PROTO-TOOLS 1  TRANSCRIPTION
16-17 NOVEMBER 2013
FLAT TIME HOUSE
SOMETIMES DOING IS UNDOING
AND SOMETIMES UNDOING IS DOING
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In 1990, the Belgian artist Francis Alÿs (b. Antwerp, 1959) produced Placing pillows. Created soon after his relocation to Mexico City, and in the aftermath of the 1985 earthquake, Placing pillows was a walk, a stroll, in which the artist placed pillows in broken window frames around Mexico City’s historic centre. Alÿs’s “subtle gesture of symbolic healing,” as described by Cuauhtémoc Medina, was his earliest attempt at developing a “methodology of walking [as] a means to physically inscribe narratives into the city fabric” [Francis Alÿs and Cuauhtémoc Medina, "Entries," in Francis Alÿs: A Story of Deception, (2010)]. Through Placing pillows, Alÿs attempted to insert a story into the memory of the city by allegorically ‘repairing’ some of the broken windows with unexpected objects, the pillows. These, for Medina, “infused dream-like passages into daily life.” The work symbolically addressed a turbulent reality; it was an attempt to ‘mend’ the wounds left by the natural disaster, which implied a process of careful observation of said reality. It also narrativised the urban fabric by directly including it as a protagonist of a series of ‘repairs,’ similar to a dream-like fairy-tale. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, Placing pillows was Alÿs’s earliest attempt at creating a “sculptural situation” out of a simple stroll.

Placing pillows emphasised the action itself – Alÿs’s actual insertion of the pillows into the physical material of Mexico City. Through their physical positioning, the pillows acted as a trace of Alÿs’s symbolic act of mending, while at the same time, plotted an alternative cartography of the city that focused on the incomplete, the fragmentary, broken, the unbuilt, the unmended. Because the action can be described in a concise sentence, “While walking around the centre of Mexico City, I place pillows in the frames of broken windows,” Alÿs’s stroll had the potential to be easily circulated through rumours and, therefore, add a narrative layer to the existing architecture without physically adding to it.

Dissolving sculpture
In the catalogue for Alÿs’s 2010 Irish Museum of Modern Art painting exhibition, Les temps du sommeil, he described the work Seven lives of garbage
(1995) as follows, “On the night of 4 February 1994, I put 7 identical bronze sculptures painted 7 distinct colours in 7 plastic bags and I dropped them on garbage piles in 7 districts of Mexico City. On the following days, months, years, I have wandered through local flea markets looking for the missing sculptures to resurface. As for now I have found 2 out of 7” [Francis Alÿs: Le temps du sommeil (2010)]. As his account suggests, the work emphasised the circulation of the sculptural objects rather than the objects themselves; the sculptures were only the excuse for making visible a complex informal circuit of exchange characteristic of several megalopolises – trash scavenging. As the title of the work suggests, discarded objects have more than one life – they are appropriated and reused (re-sold in this case), moving “through different social strata,” as Medina noted, in this case from artist’s studio, to garbage bin, to flea market. Mutating roles and values, the re-found bronze snail echoes the multivalent indexical associations of the pillows of Placing pillows. Both pillows and the re-found sculptures simultaneously act as objects within a plot – pillows placed, snails dumped – while simultaneously mapping out different systems of circulation – the pillows as markers of symbolic urban healing and the snails as ‘probes’ of parallel economic systems. For Seven lives of garbage, Alÿs released a series of objects into the world of garbage in Mexico City which, upon re-discovery in a flea market, acted as bearers of a series of transactions and transitions – both economic and symbolic – of their own paseo. The re-found snail, plucked away from the circuit of re-use, is not the same bronze snail that was released by Alÿs; it has been fundamentally altered by virtue of its circulation in different realms.

If Seven lives of garbage dissolved the single sculptural object (multiple snails which suggest multiple routes through which each of the seven can traverse and therefore bring to light) into a discursive field, Paradox of praxis 1 (sometimes doing something leads to nothing) 1997, literally melted a perfect minimalist form. It was described by Medina as “a literalist dematerialisation of the art object that took place from 9:15am to 6:47pm on a mild day in Mexico City” [Recent Political forms: Radical Pursuits in Mexico. Santiago Sierra, Francis Alÿs, Minerva Cuevas, (2000)]. As he commented, for Paradox of praxis 1, the artist “pushed an ice block through the streets of Mexico City until it completely melted away, as if eroded by the urban surroundings.” The documentation of the action, a five minute documentary video or a series of photographs of the artist pushing the block, shows the gradual dissolution of the block while highlighting the physical strain implied in such action. We see, for example, how difficult it is to move the block at the beginning of the ‘walk’,
we see the artist bent over, leaning and pushing against the block with great difficulty. As the day passes, and as the cube becomes smaller, it becomes lighter; enough to be kicked around through the streets. The video ends with an image of a small puddle of water surrounded by curious kids, documenting the complete disappearance of the former object. The work did not produce any final result besides its own unfolding (and documentation); in the end the ice melted. By having no visible or direct material product, _Paradox of praxis 1_ was an investigation into the dynamics of production or of the logic of effort vs. results. After all, its subtitle is _sometimes doing something leads to nothing_, a statement aimed at what Alýs considered the understanding of sculpture at the time, "as a permanent material construction" [Entries]. For _Paradox of praxis 1_, Alýs directly countered this notion and advanced an artistic language that, as observed by Betti-Sue Hertz, "opened the object of sculpture to the urban environs" ["The Circumstance Is Mexico: Art Practice for the Transitory Cosmospole," in _Axis Mexico: Common objects and Cosmopolitan Actions_, (2002)]. The pristine cube of ice, reminiscent of a polished minimalist sculpture, was made to interact with the city and as a result it completely disappeared. As a critique of an artistic definition – sculpture as a material construction – it underlined the inoperativity of such conceptualisations when displaced onto the urban context of Mexico City. As Medina argued, "Seen in the context of the history of sculpture, the work might be taken as a parable of the 'thaw' of the Minimalist object, as if a Sol LeWitt or Tony Smith work were consumed by the complex phenomenology of the social resistance of the megalopolis" [Recent Political forms: Radical Pursuits in Mexico. Santiago Sierra, François Alýs, Minerva Cuevas].

Both _Seven lives of garbage_ and _Paradox of praxis 1_ emphasise the dissolution of the sculptural object – one through circulation and the other through literal dematerialisation. _Seven lives of garbage_ focused on the act of insertion into parallel systems, highlighting both the initial act of release of the sculptures but also the different social strata through which the snails traversed in order to be re-found and purchased by the artist. Although the bronze objects effectively catalysed a series of reactions, the emphasis of the action was on the atomisation of that sculptural object into different registers and the spaces that it traversed; in other words, the trajectories plotted by its actual, physical circulation. Similarly, albeit perhaps more effectively doing away with the sculptural object, _Paradox of praxis 1_ enacted a physical disintegration of the ice cube through its circulation. Both works call into question the materiality of sculpture by, as Medina argued, displacing "the
But Seven lives of garbage and Paradox of praxis 1 share another, perhaps more important, affinity. If, as argued so far, the bronze snails of Seven lives of garbage are relevant as probes that mapped what Alýs and Medina called "the underground economies on which the metabolism of a whole society in the so-called Third World relies," [Entries] – and therefore provided a fragmentary glimpse of these circuits – Paradox of praxis 1, also provided fleeting glimpses into the urban context of Mexico City's historic centre. Alýs is not pushing an ice block in his studio or a pristine gallery space. As Medina noted, the action "provided an oblique glimpse into city life, which continued on, oblivious to the epic quality of Alýs's performance" [Recent Political forms: Radical Pursuits in Mexico. Santiago Sierra, Francis Alýs, Minerva Cuevas]. As both photographs and video show, Alýs's action passed mostly unnoticed; only at the end do a few kids gather around the last remains of the ice cube; there are no suggestions that he was offered help or that anyone disrupted his stroll. In this way, Paradox of praxis 1 is also a chronicle that provides a glimpse into the behaviour of the city, the reaction or lack of reaction of its citizens, how they conduct themselves in public space. At the same time, and just like Seven lives of garbage was an exploration of underground economic spaces, Paradox of praxis 1 also offers a series of views into the physical conditions of the city, its building and urban structures; the colours of façades, the consistency of the pavement; the dirt, the sun, the traffic. As a clear rejection of the physicality of sculpture, Paradox of praxis 1 not only literally dissolved the sculptural object but also used it as an excuse for a photographic view of the daily life of Mexico City. Doubly de-emphasising the physicality of sculpture, the work proposes instead a mobile practice articulated at the crossroads between social encounters and sculptural situations [Entries].