

***Ciudad Juárez Projects*, Francis Alÿs
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“What single item would you take from a burning house?” A reporter once asked the writer Jean Cocteau this clichéd question. Without skipping a beat, he retorted, “I would take the fire.”(1) To take the fire out of the burning house involves an impossible act: lifting burning itself — the brash light that bends destinies, engulfs surfaces, consumes what it illuminates — from the material substrates on which it feeds.

In his exhibition *Ciudad Juárez Projects* Francis Alÿs takes the fire, so to speak — takes fire on a walk through conflicted territory. In *Paradox of Praxis 5: Sometimes we dream as we live & sometimes we live as we dream, Ciudad Juárez, México* (2013), he kicks what appears to be a flaming football through the troubled city of Juárez, Chihuahua, Mexico — just across the border from El Paso, Texas. Ravaged by drug trafficking and turf wars, this once-prosperous city has seen its population decline in recent years, leaving a hollowed-out ghost town in its wake. Alÿs kicks the ball, takes the fire in and out of filmed foregrounds and backgrounds in spurts of tumbling motion — like the tip of a “burning, inflamed metaphysics”(2) that erodes the distinction between image and object. The fire — this modicum of destructive, kicked potential — illuminates, but also threatens, the seedy, desolate scenes unfolding in the border town through which it travels. Yet nothing catches; already ravaged, barren, and dusty, the ground scarcely responds to this chaos of flame, which only leaves a faint trail of wan, inconsequent embers in the brush at the end of its dark journey.

Similarly, in his series *Ciudad Juárez Postcards* (2013), Alÿs takes the fire out of sixteen postcard images. He does this quite simply, by blacking out the rest of the picture. Only the light sources remain visible; abstracted and deprived of their tasks of illumination, they cut like gashes into thick, black surfaces. These almost-gone images seem to echo Blanchot’s pronouncement: “The image requires the neutrality and the effacement of the world, it wants everything to return to the indifferent depth where nothing is affirmed, it inclines toward the intimacy of what still continues to exist in the void”(3) — a sharp image of the wants of images for a time in which images seem the most wanting, at the edges of territories in which enlightened ideals struggle, like wan, inconsequent embers, to take root.

In his performances, Alÿs often walks through, re-enacts, and activates the lines between conflicted grounds — places where the harsh performativity of political borders burns trails through territories, and where political abstractions, such as universal human rights, wear thin. Such investigations seem appropriate for London, in light of the recent Brexit referendum vote, which instantiates new political divisions for a post-rational Britain, now rendered all the more vulnerable to privatization and the erosion of workers’ rights. The drug wars in Ciudad Juárez; the water crisis in Flint, Michigan; the angry, impoverished, inarticulate edges of “Little Britain.” What might, at first, appear to be zones of exception — isolated, unfortunate, overlooked border territories — now appear as harbingers of a new

rule: a state in which privatized, warring factions churn out regular turf wars, and spread ravaged borders willy-nilly across the globe.

Universalism, so it seems, is burning out; yet, perhaps Enlightenment thought always had its pants on fire. As Chris Taylor reminds us in his theory of plantation neoliberalism,⁽⁴⁾ Spinoza was haunted by the spectre of its cruellest irony: that the enlightened rationality of universal human rights was coupled, from its very outset, with dependence on slavery—on burning through lives. Today, this once-hushed-up irony rings loud and clear: a frank, undiluted flame that burns through the frame, through the city, through the city's self-image.

In Alÿs's video *Children's Game #15: Espejos, Ciudad Juárez, México* (2013), kids run through overgrown brush and abandoned houses in the Ciudad Juárez, playing a game with shards of mirror. When they catch the sunlight with their mirror and refract its beam onto one of their opponents' bodies, this counts as gunfire. The opponent falls down and plays dead, in a game fuelled by a light that both provides for and burns through images.

As S. M. Amadae argues, non-cooperative game theory provides the basis for a theory of neoliberalism.⁽⁵⁾ Strife and competition run rampant against a backdrop of scarcity, sacrificing human dignity to strategic rationality. This sea change from Enlightenment ideals (however flawed and partial) to the (gun)fire burning through neoliberal-era border-images reveals itself in the embers of Alÿs's acts of inflaming.

NOTES

(1) Jean Cocteau, *The Difficulty of Being*, trans. Edith Sprigge (New York: Da Capo Press, 1995), back cover, quoted in Johnny Golding, "Ana-Materialism and the Pineal Eye: Becoming Mouth-Breast," *Leonardo Electronic Almanac* 19, no. 4 (2013): 67.

(2) I borrow this term from Golding, "Ana-Materialism," 67.

(3) Maurice Blanchot, "Two Versions of the Imaginary," in *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader*, ed. George Quasha, trans. Lydia Davis (Barrytown: Station Hill, 1999), 417.

(4) Chris Taylor, "Plantation Neoliberalism," *The New Inquiry*, July 8, 2014, accessed June 28, 2016, <http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/plantation-neoliberalism/>.

(5) See S. M. Amadae, *Prisoners of Reason: Game Theory and Neoliberal Political Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).