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Fabiola on tour

I

At first glance, all the paintings that belong to Francis Alÿs' collection look remarkably alike, for they are all portraits of the same subject, Saint Fabiola. Depicted in accordance with her canonical iconography, the demure young woman is shown in profile, facing left, wearing a crimson veil. Their prototype is a painting executed in 1885 by a late-nineteenth-century French academician, Jean-Jacques Henner.[1] Given that the original was lost long ago, each must have been based on a reproduction, perhaps a book illustration, a picture postcard or an engraving. Although thousands of mechanically reproduced images have been made since then, none is included in this collection: every one of the almost four hundred examples was created by hand. While in its iconography, style and composition, Jean-Jacques Henner's portrait of this fourth century saint may seem unexceptional, his delicate rendering of the young woman's physiognomy is deceptively subtle and, as evidenced by these examples, not easily replicated.[2] Most of these works were made by amateurs as the considerable breadth in their technical skills attests. Though lacking the proficiency expected of a professional artist, it is often precisely those limitations that account for the eloquence



Jean-Jacques Henner, *Fabiola*, 1885. 13 × 16½ inches. Location unknown.

1
Evidence suggesting the paintings were copied from reproductions of the lost original is found, for example, in the variations in size, the reversal of the motif so that Fabiola faces right (in several instances), and the substitution of the tonally similar green for the customary red in the cloak. Evidence that suggests no color photograph had ever been taken of the original may be deduced from the date of the work's disappearance (1889) but also from the wide range of reds employed for the veil (following Jean-Jacques Henner's known taste, Venetian red being most favored), and in the red-green reversals. Some of the Fabiola paintings may have come from second-generation images, that is, from postcards made of a copy by another artist rather than from a reproduction of Henner's original.

2
Henner's depiction had its visual sources in the portraiture of secular subjects that the Bellinis and other Venetian artists introduced in the sixteenth century. Given that profile portraiture was linked to Classical as distinct from Christian traditions of representation, his iconography could be said to meld intimations of her patrician background with the Christian virtues she acquired through her penance, charitable deeds, and piety.

that makes the best of them so charged. Among yet other differences that undermine any lingering impression of homogeneity within the group are the ways in which some of these painters, consciously or not, have enriched the standardized schema by introducing features belonging to another model, perhaps living, more often probably ideal or imaginary. An unusually wide range of media further contributes to the collection's diversity: oil paint, gouache, embroidery, enamel, plaster, ceramic, and, in one especially memorable instance, seeds and beans have all been employed.

Little noted in the ecclesiastical pantheon for centuries after her canonization in AD 537, Fabiola finally escaped from obscurity on the wave of the Catholic Revival that swept late nineteenth-century Europe. The biographical account provided by the early Church Father Saint Jerome, her first advocate, was succinct. A noble Roman matron, Fabiola left her abusive husband and remarried, only to be widowed some years later. After converting to Christianity and making public penance for the sin of divorce, she then devoted the remainder of her life (and fortune) to charitable work, founding the first hospital for the poor and needy on the outskirts of Rome in the late fourth century. Her rise to cult status only began in the 1850s after a racier version of her story was published. A romantic historical novel of the kind popularized by Sir Walter Scott, it was written by a pillar of the Catholic Revival in England, Cardinal Nicholas Wiseman. Fabiola, or the Church of the Catacombs soon became a best seller read by generations of impressionable young minds. In addition to her role as the protector of abused women, Fabiola is also the patron saint of nurses. Her widespread veneration may therefore reflect not only the popularity of Wiseman's lurid tale but the concurrent growth of the modern nursing profession, whose ideals were manifest in heroic sacrifice, viz. Florence Nightingale.[3]

3 The only other iconographic rendering of Fabiola known to this author is by Edward Jakob von Steinle, whose version, an oil painting dating from 1855 (the year after the publication of Wiseman's book), is now in the collection of the Städelsches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt am Main.





left: No. 185; catalogue raisonné; 22 ¼ × 17 ¼ × 1 ⅜ inches; Date unknown; Grains, seeds, and legumes mounted on wood composite panel or board; Provenance: Mexico, 2004, gift. Photo: Francesca Esmay. Courtesy Francis Alÿs.

right: Cover of Cardinal Wiseman's Novel *Fabiola*, published by Editorial Diana, Mexico City, 1953.

Perhaps because she has been esteemed by women above all, Fabiola never became the object of an official or public worship expressed in the form of dedicated sites and shrines. Devotion to her has remained at the level of the private; a personal supplication. This may account, too, for the fact that Henner's economic head-shot was never supplemented by narrative variants, such as scenes of her nursing the infirm, as was the case for example with Saint Elizabeth of Hungary who, similarly, dedicated her life to the ill and infirm.[4] Later artists have stuck closely to his definitive portrayal. If faithful adherence to an icon's fundamental lineaments ensures its potency then traces of subjective or expressive distortion are likely to be more inadvertent than intentional. Yet even while conforming to that stringent prescription many also sought to infuse their subject with naturalistic overtones as if to impart a certain intimacy and contemporaneity to their model.

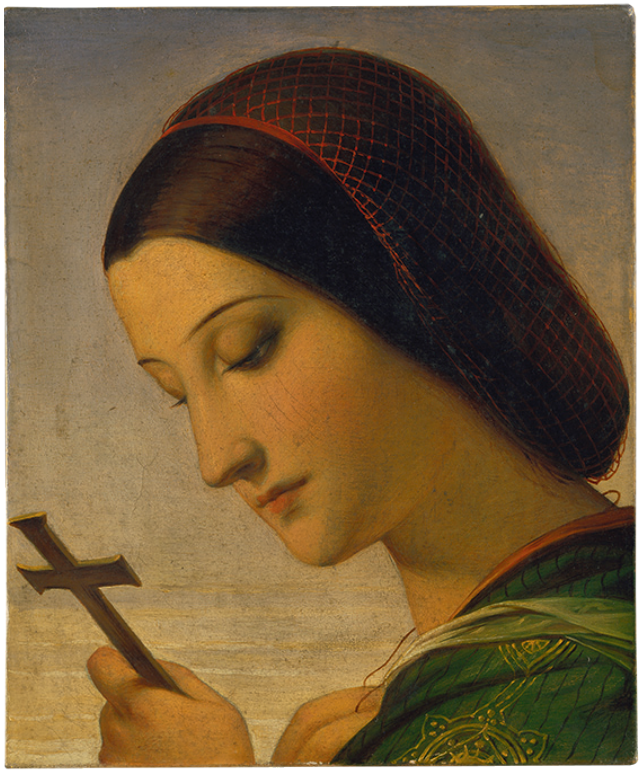
From the end of the nineteenth century copies of Henner's image proliferated in the form of printed media as well as in painting; and far into the second half of the twentieth century, popular interest continued to generate a considerable mass market for photographic reproductions.[5] Hand-painted versions by both professional and amateur artists, too, continue to find a ready audience. Although some of the works in this collection amassed from cities throughout Western Europe and Latin America have a patina, close inspection reveals that most were made in recent decades. In many instances, artificial aging has been reinforced by the accidents of history. Shorn of the frames that once enhanced and protected them, quite a number have abraded edges or are otherwise

4
Namesake of many women in Mexico and Belgium, including the dowager queen, Fabiola was also the subject of two films, one directed by Enrico Guazzoni and released in 1918, the other one released in 1949 by Alessandro Blasetti, both based on Cardinal Wiseman's novel. See, also, Fabiola Santiago, 'St. Fabiola: An Art Exhibit Reminds a Cuban Exile How She Learned to Appreciate Her Name,' Miami Herald (February 2, 2008), p. 1E.

5
Until recently, the Louvre sold reproductions of this work, a perennial favorite. For current discussions relating to works depicting Fabiola, see Antiques and the Arts Online, http://antiquesandthearts.com/forumresponse.asp (accessed March 9, 2011).

left: Edward Jakob von Steinle, *Fabiola*, 1855. Städelsches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt am Main. © Städel Museum – ARTOTHEK.

right: A series of some 254 Clasicos de Lujo matchbook covers, sold throughout Mexico in the mid-twentieth century, featured renowed old master paintings. The first in the series (preceding works by Velazquez, Titian et al.), is devoted to Henner's *Fabiola*.





damaged. None, however, reveals the type of restoration customarily accorded to artworks that are highly valued. In short, no attempt has been made to redeem their fall from grace by disguising the signs that almost all were sourced from flea markets and similar haunts: their lowly status is incontestable.[6]

Conventional distinctions between works of fine and applied art are blurred in this collection partly due to the unusually broad range of supports as well as media: glass and velvet as well as the more customary canvas and board are all found here. While most of these works can be described literally as copies after an old master painting, it is unlikely they were undertaken for the usual pedagogical reasons (both the rudimentary levels of technical proficiency and the decline into which Henner's reputation has sunk argue against that).[7] More likely, they met functional needs. The singular character of this collection is thus determined by a combination of factors: it focuses on a single subject, every example has been hand crafted; and most were designed as devotional images.

From the first tentative discussions concerning the exhibition of his collection, Francis Alÿs placed certain restrictions on its presentation: it should not be installed in either conventional white-cube galleries, normative to the display of modernist and contemporary artworks, nor in raw warehouse spaces of the kind generally preferred for post-sixties installation art. In their stead, he proposed a historicizing context, like that reserved for old master paintings. To date, the collection has toured to four quite different types of institution: the Hispanic Society of America in New York City (where it was on view from September 2007 through early April 2008); the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (September 2008 through March 2009), the National Portrait Gallery in London (May to September 2009) and the Abadia de Santo Domingo de Silos in northern Spain (October 2009 to February 2010). On each occasion the works were installed salon style in a separate space – one or two galleries – whose decor, while tailored to the needs of the collection, echoed that of its wider context. Displaying Alÿs's works in these venues prompts interpretations filtered and shaped by the framing circumstances – the policies, programs, and politics of each host organization – and broader cultural concerns.[8]

The Hispanic Society, the New York City venue was founded in the early 20th century by a private patron, Archer Huntington. Devoted to the culture and history of the Iberian peninsular, it comprises a research library and various collections ranging across the visual arts from Neolithic times onwards. Alÿs's works were installed on dark wood paneled walls in an annex that normally displays 19th century Spanish paintings and vernacular artifacts such as pottery and textiles assembled from rural regions throughout the country. Here, as

6 'Flea markets are black holes of the signified,' Cuauhtémoc Medina argues eloquently, 'places where objects lose their inherited meanings that gave them a sense of belonging, where they acquire new meanings as they pass to other hands.' [Cuauhtémoc Medina, 'Fabiola: Who [doesn't] know[s] her?' in *Fabiola* [Mexico City: Curare, 1994], p. 11.]

7 Copies were traditionally made by professional artists or apprentices who took on the servile task of making a version of an old master painting to attain, or refine, their manual skills or to demonstrate their prowess in a particular artistic style or idiom. Alternatively, copies might be commissioned by collectors who wished to have their own version or replica of an acclaimed masterpiece, or even by newly founded institutions seeking to educate their untutored general audiences; as vehicles that could form the tastes of novice viewers according to standards and values established by the academic canon, such copies served pedagogical ends.

8 Each presentation has been accompanied by copies of the collection's catalogue raisonné, in which the usual scholarly apparatus has been brought to bear on every item in the checklist, even though these mostly anonymous exhibits have scant pedigrees and slim provenances. Memorable more for its miscellaneous details than for its ability to confer a legitimating authority, this reference tool does not escape a hint of parody

elsewhere in the institution, the artifacts have been arranged typologically rather than according to notions of connoisseurship, or to chronological or historiographical models. To those visitors who came in search of a project by Alÿs, this presentation of the Fabiola paintings assumed something of an ethnographic character, in that it could be approached in terms similar to those applied to adjacent groups of artifacts.[9] At the same time, the collection could also be viewed as the product of a highly specialized if somewhat eccentric collecting policy of the kind that had fuelled the Hispanic Society's maverick founder in his omnivorous quest. Neither a wunderkammer nor a museum devised according to current tenets, this institution is wreathed in the aura of a bygone era – that same era in which Henner's painting took on cult status. Thus to the inadvertent visitor the Fabiola collection could easily have seemed an integral component of this somewhat otherworldly domain.

9
His conceptually driven practice has no signature style. Since he tends to work on a project-by-project basis, with each site-related undertaking assuming a distinct content and formal idiom, few of even his most informed fans could have anticipated the nature and scope of these in situ interventions, let alone their content.

A very different context was provided by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, with its encyclopedic spread of art works spanning numerous cultures and eras. Here Alÿs's project was installed in galleries adjacent to those devoted to displays from the Old Master collection. Visitors could move seamlessly from one to another, as if the conventional boundaries between masterpieces and journeyman renderings had become irrelevant, as if the disciplinary governance exercised by questions of authorship, provenance, authentication and attribution had been temporarily relaxed. For, in contradistinction to standard museum practices, Alÿs's collection privileges the replica over the original, the anonymous over the renowned, the amateur over the professional, and the lowly and commonplace over the unique and precious. Seen in juxtaposition with LACMA's diverse European holdings, however, such precepts became moot to all but the initiated.

When encountered en masse at the National Portrait Gallery, where they were installed in galleries assigned to changing exhibitions, Alÿs's portraits invited other kinds of conjecture and analysis. Since the National Portrait Gallery restricts its holdings to representations of verifiable historical figures, there are few portraits of religious figures. In the case of individuals who lived in the distant past, the validity of some of the ascriptions attached to works purporting to represent them is open to question. So too are the terms in which likeness was imagined subject to shifting criteria. Not surprisingly, given the stylized generality of Henner's depiction and its imaginary relation to its distant subject, there is no historic work in this institution quite like any of these portrayals of Fabiola. Their affinities lie with more contemporary figures, with celebrity film stars and pop singers. Tellingly, today artists and photographers from all ranks and persuasions – from the paparazzi to official portraitists routinely commissioned to enshrine dusty dignitaries – succumb to the glamour of media stars and offer their tributes, as the renown of Andy Warhol's inimitable *Gold Marilyn*, 1962, makes evident. Seen in this context Alÿs's pictures of Fabiola become inflected with a contemporaneity impossible in any of the other venues in which they have been exhibited to date.

Fabiola entered a religious institution for the first time at Silos. In contrast to the local parish church nearby, the monastery's 18th century church contains only one chapel dedicated to a specific saint. The body of the Santo Domingo, the Abbey's patron, rests in front of an altar in a side chapel closed to all but the resident monks. After Vespers each evening they file past his tomb in silent tribute. (Several devotional images of other saints can be found in the Abbey's research library and a small museum open to the public.) The site for the presentation of Alÿs's collection was a former underground storage room now converted into a gallery for the presentation of contemporary art projects.[10] Located immediately outside in the cloister, are the famous 11th and 12th century sculptures on account of which the Abbey has become a national cultural landmark, and the source of much its considerable tourism. Like most visitors to the other three institutions in which the Fabiola paintings have been presented the bulk of its audience here did not come in search of Alÿs's project, and indeed may not have recognized this presentation as an art project, for it could quite easily and, indeed quite properly, be viewed as a display of devotional artifacts. Distinctions typically drawn between, for example, objects designed for public as opposed to private veneration, or between reflections of popular faith and established forms of devotion, or between art works with religious subjects and religious artifacts with strong aesthetic qualities, prove difficult to maintain under such conditions.

10 The Museo Reina Sofia in Madrid has orchestrated a program of contemporary art exhibitions here for more than twenty years.

In Basle yet another kind of situation has been proffered. Under the auspices of Schaulager and with the help of the city's Historisches Museum, the collection was installed at Haus zum Kirschgarten. Built between 1775 and 1780, this prestigious neoclassical town house is today a museum of domestic life, a 'Wohnmuseum': half of its fifty rooms are dedicated to period displays that reflect the social and cultural history of its citizens over more than a century. In the remaining rooms are sundry collections that highlight objects from the decorative arts as well as more humble vernacular trades, and indigenous crafts: among its treasures are faience and porcelain, clocks, dolls houses, puppets and games, and a group of papier mache stands in the form of women's heads (on which 19th century bourgeois matrons placed their bonnets in order to retain their shape when not being worn). While the original disposition of the rooms in the house has been largely preserved, its moveable furnishings have been lost. Those period rooms which conjure the lifestyle of the owner, or his contemporaries, are consequently reconstructions; others reflect the tastes of households from later eras, when Biedermeier and art nouveaus styles became fashionable.

Walking through the mansion, visitors find themselves immersed in one fully fledged domestic mise-en-scene after another, at one moment aware of the passage of time and at another enveloped in the specific moment represented by a particular diorama. Typically, a tour of the museum elides the constitutive time gap between an event and its reproduction; as the various pasts are revived in the present, their ontological distances are blurred. The discovery of an image of Fabiola in a miniature lying on a side table in a salon, or in the guise of a pair earrings in a jewelry box in a lady's dressing room,

Movie poster of *Fabiola*, directed by Alessandro Blasetti, released in 1949.



or as a devotional image hanging on the wall of a bedroom may not, initially, seem untoward. Of course their presence is anachronistic given that Henner only created his seminal portrait in the late 1880s. While it is historically inconceivable that this particular image could have been found in any of these early period rooms, any such objection is immaterial. Fabiola's presence here is emblematic. Her infiltration in these rooms encourages an exploration of larger cultural issues relating to questions of authenticity and representation. Some of these subjects are endemic to the very identity of the Wohnmuseum, others are particular to the context of Basle. How, for example, might a personal devotion (to a Catholic saint) express itself domestically in a city where civic governance was wrested from ecclesiastical authorities by powerful merchant guilds centuries ago, and where manifestations of (Protestant) faith have long been an essentially private matter. Others questions relate to museology, to the practices and protocols that inform the typology of the history museum. Do the temporal sleights of hand which underpin the visitor's enfilade through the Haus zum Kirschgarten conflate fact and fiction, the diorama with the period room?

Throughout this extensive residence, groups of Fabiola paintings have also been installed in ancillary or transitional spaces. There they enter into dialogue with the taxonomic collections dedicated to such objects as clocks, models of stoves, and bonnet stands. Though the vernacular traditions that produced these very diverse types of relic are quite different, their juxtaposition underscores the problem of how the past is preserved, and of who decides what is chosen. What

left: Bonnet stands; mostly from Paris, mid-19th century; used for presentation of hats and bonnets in stores; papier mâché, painted. Photo: Tom Bisig.

right: Tiled stove; Strassburg, probably studio François-Paul Acker, decoration by manufactory Paul Hannong, 1748–53, Inv. Nr. 1932.359. Photo: Tom Bisig.





roles are played by chance or serendipity in the salvaging of these objects? How do scholarly research, institutional policy and individual design contribute to their preservation? Today the value of material repositories and cultural legacies of the kind epitomized in the Haus zum Kirschgarten is increasingly in dispute. In an era in which virtual experience has assumed an unprecedented potency and ubiquity, and historical amnesia is endemic, the traditional roles of institutions like the Basle Historisches Museum are being revised, their very existence called into question.



Cartel clock; Basle, around 1800, case by Aubert Joseph Parent (1753 –1833), carved wood, painted in light grey and different tones of gold, with allegorical representations of the Triumph of Love over Death, Inv.Nr. 1988.87. Photo: Tom Bisig.

Over the past four decades, interventions by contemporary artists in museums of all types have become a familiar aesthetic strategy – indeed, so routine has this practice now known as institutional critique become that it has been codified as a received category of art historical study. Such interventions typically probe power relations as well as ideological and disciplinary protocols integral to museum infrastructures. Originating in the late 1960s in the radical site-specific and site-related works of Michael Asher, Hans Haacke, and Marcel Broodthaers, this genealogy provides a readymade filter for interpreting Alÿs's project. With his celebrated, if confounding, 'museum fictions,' the Belgian-born Broodthaers sought, as Douglas Crimp argued, to 'reveal the true historical conditions of collecting as they now exist.'[11] Broodthaers' *Musée d'art moderne, Département des Aigles* (1968 – 72), became a multifaceted project, an enormous collection of heterogeneous artifacts, artworks and reproductions unified solely by the fact that they shared a single motif – the eagle. First exhibited at the artist's own studio in Brussels in 1968 as an assembly of packing crates and postcards, its presentations culminated in 1972 in Kassel at Documenta 5. While individually fascinating, the items in this absurdly cacophonous ensemble were nonetheless but the pretext for the artist's larger endeavor – to deconstruct, destabilize, and dismantle museological structures and practices.

11
Douglas Crimp, 'This Is Not a Museum of Art,' in *Marcel Broodthaers* (New York: Rizzoli, in association with Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 1989), p. 72. Not incidentally, as Crimp notes, the "institutional "overvaluation" of art produced a secondary effect, which Benjamin called "the disintegration of culture into commodities," and Broodthaers referred to as "the transformation of art into merchandise"' (p. 80).

The shards of a resilient, but nonetheless threatened, cultural practice, Alÿs's flea-market finds serve very different ends from those to which Broodthaers put his more heterogeneous tokens. The sites in which Alÿs's collection has been presented on this tour have been carefully chosen for the range and richness with which they spotlight issues that pertain both to the individual situation and to broader institutional discourse: Alÿs did not however amass his trove for this purpose. If the public display of these works opens the possibility of critiquing museological, art historical and other disciplinary issues, these were not his original concerns: they did not propel him to make this collection. First and foremost, Alÿs is concerned with the image of Fabiola and its proliferation in the culture (a proliferation to which most art historians and cultural theorists have been indifferent). His requirement that the collection be displayed in historicizing sites is consequently an interpretative maneuver designed to center attention back on the *image* of Fabiola. Only such contextualization, he contends, can elucidate the elusive prototype somehow ever present among the myriad approximations. In this respect he echoes Broodthaers' penchant for the confounding gesture. However, in contrast

to his predecessor whose strategies were devised for deconstructive ideological ends, Alÿs's approach has a different cultural dimension. Given that his focus remains with the objects – on their roles and identities – as material artifacts, his is ultimately an ethnographic scrutiny. Over the years he has repeatedly asked himself: 'Why that image in particular? What gives it that power to resist ... first, mechanical reproduction and, now, digital reproduction? Is the ritual/act of painting a requisite for conferring on the image its aura? What is it that made it become an icon, an object beyond any consideration of taste? How has it served as a reminder of the existence of a completely parallel and separate art scene from, say, "ours", one with its own references and obsessions?'[12]

II

Several years after he relocated to Mexico City and abandoned his vocation as an architect, Francis Alÿs decided to make an art collection for himself. A young artist with limited resources, he had developed a fascination with various forms of artisanal production and an interest in the structure and role of the (art) market as it impacts economies of production.[13] He therefore resolved to build a collection from 'hand-painted' copies of masterpieces of Western art, which he hoped to find in the flea markets and antique and junk stores he loved to frequent. However, he soon discovered that in lieu of the journeyman renderings of Raphael's *Sistine Madonna*, Jean-François Millet's *Angelus*, and like works that he assumed copyists would favor, he encountered pictures of a young female saint whom he quickly learned was Fabiola. Most of his early acquisitions were made serendipitously, on his wanderings through places as far-flung as Maastricht and Mexico City; more recently, colleagues and acquaintances have supplemented his finds with theirs. Beginning as a modest, almost casual quest, Alÿs's deliberately low-key venture has evolved in unanticipated ways. Far from terminating when it reached the bounds of a domestically scaled collection, it is ongoing and openended: there is no inevitable, even conceivable, closure.

12
Francis Alÿs, e-mail message to the author, July 17, 2007.

13
See Olivier Debroise, 'Entry and Exit: A New Internalization of Mexican Art 1987–1992,' in *La Era de la Discrepancia: Arte y cultura visual en México/The Age of Discrepancies: Art and Visual Culture in Mexico*, 1968–1997, ed. Debroise (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2006), pp. 338–47.

With the copy as its founding precept, Alÿs's collection ostensibly privileges the replica over the original, the anonymous over the renowned, the artisanal or amateur over the professional, and the lowly or kitsch over the precious. Veneration of unknown or anonymous workmanship is fully in keeping with his practice, for he has long collaborated with craftsmen of various kinds, pooling and exchanging skills as needed. His redirection of the rapidly growing collection into an investigatory venture dovetails with his willingness to allow the conception of any project to move in directions he could not have fully foreseen at its start. Struck first by how little the iconographic subject was known to art-world professionals and second by the breadth of the motif's geographical dispersion and its evident abundance, Alÿs realized that he was faced not only with an alternative economy but with distinct if unfamiliar circuits of aesthetic appreciation (as well as spiritual faith).

The transformation of a highly personal approach to making a private collection into an investigation of issues grounded in cultural history crystallized with the first public presentation of the Fabiolas.[14] Within the short period of two years, Alÿs had acquired some twenty-eight examples. In September 1994, they were installed throughout Mexico City's vanguard venue Curare, in the stairwell and office as well as the gallery proper. Founded in the late 1980s by a close-knit group of artists, art historians, critics, and theorists, Curare combined discursive investigation with exhibition programming, archiving, lecture series, and research. Presented under the rubric 'Una investigación de Francis Alÿs, en colaboración con Curare, Espacio Crítico para las Artes,' this intervention was jointly organized by three of the institutions founders, Flavio Gonzalez Rossetti, Pascale Rossignol, and Olivier Debroise. They deemed it a 'project' (as distinct from an exhibition) and supported a modest catalogue whose cover was made from shelving paper with a faux wood veneer pattern. Above a handwritten 'signature' printed in silver ink Alÿs glued a small reproduction of Henner's portrait. (He had purchased these images in considerable quantity from the vestry of a local church and then attached them one by one to each cover). If the design and production values made the publication appear more like an artist's book than a catalogue per se, the contents belied this impression. Both of its texts were printed in Spanish and English. The first, written by Alÿs and titled 'Fabiola, or the Silent Multiplication,' described the artist's plan to make a collection of copies of famous

14
The formative influence of a research project that Alÿs undertook in Venice in the mid-1980s for his thesis as a student in architecture and urban planning should not be underestimated in any consideration of his reconceptualization of the Fabiola project as an 'investigation.' The object of that study was the symbolic, as well as practical, exclusion of animals and dogs from the public arena in the Veneto during the Renaissance, as La Serenissima sought to regulate its largely still-medieval urban entities. The city of Palmanova was thus projected ex-nihilo as the prominent model for the ideal city. Alÿs garnered much of the evidence with which he traced this exclusionary process from visual imagery, particularly from the paintings of the period. (The impact of these works on the formation of his painterly idiom has frequently been noted.)



Fabiola: Una investigación de Francis Alÿs, en colaboración con Curare, Espacio Crítico para las Artes. Installation at Curare, Mexico City, September – October 1994.
Photo Courtesy Cuauthémoc Medina.

masterpieces for himself, and his surprise at the outcome: 'Fabiola indicated a different criterion of what a masterwork could be.'[15] Given this realization, the final sentence of his brief preface seems laced with irony: 'It is an honor for me to show my collection to this educated audience.'[16] The second, by art critic and historian Cuauhtémoc Medina, traces the shift away from the originating impulse in greater detail: motivated by an interest 'in the process of the copy, and by the circulation of images that go beyond established art circles, Alÿs set out to find the painting(s) that average people have most frequently taken as models for reproduction.'[17] Matching not the irony but the sentiment of Alÿs's concluding statement, Medina, too, was forced to concede: 'There is no doubt that this hypothesis entailed a prejudice, namely that 'public taste' would appropriate the same referents that intellectuals believed capable of arousing tremendous popularity.' Medina's analysis of the image and its origins ends with the following series of questions: 'How have we not before recognized this taste? How can we adapt this to our preconceived hierarchy of values?'[18] The somewhat separate issue of the status, indeed the definition, of a copy proved of equal concern to both artist and critic alike. 'Every time it is repainted the source is erased as a referent,' Medina asserts. 'The original is reproduced as an original.'[19] There is no contradiction in this seeming contradiction: for, as paintings, these handmade artifacts have the aura and stature of originals, while as devotional objects or icons, they rigorously replicate a prototype. To much of its intended or primary audience, the claim that these objects are copies is therefore meaningless.[20]

The final component in this revealing publication is a checklist of the 28 items on display. For each entry, the name of the artist (where known), the place and date of acquisition, and the price paid has been provided. The most expensive purchase was probably number twenty, signed 'Dora 82,' bought in Mexico City in 1994 for 180 Mexican pesos. By contrast, number thirteen, an anonymous example acquired in London in September 1993, cost five British pounds, and number seventeen, signed with the initials 'R.B.', was received as a gift in Maastricht, the Netherlands, in November 1993. Eschewing such forms of data required by the art historian and museum curator as dimensions, media, and materials, the list favors information of prime interest both to the collector and also the social historian.

While Alÿs readily acknowledges that the totality of these objects constitutes a collection, he shies away from using the term 'collector' to describe his relationship to this material, preferring in its stead 'instigator.'[21] Implicit in the latter is the notion of goading or urging forward, provoking and inciting; of open-ended agency; of a venture begun without any anticipation of closure; and of an act of initiation rather than of resolution. In this respect, the instigator is the very

Cover of *Fabiola*, published by Curare, Mexico City, 1994.



15
'Fabiola, or the Silent Multiplication,' in *Fabiola* (Mexico City: Curare, 1994), p. 4.

16
Ibid.

17
Medina, p. 11.

18
Ibid.

19
Ibid., p. 12.

20
The notion that copying might (re) gain a generative potential within a contemporary art practice is something that Alÿs had already explored. This was precisely what he was attempting in a concurrent project undertaken with a group of rotulistas, or professional sign painters, whose activities are endemic to Mexico City.

21
Several years previously, Alÿs had made a work titled *The Collector* that comprised a small magnetized 'dog,' which he took on walks through the streets of the inner city. Each walk ended when the animal was completely covered with stray bits of metal that had fortuitously attached themselves to its body over the course of their wanderings. Three years later, he himself assumed that title when he wore a pair of magnetized shoes through the streets of Havana. The key notion that informs both projects is of an accumulator of valueless material, whose identity and coherence are defined by a single simple characteristic, in this case, by being magnetic, rather than by any larger purpose or design. Structurally, this model is isomorphic to the initial conception underpinning his making of a collection: whatever he encountered that fit the single simple rubric of a handmade copy of an old master.







upper left: No. 075 Catalogue raisonné; 15 5/8 × 11 3/4 × 7/8 inches; Date 1982; Paint on panel or board; Provenance: Mexico City, Mexico, February 1994, 180 Mexican pesos. Photo: Francesca Esmay. Courtesy Francis Alÿs.

upper right: No. 103, Catalogue raisonné; 15 3/4 × 11 3/4 × 3/4 inches; Date unknown; Paint on panel or board; Provenance: London, England, September 1993, 5 British pounds. Photo: Francesca Esmay. Courtesy Francis Alÿs.

left: No. 066, catalogue raisonné; 16 1/4 × 11 7/8 × 7/8 inches; Date unknown; Paint on paperboard or Masonite panel; Provenance: Maastricht, Netherlands, November 1993, gift. Photo: Francesca Esmay. Courtesy Francis Alÿs.

antithesis of the personal collector, that rare specimen so eloquently defined by Walter Benjamin. For Benjamin, the 'true' collector is a singular type who 'represents his fulfillment, insofar as he realizes the liberation of things from the bondage of utility.'[22] That is, in seeking the completeness and integrity essential to forming a personal, as distinct from a merely private, collection, Benjamin's collector renders useless those objects he covets. By this criterion, Alÿs is the antipode of the collector. For, following the Curare project he began to focus more on the former use value – the role and function – of these and similar unmoored artifacts.

The presentation at Curare thus became the first in what is now conceived as an ongoing series of exhibitions of the collection in sites that act as discursive frameworks. In selecting these venues, a key criterion is that they stimulate investigation in poetic as distinct from scientific or political terms.[23] Alÿs articulated his goal in the following terms: 'The intention is to generate situations, stories, events that can provoke a sudden, unexpected distancing from the immediate situation and, how can I put it, ... shake up your assumptions about the way things are. ... They ... destabilize ... that is, they open up, for just an instant – in a flash – a different vision of the situation, from the inside.'[24]

The principal distinction between the Fabiola project and most of the artist's more recent projects is that, normally, the latter evolve in relation to a specific context or venue and are then dispersed to museums and galleries as 'nonsites,' (to borrow Robert Smithson's term). Comprising documentary composites of textual and visual material, research tools, videos, photographs, notes, letters, sketches, and the like, these works are also usually supplemented by publications that add additional layers of critique written from various disciplinary positions. The (non)site that allows such juxtapositions of miscellaneous and heterogeneous materials is, as Michel Foucault has shown, the site of discourse; and, hence, for Alÿs the place where stories, fables, rumors, and the like may be both generated and confirmed. Originating outside his art practice, the Fabiola project was only subsequently seen to require a historicizing context. Once again, the principal role of the frame was to provide a discursive ground. Whether or not the Fabiola collection is formally acknowledged as a work within Alÿs's oeuvre is thus of less significance than recognition of the remarkable degree to which it prefigures the ethics, politics, and poetics of his mature practice.[25] In short, it signals the adoption of a more proactive role (that of 'instigator/investigator') in contrast to that of participant/observer, so memorably enshrined in his signature early piece, *Turista*, 1994, in which he self-identifies as 'tourist.'[26]

22
Benjamin, quoted in Crimp, p. 72.

23
There have been several false starts in this investigation: The next time Alÿs presented the Fabiolas was in 'Antechamber,' a thematic group exhibition held at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, in 1997. Each artist in the show was asked to present a work of his or her own together with a second work that was particularly meaningful to him or her. Alÿs presented a sampling of works from an ongoing project with the rotulistas; he fulfilled the requirement of a work that was inspiring to him by presenting a selection of 50 Fabiolas. He found, however, that the juxtaposition of copies of two quite different orders brought more confusion than enlightenment to the role played by notions of authorship, copy, and original in what were for him quite distinct projects. The third venue for the Fabiola project was also planned for 1997, the second biennial of Saaremaa, Estonia. After his experience at the Whitechapel, Alÿs began to refine his exhibition strategies; thereafter, he tended to favor showing one project at a time, whether new or not. For more comprehensive shows, he devised a thematic, such as works relating to the locus of his studio in Mexico City or to the subject of the rehearsal.

24
Alÿs, 'Fragments of a Conversation in Buenos Aires,' in *A Story of Deception: Patagonia 2003–2006* (Buenos Aires: Fundación Eduardo F. Constantini, 2006), p. 82.

25
Alÿs is, of course, aware that, as a collection made by a well-recognized artist rather than by, say, a dentist or an antiquarian, it has a certain cache and, presumably, an enhanced market value.

Whether in Mexico where he personally and professionally grounds and identifies himself, or elsewhere, Alÿs engages the public arena, everyday urban life, as his point of departure. The projects he executes in D. F. are based on intimate knowledge acquired from extensive observation and close study; those conceived abroad, by contrast, are the products of different tactics. Sometimes they require an intense if necessarily short-lived immersion in a location, as was the case with *Bridge/Puente* (2006), which depended on a collaboration between communities of fishermen in Cuba and Florida. Sometimes they involve more opportunistic interventions in response to unique sets of circumstances. Such, for example, was the case with *The Modern Procession* (2002), conceived to mark the enforced exodus of the Museum of Modern Art's collection from its permanent home on West Fifty-third Street in Manhattan to temporary exile in Queens.

Michel de Certeau's influential book, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, theorizes the ways that ruses, tactics, and various kinds of poaching and appropriation, when pushed to their ideal limits, together 'compose the network of an antidiscipline'.[27] They become the means by which people everywhere surreptitiously empower themselves, enriching and enhancing their lives as they wrest and negotiate agency under the radar of dominant and official forms, or even within their own local milieu. Other, related modes evolve more serendipitously, by default as much as design. 'Although they are composed with the vocabularies of established languages,' de Certeau writes, 'and although they remain subordinated to the prescribed syntactical forms … the[ir] trajectories trace out the ruses of other interests and desires that are neither determined nor captured by the systems in which

26
In a number of subsequent works, based in walks taken while traveling abroad, Alÿs occasionally again exploited the role of the tourist. See, for example, *The Loop* (1997), with documentation of his related e-mail correspondence with Olivier Debroise, and Narcotourism (1996).

27
Michel de Certeau, introduction to *The Practice of Everyday Life*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) pp. xi-xii



Francis Alÿs, *Turista*, 1994. Photographic documentation of an action, Mexico City. Courtesy of the artist and David Zwirner Gallery.

they develop.'[28] In their singular melding of the handwrought and the copied, as in their low-key but extensive infiltration into the lives of the faithful worldwide, the Fabiola paintings may be seen as readymade instruments of de Certeau's thesis. It should therefore not be surprising that Fabiola's roles and functions have almost completely eluded identification and analysis by institutionalized – that is, academic and art-world – audiences. That recognition lies at the heart of a project that, paradoxically, seeks to insert these works into circuits proper to the mainstream and officialdom. 'Through the gratuity or absurd quality of the poetic act,' Alÿs argues, 'art provokes a moment of suspension of meaning, a brief sensation of senselessness that reveals the absurd of the situation, and, through this act of transgression, that makes you step back or step out and resume/revise your *a priori* regarding this reality ... In the best of all cases, it can open up – even if just for a few seconds – a new, other, perspective on the situation.'[29]

28
Ibid., pp. xviii.

29
Alÿs, 'Fragments of a Conversation in Buenos Aires,' p. 82.