



TACITA DEAN. ANALOGUE: FILMS, PHOTOGRAPHS, DRAWINGS 1991–2006

FRANCIS ALÿS. «THE SIGN PAINTING PROJECT (1993-97): A REVISION»

May 13 to September 24, 2006

#### MEDIA INFORMATION: THE EXHIBITION

This year's exhibition, the fourth at Schaulager, is dedicated to the work of the English artist Tacita Dean (born in Canterbury in 1965, lives in Berlin) and the Belgian artist Francis Alÿs (born in Antwerp in 1959, lives in Mexico City). With Francis Alÿs and Tacita Dean, Schaulager is turning, not unexpectedly to a younger generation. Dean and Alÿs began their artistic activity in the early 1990s; today they are right in the middle of it, representing highly individual and well-respected positions in the world of contemporary art.

With seventeen film installations and numerous photographs and drawings, including several recent works, *Analogue* is the most extensive presentation yet of Tacita Dean's work. The powerful yet little appreciated interaction between Dean's drawings and her films is emphasised in this exhibition both through the selection of works and the exhibition architecture. It provides insight into an oeuvre in which everything is combined with everything else in fascinating ways, with countless interconnections. By contrast, the exhibition concentrates on a single work by Francis Alÿs: the *Sign Painting Project*, a single, multi-part, spectacular project that was produced between 1993 and 1997, presented here in a comprehensive way for the first time, with a selection of more than sixty paintings and many sketches. This concentration on the dissemination of an exemplary project is in keeping with an artistic practice marked profoundly by experiment, action and collaboration.

In terms of results, the work of Alÿs and Dean is quite different. Yet this exhibition consist not of two independent presentations, but rather a deliberate combination. The two artists are related in terms of the attitudes and interests that fuel their work. Both artists are trying to make it possible to imagine ephemeral things through visual means; both of them direct their attention to phenomena that are scarcely tangible and that easily escape. Their gazes shift, as it were, from the centre to the marginal areas in the perceptual field in order to bring unspectacular things back to the centre from there. Among the specific features of this shift in gaze that Alÿs and Dean undertake is that for both of them the motif of walking, being underway and travelling in various forms plays a central role. From this attitude Dean and Alÿs develop diverse 'images', each of which has its own subversive poetics. This attitude is not new per se, only in its specific form, and in that respect it is highly topical in a contemporary world in which binding perspectives are constantly slipping away.

## MEDIA INFORMATION: TACITA DEAN. ANALOGUE: FILMS, PHOTOGRAPHS, DRAWINGS 1991–2006

Film installations are the most striking element in the work of Tacita Dean. Less prominent, but closely connected to them are her works in other media: drawings, not just on paper but also on wall panels, photographs or alabaster stones, short stories and photographs, which include both found photographs and her own. This close connection of films, drawings, photography and narrative is reflected in the exhibition's conception and its installation. The exhibition consists of seven rooms that are entered like islands. They contain several films and other works, which enter into dialogue with one another.

For the most part, the films are brief 16-mm projections shown in loops. They are not films in which the story breaks free. The projections are rather images that, though they move, do not 'run away' with the story, instead remain present and effective as images. The films show fragments of reality – buildings, abandoned spaces or atmospheric events that are shown in real time with the associated ambient noises. Dean finds the sites and motifs for her film in her surroundings: in the landscapes of her childhood in Kent, to which she returns again and again; in Berlin, where she has been living for three years and in places where she has stayed for briefer periods, usually by invitation, such as Prague and Cork or Madagascar and Columbus, Ohio.

The films could be described as documentary if not for the specific movement of the camera that turns them into something quite different. The camera probingly films objects and places and captures their light; it feels out surfaces, bringing out unnoticed phenomena of the visible and then losing them again. For the movement of searching and exploring always has an aspect of slipping out of control as well. It moves slowly, without any technical tricks. The cinematic time does not correspond to the time of a plot development; rather, it is the time it takes to perceive what is seen, the time in which the object of the film can become a subject. As a result, the film images sometimes recall early still lifes in their intensity.

It is no coincidence, but rather crucially important, that Tacita Dean works with the analogous medium of film, whose technical requirements and qualities seem to be a response to her pictorial ideas. This is also evident from the fact that, from the outset, her entire creative oeuvre has repeatedly thematized the medium film.

All of Tacita Dean's works, whether moving or still images, are about the attempt to capture things, people, places or atmospheres that are on the verge of disappearing, escaping or changing radically. "All the things I am attracted to are just about to disappear." Yet the focus is not on a melancholic recollection of something gone; they never tell of times past. Crucial

to recording these images is finding the right moment – or better: the right constellation or situation – that contains the shift from the still present to the just disappeared. "My work is always about trapping things before they change."

'Coincidence' is the magic word with which Dean describes her 'method' for hitting upon the 'right moment'. It cannot be captured by force; it must be sought and courted, but ultimately it simply has to be hit upon and seen. This gives these images something magical and unreal.

Dean writes brief texts for each film. They are disguised as commentaries on the films, but in truth they are much more voluble than the films and they continue the narrative of Dean's work on another plane. The same things, places and people found in the film become the point of departure for the texts. They are not, however, their focus; rather, the texts narrate coincidences and circumstances that drive the search and lead the narrative from one 'found object' to the next. The texts recall entries in a logbook or a travel report – a journey in which the movements of seeking are determined by a willingness to give room to the unexpected and to chance and in which the destination of the journey plays no role whatever.

## MEDIA INFORMATION: FRANCIS ALÿS «THE SIGN PAINTING PROJECT (1993-97): A REVISION»

Francis Alÿs' *Sign Painting Project* was produced in collaboration with several professional sign painters from Mexico City – namely, the *rotulistas* Juan García, Enrique Huerta and Emilio Rivera. The project includes countless paintings which have since been strewn by the winds and for which no comprehensive list exists. *The Sign Painting Project: A Revision* is the attempt to assemble some of these paintings not only to present this imaginative ensemble but also and above all to raise for discussion the artistic practice of collaboration expressed therein. It appears here clearly in Alÿs' work for the first time, but its influence on his work is even stronger today.

*The Sign Painting Project*, like many of Francis Alÿs' works, is closely connected to the place where it was produced. In this case it was Mexico City, where Alÿs has lived since the late 1980s. Since the serious devastation from the earthquake in 1985, Mexico's metropolis has grown into a megalopolis with twenty to twenty-four million inhabitants. Life in Mexico City, especially in its old town, and everyday life contrary to all reason represent the fertile soil in which Alÿs' work grows. His first efforts at art began with purposeless wandering in the city, and this remains the basis for all his work right up to the present. Observations of quotidian events or coincidental, undramatic micro-events ignited the ideas for the choreographies that turn a stroll into a work of art. A *paseo* or *walk* designed in this way can take the form of a one-time action that is documented in texts, sketches, postcards and videos or can become the occasion for work that takes on a form autonomous of the actual walk.

*The Sign Painting Project* being exhibited in Schaulager is an example of such an action that has developed in connection with Alÿs' wanderings in Mexico City. It is, however, a group of works independent of them. Around 1992, Alÿs began to paint small-format oil paintings, each of which depicts a male figure in a grey suit. Each of these paintings shows the figure performing a different action whose meaning is not evident. Alÿs took the style and type of each figure from signs that he encountered during forays into his neighbourhood. The signs are found on the pavement or on the façades of businesses; they are the work of professional sign painters, the *rotulistas*. Alÿs' oil paintings marked the beginning of a project whose continuation he described as follows: "To make the series more anonymous, and to reduce the market value of each painting I commissioned various rotulistas to produce enlarged copies of my originals. There would be no limit to the potential versions of the original, nor would their execution be confined to one studio per model. As time went on, some of the copies became based on new versions done by other rotulistas. It also appeared that once the structure of the scene had been grasped, little attention was paid to the model. In fact,

the work is mainly impelled by discussion of the scene at hand, amongst other gossip. The project has gradually deviated from its original illustrative purpose, as the copying process became increasingly important. By now it doesn't matter whether you are looking at a model, a copy or a copy of a copy. I myself have started copying my own models, under the influence of the new versions."

Following simple rules, Alÿs has launched a project in which central questions of artistic practice are raised in an uncommonly visual and poetic way: namely, the theme of collaboration and the associated questions of authorship, original and copy. As his most recent projects in Lima and Havana demonstrate, Alÿs is concerned with these issues now more than ever – *The Sign Painting Project* marks its powerful visual beginning.

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