

situations papers

material city 2

Transcript of response delivered by writer Iain Sinclair after a screening of Francis Alÿs' film *Guards* at Arnolfini, Bristol on Wednesday 22 February 2006

Over five years, Francis Alÿs developed Seven Walks, an ambitious project for Artangel which delved into the everyday rituals and habits of the metropolis of London. The walks were enacted in different parts of the city – Hyde Park, the City of London, the National Portrait Gallery and in the streets close to Regents Park, and resulted in a series of films, videos, paintings and drawings which were presented together in a neo-classical building on Portman Square and the National Portrait Gallery in autumn 2005. Guards, a 28-minute film by Francis Alÿs and Rafael Ortega, follows sixty-four individual Coldstream Guards. Each soldier begins alone and then groups when meeting his peers creating a square formation, whereupon the formation marches to the nearest bridge and then dissolves. The project took four years in preparation, was filmed in 2004 and was screened as part of Seven Walks in 2005.

Iain Sinclair

Of course what we should do now, rather than me blathering at you, is that we should all cover our eyes, turn the lights down and run the film through again – because *Guards* is very much a sound film. It's carefully orchestrated; it appears to be very simple, but I think it's complex, interesting and provocative in a number of ways and I'll try and touch on some of them.

It's interesting that [Alÿs] was born in Antwerp, one of the ten famous Belgians, and later lived in Mexico City, which is a very very good combination. He arrives in London as a kind of privileged stranger to make sense of this weird place and is overcome by the density and difficulty of it and has to work with that, and luckily takes his time. This is not one of the projects where he comes in for a few days and responds and does something; he's here for a number of years and what he gets at is the way that, amongst other things, London is layered from its sounds and he listens very carefully. And what he wants to do, initially, the first notion, is

nothing to do with guardsmen – what he wants to do is establish a kind of marching band. Musicians would infiltrate the privileged zone of the square mile of the old City of London – the original settlement, sealed off by its Roman walls and all the acoustic implications of that, even when it is no longer visible, not there. The gates, the rights of passage and this incredibly dense system of surveillance and CCTV; what he thought might happen, with bandsmen playing different pieces, is that they would meet each other, come together, and the whole thing would be, not filmed as *Guards* is filmed, but actually captured on CCTV. But the complexity of that was too much; it didn't work. He'd done another project in Venice where there were just two characters. One arrives at the airport with one part of a tuba and another arrives at the railway station with the second part and they wander this labyrinthine city until they encounter each other, assemble the musical instrument and play a single note. And that worked! Venice is a different kind of space, labyrinthine wanderings were quite possible and at the end the project was resolved. Lost musicians tootling in London, this was un-resolvable.

And then, meditating and walking through our metropolis, Alÿs begins to have a sense of how important red is. That if you're coming to London as a stranger the first thing you do is look at postcards. He starts to do artworks in which he exploits the iconic postcards of London. In this film it's not only the red of the guardsmen – very early on you see the bright red of a woman's coat. You see the red of phone boxes; you see the red of buses. It's a very strident red.

When Alfred Hitchcock returned to London after many years in Hollywood to make *Frenzy* – this was at the time when the Covent Garden Market, the old markets on which the city had depended, were disappearing – he begins by coming in under Tower Bridge in a helicopter shot and immediately tries to summon up the reds by which London is known. A film to look at, in par-

allel to this, is obviously Patrick Keiller's *London* – which again takes that kind of steady gaze, the postcard version of the city, and uses it ironically by creating a melancholy commentary against which to challenge and de-construct everything that's there in the lazy tourist account.

The Alÿs film begins with the ultimate tourist vision and takes it to another place. *Guards* is not only an acoustic piece, it's also a mythological piece. It begins in those moments of comparative silence at the start of the day. You're looking round, waiting, breathing slowly, and the thing to which he directs your attention is the bestiary of the City, griffins or dragons that actually mark out a literal boundary: so he's beating the bounds. Then, gradually, the people appear, quite comically, they get together, assemble into their groups of eight and march on the river – because getting to the river is getting to the source of power in London. It's a mythological piece; it's made by someone who doesn't belong in London, a passer through. And these people, the cultural exiles, as far as I'm concerned, are always the ones with the sharpest visionary take on London. They're estranged from the nonsense of simply getting yourself about, sealed in discrete pods. True Londoners build up many skins to survive being in that place, they actually have special kind of lungs to breathe this terrible air.

Someone coming from outside sees two things; they see the iconic postcard realities and they see how impossible it is to negotiate space – and they recognise certain obvious facts. Just this afternoon I was looking at a series of the key images that derive from London; images created by people not born here, not initially part of this local culture. TS Eliot comes, an American scholar, to London – and he's here at that period after the First World War, the great moment of classic modernism, and it's a city in psychological crisis after four years of death and bereavement, followed by a flu pandemic and a loss of faith in the imperialist values that underwrote the pre-war capital. And Eliot works in the City of London as a banker, under the pavement, and from that and from the dissolution of his

own marriage and the difficulties in his life he sees a particular landscape. And what does he see? 'Unreal City'...

*'Under a brown fog of winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many
I had not thought death had undone so many,
Sighs short and infrequent were exhaled.'*

There's a great moment in this film. The thing you have to notice is the choice of lens. Alÿs had to decide on the focal length. Whatever he chose would make a big difference. And he goes for a long focus lens most of the time, which tends to distort and squash up. And in one of those massive close ups, you see the faces of the guardsmen. There's this little guy and he's "Oh God!" The guardsmen have decided they want to carry guns. He sighs; the weight of the world. Suddenly, it's the Eliot thing from years before – movement, mass, like a group of the dead moving through this deserted city like a dream and having to release that sigh.

*'Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet,
Flowed up the hill and down
King William Street
To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours
With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine.'*

Saint Mary Woolnoth is a Hawksmoor church at the edge of Alÿs' version of the City, very close to the Royal Exchange, where those guardsmen mass at the end. That moment of the massing, with the Royal Exchange in the background, is very close to where Eliot worked, to what he is describing in that movement of his poem. When the guardsmen march into Paternoster Square, they invade a virtual space of revived heritage architecture; quite bogus. A zone where the planners have gathered up, like colonial plunder, the original gate of the city that used to stand in Fleet Street. Temple Bar has been reassembled alongside a copy of the monument that marks the Great Fire of London, and some random sheep modelled by Elisabeth Frink. All these things are in Paternoster Square, and as the guardsmen arrive, we hear the sound of the

bells of St Paul's; the kind of sound that marked the divisions of the medieval city. Eliot gets all of that.

Apollinaire came to London searching for the residue of a failed relationship, a lost love, a woman who was going to take off – and he looks at the city from Paris, the city of wondering and the flâneur, the sense of moving leisurely through a city of arcades as Walter Benjamin saw it.

Apollinaire, who has a wound in his head from the First World War, writes in a poem called *The Landor Road Emigrant*:

*'The crowd moved about in all directions,
Loveless shadows which dragged
on the ground
And sometimes hands flew up like white birds
Towards a sky full of lakes of light.
Tomorrow my ship sails for America
And I shall never come back.'*

The instinct, all the time, is to come from being scattered, lost individuals, into forming a block or group; to undergo this kind of square dance, a dance in the city of noise, of hobnail boots, to make a shape and to get to the river. Go away, America, anywhere to escape from the imprisonment of the square mile. The weight of capital, money, investments, surveillance that's pushing at you, constantly, and you have to get away.

Louis-Ferdinand Céline came to London after the First War, with shrapnel in his head, one of the war wounded, and wrote an extraordinary pair of books about London, called *Guignol's Band* and *London Bridge*. The whole of the momentum of *London Bridge* is a journeying across London to get out, to get down to the docks to find a boat that can take you away into this other world.

The most visionary of all the writers who came to London was Rimbaud, the great poet who lived here with Verlaine and who walked more than any other witness, wandered endlessly through London when he wasn't spending time

researching alchemy in the British Museum – because London is also a repository of arcane knowledge – and he identifies exactly the things that Francis Alÿs notices – crowds marching, the sound of a band; he writes a poem about democracy, he says:

*'Let us go to dusty and exhausted countries,
And put ourselves at the service of monstrous,
military exploitations.
To our next meeting here, no matter where,
This is real progress: forward, march.'*

Another poem called *Parade*:

*'Dressed up with disgusting richness,
They're sent to exhibit themselves in the town.
I alone hold the key to this savage parade.
The groupings of the buildings in squares
And courtyards and closed terraces
Make all cab drivers drunk.
It's as rare as pedestrians on a Sunday
morning in London.
The empty city.'*

The unnerving thing about this is the emptiness. Why is nobody looking at the marchers? Quite early on there's a soldier with heavy armament walking near Shoreditch and a guy comes past him – it's a kind of distortion of the long focus lens, but he doesn't even turn his head, he just walks past. These redcoat soldiers do not belong here, they should be in the royal part of London; they should be up near Buckingham Palace, they should be at Horse Guards' Parade. They fit there, that's the postcard reality. Here it doesn't work, it's threatening, there's something going on – and what's going on is that, thanks to the organisation called Artangel, a very complex logistical exercise has been launched. It's all about permissions again; how you negotiate the deals necessary to make art, to make sense of an alien city. But there are a lot of other people – and I'm sure there are people here – who carry out similar projects without permission, without finance. The miracle, for Alÿs, is persuading the Coldstream Guards to become tame conceptual artists; performers, not enforcers. The City of London, the most protected enclave in the whole

of Britain, is up for it – they allow this to happen.

There's a Dutch artist called Nicoline Van Harskamp with whom I've done a long walk in London. The project she was working on was also called *Guards – Guide to London Guards* – but Nicoline tends to stalk around on her own and she thought London defined itself by its level of security. Everywhere you went in the city there were these gooseberry coloured jackets, there were these strange people, a new underclass who were forced to protect building sites and to march around razorwire perimeters. She made a film about African security guards meeting at a particular place at Bishopsgate at the moment when they changed shifts and changed yellow jackets, and she made it look like the changing of the guards. This was a sort of a secret project and a private project. I went out with her to Tilbury to the dock area, and as happens all the time in those places, when you're photographing surveillance systems and you're captured on a million CCTV cameras, you are immediately surrounded; an arrest situation arrives. Her obsession was photographing doubles or twins, couples in matching yellow jackets. Edge-land duplicates are this woman's subject. So, in the day at the port of Tilbury, we're pulled up by a police car for the crime of photographing two women in lime green tops carrying green plastic bags, with their heads dyed red, passing two men, security personnel, walking in the opposite direction in yellow-green tabards and yellow hard hats. "Don't you know there's a war on?" said a cop as he stepped from the car. This is a very sensitive place, this is a wilderness, the back end of the Thames estuary, there's nothing there.

The artist refused to show any form of identity, she kept her fake cards with a real photograph for Berlin, for her next destination. I fobbed the police off as usual with tales of the river and the production of a document which proved my membership of the Welsh Academi. It was that or a Video Box membership from Hastings. The mobile policeman confessed to living on Canvey Island and we parted on the best of terms.

Well, those things happen all the time and Francis Alÿs is aware of that too, because one of the other elements he wants to build into his film is the sense of rumour – and rumour as Shakespeare has it at the opening of *Henry V*. It's tongues and the tongue of the griffin that you see at the start of the film, the red tongue from the silver beast, wagging. He thinks that what he'd really like to happen is that people should report the sight of these scattered Coldstream Guards. Start a campaign of Chinese whispers. What are they *doing* in the city, the military? And gradually a sense of rumour and panic and paranoia would evolve.

It didn't work that way. When Alÿs tried this in Mexico, it worked much better. He did an event where he persuaded a friend to describe a missing person (who'd never existed) as having walked out of a small hotel one evening, never to be seen again. And, bit by bit, sightings of this non-existent person accumulated throughout the town – and in the end there were 'wanted' posters with an imaginary face, and so Alÿs photographs that. The invented person is now a reality. Alÿs wanted London to become infected by rumour, but London can't do that; there are too many rumours already. It's a city of manipulation, but rumour remains an element in the film. It is an element that reminds me very much of something William Burroughs tried to do in the 1960s. Burroughs had a project whereby he wanted people to go out with tape recorders, to stand on street corners recording random snatches of conversation, then rushing off to another part of the city to play whatever they had, loudly, until it provoked arguments and fights. Groups would start to lose their sense of how a city should behave and the process would somehow reflect the way that we're manipulated by the media, by false information coming at us from every side.

What it really reminds me of, noticing the sense of permissions and seeing the empty city on a Sunday morning, is the other time this happened. The other time this happened was a rehearsal for terror. There was a big event in the city in which everybody climbed into biological

suits, body armour, and ran about seeing what would happen if there was a terrorist attack on the underground – and it was a complete sham-ble. Unlike this film with the regimented guardsmen, the legions of well-briefed camera-men, the terror-attack rehearsal did not work. It was a shambolic disaster; instead of reassuring everybody that this would all be okay, it seemed in some way to incubate the threats that lay ahead. It reasserted the notion of the city as a special place, a place of privilege and high security, empty offices sealed off and covered by surveillance. If you're going to justify the budget for a major disaster movie, you'd better let off a few bombs. Kill a moderate number of citizens on a tube train.

Guards is a film that's very beautiful in some ways; its use of red against the defining pinkish-grey colour of London, the khaki sediment of the river. Red is both brilliant and a threat and we feel nostalgic about red. People are always going on about Routemaster buses and Gilbert Scott's design icon of the telephone kiosk (otherwise known as the porn-card urinal) – especially when such things have disappeared. The colour red has a profound sentimental value for Londoners. It defines a place which is London and not London. When Francis Alÿs went on his other walks, his other projects, he saw London as a sequence of defended communities; barricaded, privileged. The old imperial city could still be discovered through railings closing off private parks and gardens. He did an acoustic piece about people running sticks along those railings.

He also did a very interesting thing called *Night Watch* in the National Portrait Gallery. The city is now completely invaded by this feral army of foxes and rats; he took a fox and released it into the National Portrait Gallery. It passes through these steady-stare portraits of Stuart and Jacobean grandees, and it reminds me of a song from the same period, *Tomorrow the fox'll come to town*, it's like that; it's like something that's very deep in our consciousness. In the same way as those figures of the city, the griffin or the dragon are there. William Blake's red dragon becomes a book by Thomas Harris. Popular

novels about serial killers and slasher crimes lurk behind the marching figures of Alÿs' guardsmen.

When it gets to the end and all the scattered figures have been brought together and they're there in front of the Royal Exchange, and we've appreciated that elegant high angle shot down into Guildhall with its mosaic floor, the straight lines and shadows breaking into curves, I realised that this arrangement by Alÿs was actually a painting. It was, very nearly, a painting from the collection of the Guildhall itself, because there is a painting of a parade made, precisely, at this point. As with its level of post-card reality, the film chooses to remember the iconic paintings that represent London in our accepted catalogue. There's a painting of that view towards the Royal Exchange by Alexander Fritz Werner, the Royal Exchange from Queen Victoria Street in 1904, it's that same camera angle. It's low and it's looking up and it's called *The Heart of Empire*. And in that moment, as these guardsmen march towards the heart of empire, there's a cute little shot in which a red-headed woman in the crowd appears, lifts her camera; it's the first time that anybody seems to have taken much interest in what's going on. And instead of photographing the marching soldiers who are coming straight toward her, she seems to frame a shot of the camera crew – and then another group sweeps in from the side.

I thought about these high-angled shots which supposedly represented a sort of CCTV consciousness, they're very beautiful; right down on the L-shaped group of guardsman as they break and as another little bunch of eight joins them – and that is very much the perspective of John O'Connor's painting of 1874 called *The Embankment*. It's a cinemascope format picture. A woman with a pram and a baby, high up, looking down onto the Embankment and the Thames. And along the Embankment, at this moment in the second-half of the nineteenth century, marches a group of guardsmen, brilliant red jackets, the same guns; *where are they going?* It's quite threatening. They don't belong in this place. Nobody is quite sure whether O'Connor invented this scene or whether the

guardsmen were actually marching towards the Tower of London. The Embankment itself had only just been finished; it had been completed in 1872. Previous to this – as now – a railway company had owned the site and had gone bankrupt and that's how London always is – in flux – a perpetual building site on the edge of some promised future project. The only way you can feel comfortable about these red figures is that they're at a good distance, they're a long way away and you feel much more happy with the closer, domestic detail: a woman standing with a parasol looking down on the parade, a pram, a baby. But of course the pram, in conjunction with the high angle and steps, immediately triggers a memory of Eisenstein and *The Battleship Potemkin*, the Odessa steps, the baby bouncing down. There is no *obvious* threat but you kind of understand that beneath this benign image, soldiers marching at a distance, the composition isn't simply decorative. London ceremonies disguise the uses of naked power.

There is the music Alÿs finds in the stamping of the boots, the extraordinarily shiny boots, the hobnail clamping. But guardsmen are still guardsmen, they have a dark history. The red hides wounds. In *The Independent* this morning, curiously enough, from the same sort of period as the O'Connor painting, was a little extract which caught my eye, from Queen Victoria's diary. It is about the Coldstream Guards. She says: *'We saw 26 of the sick and wounded of the Coldstream Guards. There were some sad cases: one man who had lost his right arm at Inkermann, was also at the Alma and looked deadly pale; one or two others had lost their arms; others had been shot in the shoulders and legs, several in the hip joint. A private, Lanesbury, with a patch over his eye, and his face tied up, had had his head traversed by a bullet, penetrating through the eye, which was gone – through the nose and coming out of the neck! He looked dreadfully pale, but was recovering well. I cannot say how touched and impressed I have been by the sight of these noble, brave, and so sadly wounded men and how anxious I feel to be of use to them, and to*

try and get some employment for those who are maimed for life. Those who are discharged will receive very small pensions but not sufficient to live on''.

A lot of what we see in Alÿs' film is what the guardsmen wanted to happen. It is how they wanted to present themselves, how they wanted to occupy this space; to saunter and strut through the City of London.

If I went out into the streets – as I have done – with a camera crew, to observe the life of the place, to frame the shots I wanted, I would be arrested. I would be suspect, I would be sent away, I would be surrounded and have guns pointed at my head. So this film is a dream of London rather than a London that could ever exist. It's surreal, it's quite funny, there are people in the wrong place. It's a vision of the city by someone who comes from somewhere else, someone who has understood our strangeness and the strangeness of the geography.

My own sense – and I'll finish with this – is of a different kind of city. It's the same in some respects. I have a feeling for the locations Alÿs nominates as significant: Smithfield, St Bartholomew's Hospital, the Guildhall, the Royal Exchange, St Paul's; but *Guards* doesn't have quite the sense of implication and threat and paranoia and deep mythology that you would get if you lived in London for 40 or 50 years. So I close with my own attempt at this psychic landscape. An extract from a book called *Lights Out for the Territory*. A short walk in the city over the ground that you have just witnessed.

Piecing a walk together along the craggy remnants of the London Wall – ragstone blocks, brick bonding course – is like retrieving a false memory, the visual evidence for truths we prefer to forget. The Wall defines the limits of the imagination of Roman London – and is, in this, an act of modesty. To try and get a sense of the original shape by tapping its accredited ruins, following a designated route, is futile. You are contradicted, misinformed, fenced out, overseen for every inch of your journey. But the perversity

of that desire, to pick up on the energy field, is as strong as ever. I am haunted by a mythology of gates: as metaphors and as facts. Gates cut into the Wall's continuity, truces of going and coming: exchanges with the idea of outside, with the field and the garden. Instants of risk and betrayal, capture and farewell. Anticipations of journeys and pilgrimages. John Bunyan. Apertures between life and death: the path out of the dissenters' burial ground. To Blake and Defoe in Bunhill Fields. To Curtain Road, Shoreditch, and the first plays of Shakespeare and Ben Jonson.

Aldgate, Bishopsgate, Moorgate, Aldersgate, Cripplegate, Newgate, Ludgate, Billingsgate, with the Tower, the Barbican and Castle Baynard: eleven wounds in an electrical circuit.

The City, as is proper, is one gate short of holy Jerusalem, of symmetry.

The walls of it were of a great height, and had twelve gates; at each of the twelve gates there was an angel, and over the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel; on the east there were three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates. The city walls stood on 12 foundation stones, each one of which bore the name of one of the 12 apostles of the Lamb.

Even the angels, like the griffins, have been blinded and scattered. They are there but you will have to search for them: on war memorials, alcoves, stained glass, above the keystones of pinkish-grey riverside buildings. The London Stone, with its mantic cargo, is now kept behind bars, beneath the pavement; a trophy for the Overseas Chinese Banking Corporation Limited in Cannon Street. It is grievously misaligned.

Information

Francis Alÿs

Born in Antwerp, Belgium in 1959, Francis Alÿs trained as an architect. Following a period of study in Venice, he decided both to leave Europe and to discontinue his work as an architect. He relocated to Mexico City where he has lived and worked for the past 15 years.

Recent large-scale projects by Alÿs include *The Modern Procession* realised to mark the temporary move of the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2001 and *When Faith Moves Mountains*, a major 'land art' project in the hills above Lima, Peru in 2002. Alongside these public actions, Alÿs continues to make more improvised projects as well as paintings and drawings. His exhibition *Ten Blocks from My Studio* is currently on show at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Barcelona.

In 2004 Alÿs was the inaugural winner of the Blue Orange Prize in Berlin.

Iain Sinclair

"Among contemporary British writers, no-one has made the city the central subject of their work to quite such an extent as Iain Sinclair. Born in Cardiff, Wales, in 1943, and educated at Trinity, Dublin, Sinclair's essential territory has been, since he settled there in the late 60s, the landscape, history and people of East London. Like the contemporary narrative of his first book *White Chappell*, *Scarlet Tracings*, Sinclair's second novel is written in the first person voice of the narrator, Iain Sinclair, who records, with frequent digressions and intervening commentaries, his experiences on twelve linked journeys around a surreally distorted London.

In 1997, Sinclair published *Lights Out For The Territory*, subtitled "Nine Excursions into the Secret History of London". Based on narrations of a number of walks around London, the book takes up themes and obsessions already introduced in the novels, while also revealing, more explicitly, elements of his own biography."

Extract from David Cunningham, University of Westminster. "Iain Sinclair." *The Literary Encyclopedia*. 8 Mar. 2001. *The Literary Dictionary Company*. 15 February 2006. www.litencyc.com/php/speopple.php?rec=true&UID=4084

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Material City

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