

Detours

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The term ‘detours’ refers to unintentional, often undesirable routes, which means a longer and usually arduous journey to the destination. In most cases, detours mean delays and a greater investment of time and energy. Detours are therefore usually unexpected and unwelcome alternatives to direct routes. The concept of ‘detours’ thus offers new ambitious perspectives and alternatives to mobile terms such as ‘flows’, ‘routes’ and ‘circulations’, which are closely linked to globalisation and migration. These traditional terms convey the transfer or mobility of people, capital, goods, things or ideas as linear, direct and purposeful. ‘Detours’, however, sets a different tone: it emphasises that stagnation, delay, waiting, rethinking, the unplanned, the errant and the surprising are elementary for the definition and theorisation of globalisation processes. At the same time, the term, which includes meandering, zigzagging or digressing, opens up a temporal dimension as well as a spatial one, which understands globalisation not (only) as a dynamic process of interdependence fuelled by technical progress – transport, communication. The logic of ‘detours’ counters the metaphor of growth with delay, circumstance, the convoluted and unexpected. On the potential inherent in the concept of detour, and especially the zig-zag movement, Petra Löffler writes:

Hither and thither – walking in zigzag creates room as it suddenly turns and twists and scatters its vectors. It bypasses territories and unfolds in ambience. The zigzag is allied with coincidence and is as familiar with failure as it is with epiphany. (Löffler 2017, 138–143; my translation)

A panorama of possible questions and hypotheses now unfolds, providing new stimuli for research on globalisation processes: How can detours either enable or prevent worldwide entanglements, since coincidences and obstacles may or may not lead to unusual, sometimes less-travelled, pathways? How does the acceptance of such diversions as a defining paradigm of globalisation processes change the understanding of migration, flight and exile? What role did/do the arts play in giving detours a new shape, in helping them to gain visibility within the horizon of a globalisation understood as dynamic and immediate? How can we dissolve the binary conception of migration as movement (and progress) and settlement as stagnation in favour of a more hybrid and interconnected understanding of permanence-in-evanescence? Is it possible to readjust the relationship between space and time via the notion of ‘detour’?

Routes of flights and exile are rarely straightforward; the passages and travel routes are shaped by imponderables, insurmountable obstacles and periods of waiting, as novels such as *Hôtel Baalbek* (1971) by Fred Wander or *Flotsam* (1941, German: *Liebe Deinen Nächsten*) by Erich Maria Remarque (Wander 2007; Remarque 2017) show for émigrés fleeing National Socialism. Waiting (→ **Waiting**) at border fences, in camps, in hiding, for a means of transport is a fundamental part of an escape. In March 1941, the ship *Capitaine Paul-Lemerle* brought numerous refugees with the help of the Emergency Rescue Committee from the ‘waiting room’ of Marseille to Martinique, where the passengers had to stay in a former camp for leprosy patients before continuing their journey. The voyage, characterised by detours and waiting, is not only recorded in the images of photographer Germaine Krull, but also in the book *Tristes Tropiques* (1955) by ethnologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, both of whom were on board the *Capitaine Paul-Lemerle*. The writer Anna Seghers was also among the passengers and wrote the first drafts of her novel *Transit* (1942) during the crossing. Her book was about people waiting in Marseille who were trying to escape from the National Socialist troops and trying to obtain visas, affidavits and ship tickets (Seghers 2018).

Even today, little has changed in the fact that refugee movements often take detours and are primarily aimed at overcoming national borders. These detours take place over sea and land, along mountains and through forests, as Agnieszka Holland shows in her film *Green Border* (2023): people are repeatedly sent back into the swampy forests on the border between Belarus and Poland by border guards and are trapped in limbo in this dangerous restricted area. They are disconnected from both their country of origin and the destinations of their flight. New approaches in historical studies emphasise interruptions (→ **Interruptions**), detours and absences (→ **Absences**) as key aspects of a dis:connective global history, which for a long time was primarily perceived as a history of entanglements and interrelationships. The concept of dis:connectivity assumes that non-connections are always inherent to connections and that connectivity and non-connectivity are closely intertwined and embedded in globalisation processes.

Nation-state borders (→ **Transborder**) are a means of ‘mobility control’ or ‘mobility regime’ (on both terms, see Karakayali 2008, 80, 87), which channel, enable, or prevent immigration. At least in Europe, the Schengen Agreement has led to a shift from nation-state borders to the EU’s external borders, which have become institutions of defence against refugees – Nevad Kermani therefore speaks

of the 'European border regime' (Kermani 2016, 24–31). For some years the focus in Europe has been on states such as Greece and Italy and their islands which are considered as fragile 'doors' for migrants and refugees at Europe's external borders (see Kingsley 2016). In the works of contemporary artist Francis Alÿs, topographical and political border areas in Europe, the USA, the Middle East, and beyond are constantly negotiated.

Alÿs teases out various methods to free people from their passivity and to provide them with agency, which might be temporary, partly imaginative, or even formulated as utopian. What Alÿs consistently explores is a break from the conditions and pressures of everyday life, from political regimes and their apparatuses of regulation and control. Practices of joint endeavour, physical effort or confrontation with obstacles are adopted as possibilities that can help us to reflect differently on the relationship between national borders and people. Alÿs often uses different artistic techniques in parallel in his works – performance and action, drawing and photography or video.¹ In 1997, Alÿs tried out an unusual form of border crossing between Mexico and the USA.

His project *The Loop* (Fig. 1) from 1997, for the exhibition *inSITE* in San Diego and Tijuana, sought to overcome the demarcation line between two neighbouring states – one that has taken centre stage again in political propaganda 20 years later under President Donald Trump and during his election campaigns. San Diego and Tijuana are neighbouring cities that lie on the territories of the USA and Mexico respectively. Alÿs started his border crossing in Tijuana and ended in San Diego, but he did not take the direct route. Instead, he embarked on a five-week journey that took him through Mexico City, Panama City, Santiago, Auckland, Sydney, Singapore, Bangkok, Rangoon, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Seoul, Anchorage, Vancouver and Los Angeles. He thus undertook an elaborate, circular journey, ultimately arriving only a few hundred yards away from his starting point (see Ferguson 2007, 70). However, this short distance is a big step politically, as it meant that he had crossed the sensitive divide between the two countries without crossing the border directly, namely from Mexico to the USA. This direction is significant, as the crossing of the border by Mexicans has been closely monitored and penalised, and not just since Donald Trump's first presidency.²

1 For a procession project in New York City, see Francis Alÿs. *The Modern Procession*, Public Art Fund exhibition, 2004.

2 For a history of the US and Mexican Border, see Johnson and Graybill 2010; see also Ganster and Lorey 2015.

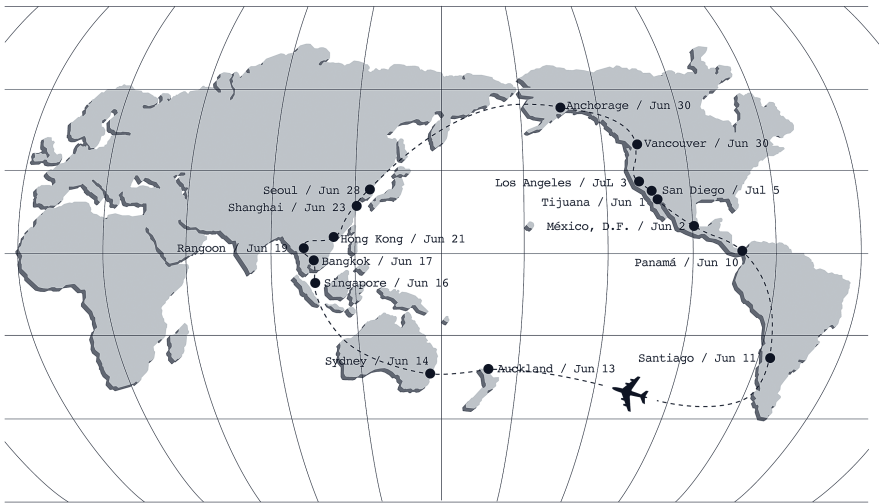
The Loop / El Loop

Fig. 1: Francis Alÿs, *The Loop, Tijuana-San Diego*, 1997. Graphic documentation of an action. In order to go from Tijuana to San Diego without crossing the Mexico/United States border, I followed a perpendicular route away from the fence and circumnavigated the globe, heading 67° South East, North East and South East again until I reached my departure point. The project remained free and clear of all critical implications beyond the physical displacement of the artist (Image courtesy of the artist).

With *The Loop*, Alÿs touched on various fields: while crossing the border between Mexico and the USA would presumably have been unproblematic for him as a native Belgian, his action highlighted the difficulties that others might face in trying to cross the border. At the same time, the elaborate journey is a reference to the routes of historical and contemporary refugees, which are characterised by obstacles, detours and odysseys.³ Alÿs' detour is not based on immediate necessity, but points to others' struggles. The detour thus evolves into an artistic practice on and with the border.

Alÿs' work underlines how political borders lead to artistic actions. It also becomes clear that imagination and artistic production can transform border spaces so that they become spaces of possibility. Mireille Rosello and Stephen F. Wolfe describe this potential of the artistic as the 'imaginative power of the border as a productive space' and ask 'how art represents, explores and negotiates border experience' (Rosello and Wolfe 2017, 7).

³ See, for example, the flight route of the artist Hugo Steiner-Prag in the 1930s and '40s via Sweden to the USA or that of the writer Ellen Auerbach via Palestine and Great Britain to the USA.

Criticism could of course also be directed at Alÿs' *The Loop*, because he, unlike those who do not have visas, passports or financial resources, is free to decide how to cross the border. At the same time, however, the playfulness and poetics of his border passage as a series of detours refers to the hardships of others. And yet, unlike Alÿs, who as an artist can imagine a detour to overcome the starting point and destination of his journey, all that remains for many refugees is the certainty of a journey into the unknown. In *Liquid Times* (2007), Zygmunt Bauman describes the fate of many displaced people in refugee camps and asylum centres as an eternal state of suspension:

Once a refugee, forever a refugee. Roads back to the lost (or rather no longer existing) home paradise have been all but cut, and all exits from the purgatory of the camp lead to hell. [. . .] And yet they do, time and again, whenever the powers-that-be decide that the exiles are no longer refugees, since ostensibly 'it is safe to return' to that homeland that has long ceased to be their homeland and has nothing that could be offered or that is desired. (Bauman 2007, 38–39).

In Bauman's description, the detour is therefore not only the imponderable route between the country of origin and the country of destination of the migration. Being on a detour can encompass the entire life of a refugee.

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