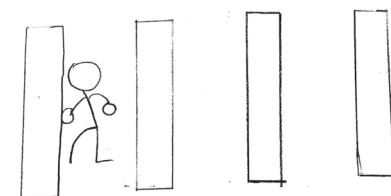


PAPALOTE (KITE)

Children's Game #10
Balkh, Afghanistan, 2011

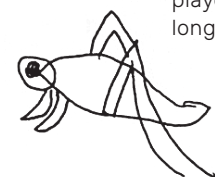
A boy dressed in a pink salwar kameez stands against a dune-coloured structure; he cuts and circles his hands in the air in nimble strokes, as though practising or dancing, or else attempting to control unknown forces. Soon, we realise he is controlling an airborne kite, moving it this way and that, and eventually reeling it in. A much younger boy in white assists him, painfully sending the kite to the sky. This popular pastime in Afghanistan is a celebrated local traditional game (though under the Taliban, kite-flying was banned). Children often engage in kite fighting, where kite flyers battle to down their opponents' kite, some even attaching small blades to their kite strings, or coating them with ground glass and glue. Under the azure skies, the children play, to the sound of dogs barking and howling, and at one point, the ominous pitter-patter of a helicopter. The boy looks up and frown: perhaps the sun is too bright, or perhaps he felt the turbulence of the helicopter. The back-and-forth interplay of human will and natural forces exemplifies what Alys calls the "mastery of non-mastery".



STEP ON A CRACK

Children's Game #23
Hong Kong, 2020

Step on a crack is a game the artist first observed in Tokyo in 2009. A child walks and hops between busy passers-by while humming a song, trying to avoid landing on a line or a crack on the pavement—thus creating a unique mode of navigation through the city. In this video, the girl chants, "Step on a line, break the devil's spine" in English and in Cantonese, to the sound of traffic in the dense urban streets of Hong Kong. At times, she zigs and zags between double-deckered buses or trams; at others, she bobs up and down hilly, mostly carless streets. In the crowded streets, people go about their own business, and occasionally watch on with amusement, while trolleys and pushcarts crisscross the intersections. The girl keeps chanting her song, until eventually she does indeed step on a line—and stops, with the game ending and possibly starting over again. The game strongly echoes many of Francis Alys's drifting works in the city, where street encounters define the experience of the journey.



MARBLES

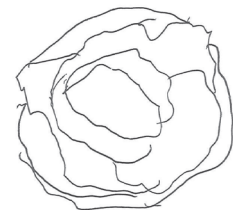
Children's Game #8
Amman, Jordan, 2010



This game requires practice and precision; it gets more challenging when playing on an uneven terrain or in an urban space. On a gravelly urban lot—mostly empty, with a rail track running through—a group of boys compete to flick their marbles closer and closer to a hole in the ground. A player who knocks out another marble gets to keep it; the one who collects the most marbles wins. The camera mostly stays focused on the ground level: feet, crouched legs, and thumbs flicking marbles against index fingers. Children's faces concentrate thoughtfully amid the din of urban traffic and the background strain of a loudspeaker broadcasting a muezzin's call to prayer.

CHUNGGI

Children's Game #17
Kathmandu, Nepal, 2017



Schoolgirls play with a "shuttlecock" in front of their school in Nepal. The girls kick the "shuttlecock"—here, a bundle of leaves—sideways, lofting the bundle up while counting. As a game popular throughout Asia, with variations in what constitutes the "shuttlecock" or "footbag", the girls' deft footwork reminds one of the footwork of football players as well as dancers.

KNUCKLEBONES

Children's Game #18
Kathmandu, Nepal, 2017

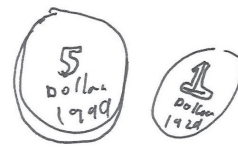


Two girls sitting on the side of a concrete stairway play with stones. The player throws a stone in the air, sometimes landing it on the back of her hand, sometimes taking hold of it, while gradually catching or picking up the other stones as well. The girls progress to other variations, too, where the stones are thrown into a defined area—an area formed by the hands, or under the hands. They play with skill and concentration, over casual banter, mostly oblivious to the passing pedestrians and the occasional monkey. Knucklebones is a game of ancient origins; both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* contain allusions to games similar in character to it.

SALTAMONTES (GRASSHOPPERS)

Children's Game #9
Salto Acha, Venezuela, 2011

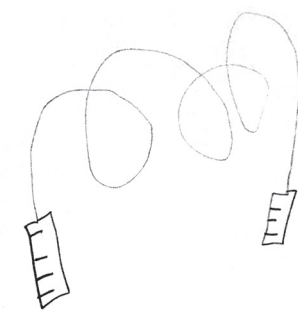
Green grasshoppers hiding in the tall lush grass do not manage to escape the attention of the boys and girls, who eventually capture the grasshoppers with their hands through diligent searching. When a grasshopper is found by a child, their hind legs—not their wings—are pulled off, dispassionately and without wincing. Shrieking in joy, each child hurls his/her own grasshopper into the air, which flutteringly glides its way through the air over the field of grassy and sandy patches. Soon, the grasshopper falls again, unable to sustain its flight, and is recaptured once more. The winner is the player whose grasshopper flew the most and the longest in the air.



COINS

Children's Game #3
Mexico City, 2008

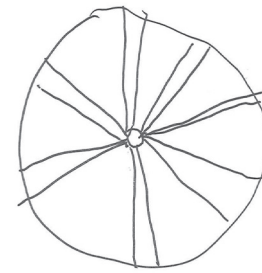
Three young children toss coins one after the other against an aging white wall. The coins bounce, flip, and clink—and then the children rush to pick them up, seemingly without a particular order and without disagreement. They quickly throw the coins and collect them back to the starting line. The rule is that the player whose coin remains the closest to the wall can keep the coins of the other players.



JUMP ROPE

Children's Game #22
Hong Kong, 2020

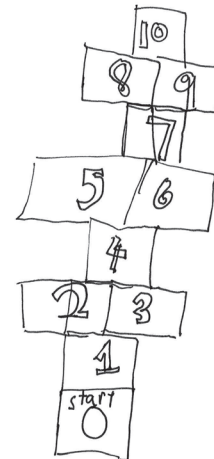
Popular all around the world, Jump Rope is certainly not just limited to children; in Asia, it is even practised as a competitive sport that requires rhythm and coordination and can be played in various configurations: solo, dual, trio, or a larger group. This video shows three girls jumping rope on a rooftop surrounded by looming towers of a housing estate in Ngau Tau Kok in Kowloon. They gather in a circle, and one by one in quick succession, each girl tries out jumps and rope tricks. They then shift to rhythmic rope-jumping in a circle, sometimes rotating, sometimes chanting. To giggles and cries, the rhythm rises to a frenetic pace, ropes flashing as almost graphical images, until finally, exhausted, they break their dance to take a rest.



HOOP AND STICK

Children's Game #7
Bamiyan, Afghanistan, 2010

Children roll tyres of different sizes and thicknesses along a gravel road, prodding the tyres on with sticks—on the outside of the tyres to keep them moving upright, on the inside to turn them. They sometimes race, but remain mostly oblivious to the passing traffic. In the background are earth-coloured dwellings of Bamiyan—a major centre of Buddhism mentioned by Chinese monk-traveller Xuanzang (630 CE), and famed for the enormous Bamiyan Buddhas, dynamited by the Taliban in 2001.



HOPSCOTCH

Children's Games #16
Sharya Refugee Camp, Iraq, 2016

On a dirt patch inside a refugee camp, an arrangement of rectangles is marked out with a groove. Each child tosses a rock and hops single-footedly on each rectangle, carefully avoiding the riveted lines until he/she reaches the one where the rock landed. All around, other children gather and watch, sometimes intently and sometimes half-heartedly. At the end of the video, we are told this: "In ancient cultures, hopscotch symbolises the progress of the soul from Earth to heaven. The player hops between Worlds to escape Hell and reach Heaven, from which he will return to Earth, reborn and redeemed."

SILLAS MUSICALES (MUSICAL CHAIRS)

Children's Game #12
Oaxaca, Mexico, 2012

We see six children with five chairs on a dirt court, from above. The music plays, and the children happily walk around the chairs; all of a sudden, the music stops—and the children scramble for a seat, sometimes screaming, leaving one child standing. One by one, the children are eliminated; at every round, one chair is removed, and the game continues. At times, a child gets excited and loses her shoe, or else slips. Finally, the winner claims the last available seat.



CARACOLES

Children's Game #1
Mexico City, 1999

A plastic bottle half full of liquid rolls down a slope quickly; a boy kicks it up the slope, and lets it roll down again. He does so repeatedly, perhaps practising his shooting skills alone with the help of gravity. The street, fairly steep, is quiet, but interruptions appear in the form of a truck, a car, a dog, or passers-by. A norteño song is played at a point, against the background noise of birds and an occasional bell ringing. In Greek mythology, Sisyphus was condemned to roll a huge boulder up the hill forever, yet here, the repetition of play is about the deft balance against gravity, playing against and with other happenings on the street.

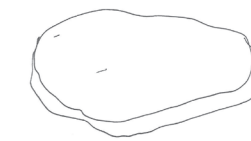


PIEDRA, PAPEL O TIJERAS (ROCK, PAPER, SCISSORS)

Children's Game #14
Mexico City, 2013



This popular game—apparently originating in China—is played around the world, usually played by two players, who choose one of three hand shapes: "scissors" beats "paper", "paper" overcomes "rock", while "rock" defeats "scissors". It can end in one side's victory or in a draw. The game is played for fun, and also to settle disputes. Theoretically random, the game also has a psychological element which has occasioned theorising in terms of algorithms and game theory. Here, we only see the shadows of the players' hands; as the game progresses, the children become more excited and act out the defeat amid cries and shrieks.



RICOCHETS

Children's Games #2
Tangier, Morocco, 2007

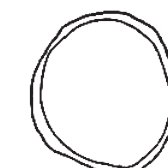
Three boys stand in the calm sea in Tangier, Morocco. The biggest boy takes a rock and skips it skillfully, while another boy holds a pile of rocks in his shirt, passing each rock quickly over to the first boy, in a partnership almost like that of a commander with his sergeant; a third boy joins and watches. With rock skipping, the rock must be thrown optimally at a certain angle and at a steady speed. The boy skipping the rocks is rather deft at this, and moreover he skips the rocks one after the other quickly, almost without thinking. He keeps throwing, the rocks bounce on the water, and ripples seemingly meet on the horizon, sometimes merging with the waves. The boys laugh and cheer, while birds accidentally veer close to the skipping rocks.



REVOLVER

Children's Game #5
Baja California, Mexico, 2009

Tree branches and wooden sticks stand in for revolvers in this classic children's make-believe of a gun fight. Ducking behind dusty boxes, abandoned cars, tree trunks, or whatever lies around, the children enact a play of attack and defence. The sound effects are key: shots are fired when sounds are uttered, together with imitations of the sound of cars getting away, and even of a grenade being launched. At one point, a girl raises her hands, as though in surrender. The somewhat shaky camera, with fast pans and jump cuts, also recalls both home cinema and film scenes from westerns, cop dramas, and gangland shootouts.



ELASTIC

Children's Game #4
Paris, France, 2008

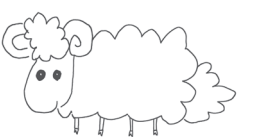
In a small courtyard, a yellow elastic string circles around a wooden chair and is held taut by the legs of one of the girls. The other girl does a jumping routine: jump one side, jump both feet outside, twist and jump, jump on one string, and jump on the other string. Once this first round is accomplished, the string is moved higher; thereafter it moves higher and becomes ever more challenging. When one girl fails, the other girl gives it a go. Almost completely silent, the girls are deep in concentration, focusing intensely on their dexterous footwork.



SANDCASTLE

Children's Game #6
Knokke-Le-Zoute, Belgium, 2009

A line for the future sandcastle is drawn in the sand, and then another for its ramparts. The boys get down to building with their shovels, piling sand up to make a mound that rises by the second. The frenetic rhythm sees a quick result, with the sand mound as well as a moat around it: a city of sand arises. Yet the tide rises, too, even as the children fortify the sand ramparts. They shovel and pound the sand at a steady pace. In the end, the tide overwhelms this miniature architectural world, leaving the sand flat and smooth again.



WOLF AND LAMB

Children's Game #11
Yamgun, Afghanistan, 2011

A group of children hold hands and form a circle: a child inside plays the lamb, while another child outside plays the wolf. The wolf tries to catch the lamb as in all fairytales, sometime breaking the protection circle. Often the wolf breaches the defence but the lamb quickly ducks out and escapes. Once or twice, the wolf gets excited enough to get on top of one of the boys forming the circle—but to its dismay, the lamb still gets away. Both the lamb and the circle of boys taunt the wolf, with close shaves that accentuate the dramatic suspense accompanied by shrieks of joy.



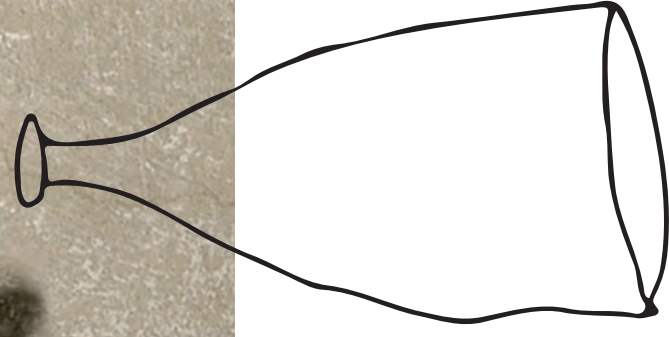
ESPEJOS (MIRRORS)

Children's Game #15
Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, 2013

Under the bright blue sky, children scramble and scurry amongst the abandoned houses of a Government Housing Project on the outskirts of Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. They duck behind window sills and dodge rubble and other obstacles. Carrying pieces or shards of mirror, they shine light refracted from the sun at each other, as if the light were bullets or a laser death ray. When struck by the light, some playfully act out their "death". At the end, we see in the mirrors the faces of each of the children, along with their names.



FRANCIS ALY'S



水限_陸界: 邊境與遊戲

Wet feet - dry feet: borders and games

