



Figure 14: Francis Alÿs, *Untitled*, 2002. Newspaper clipping exhibited with *Re-enactments* in “Francis Alÿs: A Story of Deception” at the Museum of Modern Art, New York in 2011. © 2011 Francis Alÿs.



Figure 15: Francis Alÿs, *Untitled*, 2002. Newspaper clipping exhibited with *Re-enactments* in “Francis Alÿs: A Story of Deception” at the Museum of Modern Art, New York in 2011. © 2011 Francis Alÿs.



Figure 16: Francis Alÿs, *Untitled*, 2002. Two colored photographs exhibited with *Re-enactments* in “Francis Alÿs: A Story of Deception” at the Museum of Modern Art, New York in 2011. © 2011 Francis Alÿs.

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