Francis Alÿs studied architecture and urbanism in Europe before moving to Mexico City in the mid-1980s and shifting his focus to art. In the 1990s he became a crucial player in the revitalization of the Mexico City art scene. Today, Alÿs is one of the leading artists of our time: a global transmute whose work shifts across media, from painting and installation to video and performance. He has participated in numerous exhibitions in galleries, museums and biennials, from Tokyo to Sao Paulo to Venice. A retrospective of his work opened at Tate Modern in London in June 2010. A version of that exhibition opens at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in May 2011. Francis Alÿs: The Moment Where Sculpture Happens marks the artist’s first solo exhibition in the region.

CHECKLIST:
Francis Alÿs
In 1999, Answers, Belgian, trees and works in Mexico City
Corso Pintoresco (Biokor Center), 1990–2010
Light table with 15 drawings on vellum and 1 color transparencies
Courtesy of the artist
Ambulantes (street vendor) II, 1992–2006
80 full frame: carved proportion
Courtesy of the artist/David Zwirner, New York
Ambulantes (street vendor) II, 1992–2003
80×50 cm: carved proportion
Courtesy of the artist/David Zwirner, New York
Paradox of Praxis 2 (sometimes doing something Leads to Nothing), 1997
Video documentation of an action (58 minutes)
Courtesy of the artist, David Zwirner, New York
Looking Up, 2001
In collaboration with Rafael Ortega
Video documentation of an action (1:15 minutes)
Courtesy of the artist, David Zwirner, New York
Paso Damién (Hopping Leg), 2003–2011
Single channel video (6:58 minutes)
Courtesy of the artist

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY:

ALL TEXTS BY:
James Oles, Senior Curator: Art Department and Adjunct Curator, Davis Museum

Courtesy of the artist/David Zwirner, New York.
Francis Alÿs's Cityscape

Forms part of his robust sign-painter series, which he worked on between 1993 and 1997. The triptych consists of a small original by Alÿs and larger versions of the same image created by two Mexico City sign painters, Juan García and Emilio Rivera. Each work shows an urban scene devoid of recognizable landmarks. Indeed, Alÿs draws our attention to something we might otherwise have missed, using—as he has said—the "aura of painting to look the viewer's attention." The point of view, which removes us from the social life found at street level, makes identifying the specific locale impossible. This might be Mexico City, but the billboards, water tanks, steel frames, and concrete walls are characteristic of an "international style" that can be found in any world metropolis.

The three scenes initially seem identical but actually vary in several ways. Alÿs's small and unassuming version is rendered in smooth veils of oil paint; the pale colors and indistinct forms reinforce the quiet melancholy of the scene. One critic has noted that paintings like this have an "aura of misty romanticism" about them, as if Hopper, Morandi, di Chirico and Richter had collectively guided his brush. By contrast, the sign painters work in commercial enamel, applied to a metal sheet (alumin) nailed to a wooden stretcher. This is the same method traditionally used to paint commercial signs for exterior display in front of shops and cinemas. The two men, however, use different techniques. Emilio Rivera works with an airbrush, an elaborate process that requires the use of masking tape and paper stencils, creating more atmospheric outlines. Juan García uses a classic brush and takes a more hard-edged approach.

The collaborative process recalls Renaissance and Baroque workshops, where multiple versions of famous works were commissioned by elite patrons. Yet Alÿs's conceptual project questions traditional hierarchies. His eroded "original" looks like something found in a flea market—a tingle, a fake, and flashier. Though Alÿs orchestrated the entire project, each version is a personal interpretation resulting from dialogue and direct exchange with the jazz musicians riffs on an original theme.

The compositions vary as well, and these differences are the result of artistic license taken by the sign painters and encouraged by the artist. As they enhance his "original" they add new elements (the "entrails" of painting, for example) and clarify vague aspects, like including curtains or reflections in the windows. These iconographic variations remind us of the importance of close formal analysis and connoisseurship, skills traditionally used to distinguish works by masters from workshop copies or even fakes. But they further raise the issue of memory: the small original is like an "event" fading into the past that is confronted by the sharper recollections of two eyewitnesses, neither of whom remembers things quite the same way.

This triptych is also an important example of conceptual art that draws attention to the ideas, processes and structures that lie beneath the material surface. In particular, the realist paintings form part of Francis Alÿs’s ongoing investigation of social networks in a megapolis where the old and the new are in constant conflict and proliferation. The sign painters, who identified themselves directly with the working class and created works designed for public viewing. Like them, the sign painters grid out small drawings for exchange, sign painters historically KB109.

Once several versions of the small original had been completed, I produced a new 'model' that incorporated the most significant elements of each painter's interpretation. This compiled image was in turn used as the basis for a new generation of copies made by sign painters, and so on, ad infinitum, according to market demand. The underlying intention was to work against the idea of a painting as a unique object and to reduce its market value by producing an open edition of images while maintaining copyright on each of them. As time went on, the elaboration of the original became increasingly influenced by the prospect of the upcoming collaboration, and as mutual dependency grew, considerations about authorship arose. Further blurring the line between the model, the copy and the copy of the copy. 1

Francis Alÿs's sign paintings fit within a long tradition of signature signs, either painting them (the "original" (Vuitton's Génissieu's Signboard of 1721), incorporating them into new works (Duchamp's readymade Apollinaire Enamelled of 1916-17), or even employing sign painters, as Duchamp did in his last painting (Nu et, 1918) and as the conceptual artist John Baldessari did in his famous text paintings (1956-68). Yet Alÿs's work includes an understated social critique that goes beyond Duchampian ironies, and that is less distant than Baldessari's project. Though it may have held on in Mexico longer than in other places, signpainting is others—perhaps many others—and itis readily digestible appearing in an age of digital reproduction and global exchange. In fact, the "international" architecture that appears in its Mexico City paintings remains a kind of new modernity made so many crafts like bricklaying, stone carving, and blacksmithing—redundant. Alÿs seeks to recover the sign-painters' highly refined skills, not only employing them but learning from them, forcing us to recant any lament what we have lost.

In the Rotulus series, Alÿs wanted to challenge the economic rules of the formal art market, collecting inexpensive works that could (almost) be commercially reproduced. In 1993 the paintings sold for US $1000 each, regardless of authorship. Over time, however, Alÿs's attempt to gauge the market failed: sets were created, broken up, and resold on the secondary market, sometimes to his chagrin. Yet even today, these sign paintings call into question fundamental ideas about how we value works of art. At a time when "masterpieces" can sell for over a hundred million dollars. In Cityscape, the two copies are larger, more dramatic, and, one could argue, more finely painted than the small original. It is their presence, in fact, that gives visual and conceptual complexity to that original. On the other hand, however, without original ideas, where would we be?"