

**Interview with Felipe Ehrenberg at the University of Essex on the Eve of “Xocoyotzin, the Penultimate”.**

The interview took place on Thursday 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2009 with Valerie Fraser, Michael Asbury, María Iñigo Clavo, and Isobel Whitelegg, researchers for “Meeting Margins: Transnational Art in Latin America and Europe 1950-1978”, a 3-year research project being carried out in the Department of Art History and Theory at the University of Essex and at TrAIN - The Research Centre for Transnational Art, Identity and Nation at the University of the Arts London. Also present is Joanne Harwood, Assistant Director of the University of Essex Collection of Latin American Art and an External Advisor to the Meeting Margins Project.

Felipe had just arrived from the theatre where he was rehearsing for “Xocoyotzin, the Penultimate”<sup>1</sup>, which was due to be performed the following evening. The performance addressed the murder of Moctezuma Xocoyotzin and the destruction of the Mexica/Aztec empire by the Spanish Conquistadors in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century. Coffee had just been served and we begin discussing the rehearsals.

**Felipe Ehrenberg:** I love these wooden spoons. I save them.

**Joanne Harwood:** I’m so glad, because tomorrow I’ve got everything you need, all the paper plates and everything, they’re biodegradable, they’re all like Kraft paper.

**FE:** We weren’t able to get Kraft paper, apparently it is not manufactured in England anymore, though all the trowels we ordered come packed in boxes made of exactly the Kraft paper that I need. I looked it up on Google but of course the internet has no geography. It makes a big difference, you know. “Kraft” means “strength” in German, it’s a really sturdy paper, you can do

anything you want with it. Unfortunately, what we got was wrapping paper and you can't do much with it.

We also ordered the trowels, metals ones for the Iberians and wooden ones for the Mexicans, only these last never made it here, what we got were plastic trowels, soft ones... these things happen when you have a close deadline... What I'm hoping is that you don't spend more than five or six hundred putting on this whole super-Cecil-B.DeMille-cast-of-thousands production. I actually believed I'd see thousands of volunteers. Ha! 26 people showed up and we will be working with only 18. But you can bet on it, we shall be building that empire... with something that looks like Kraft paper but isn't.

And then we're going to destroy that empire. It's being built off stage and will be destroyed on stage. The whole design is a very high labour intensive thing, you design and you cut and you fold and do things like that, because labour is clearly noticeable to the audience. People appreciate labour intensive things, even though they may not be aware of the fact, they'll know that the stage design is not machine made. So it will be painful to see when all the work we invested in it gets ripped away, all those beautiful things that are hanging there, all destroyed. I think it is important to cause that sensation, it's like the destruction of Leipzig or the destruction of Coventry or the destruction of any imperial emblem.

Basically, this piece is a police story, a murder story, and this particular one is very interesting because it may well be the very, very first play to actually -I'm calling it a "play" right now - that will actually focus on the murder of that tragic monarch. No one "takes over" an empire in a mere three months. Those things don't happen just like that... unless something horrible... unless you completely break the rules of warfare. Unless they fell in battle, monarchs were spared...

The Spaniards *were* guests of the emperor, after all, and History, the Spanish version of course, has it that the emperor was killed by his own people, or by his nephew who shortly after actually became the very last emperor. In true

fact, it was the Spaniards who killed him, in his own palace. They ambushed him and murdered him in his rooms, and that's... they destroyed an emblem. Just imagine! It doesn't matter how far to the Left an Englishman could be -if someone walked into Windsor Castle and murdered the Queen, he'd be up in arms, no matter what. When a nation's emblematic figurehead like Emperor Moctezuma is destroyed, a nation can fall and crumble. So it was a murderous act that toppled that civilization, that and sickness of course.

**Valerie Fraser:** And that's going to happen tomorrow night?

**FE:** Well, that's what actually happened! Though no one in Mexico would ever have conceived the idea of presenting a show about this monarch. As far as our Official History goes in Mexico, Moctezuma was a traitor. We're taught he was a weak, superstitious, stupid, hesitant ruler. He "delivered the empire" they say, "he gave it away". It's truly incredible that the British Museum should present this show as a tribute to that monarch. It should make Mexicans look at our past in a different manner<sup>2</sup>.

**VF:** The project that we are involved in is called "Meeting Margins", which is looking at relations between Latin America and Europe between 1950 and 1978<sup>3</sup>.

**FE:** 50-78?

**VF:** Yes.

**FE:** Cold war period.

**VF:** Yes ...and so you left Mexico, came to London and went to Devon. It would be very interesting to hear something about that?

**FE:** Just before the Olympic Games in Mexico, in '68, anywhere between nine to ten thousand Mexicans actually had to flee the country because of the social turmoil. Several of our close friends fled to France or Czechoslovakia,

others fled to Chile (later they faced Pinochet's coup d'état)... Margaret Randall<sup>4</sup> went into hiding and reached Cuba. At the time I only spoke Spanish and English. My wife and I decided we'd try our luck in England. We already had two little children.

England does not offer political asylum, or at least it didn't in those days. You may be allowed to stay here for "attenuating circumstances". So Martha and I had to report every week to the police for about two years. And then that was it! We didn't come as tourists or students with a scholarship. Life at first was very difficult indeed.

The first year and a half, us Mexicans here got involved with various English Leftist and Liberal groups which supported our demands to liberate political prisoners in Mexico... among some of our more radical undertakings were the occupation of the Mexican Embassy in Holland and the strike by the dockyard workers, in Portsmouth, I think it was, who stopped repair works on a Mexican oil ship. We'd operate by the name of "Roberto Montes", simply translated, "Bob Mountain". I guess I was the only one who wasn't a Communist or a Socialist or a Trotskyite. I just happened... ever since we were kids, we'd been brought up as ah... *anarcosindicalistas, como se dice en ingles?*

**VF:** Anarcho-syndicalist!

**FE:** Oh yes! ...anarcho-syndicalist, in the line of Buenaventura Durruti and his 'Columna' in Catalonia. This is because Mexico had always been a haven for political refugees from all over the world. In fact, the Spanish Republic's headquarters sat in Mexico City until the death of Franco. Mexico received all sorts of wonderful people from Spain. Many were Catalonians. My dad was a metallurgist and worked with Catalonian steel men, Catalonian anarchists. They were worse than priests, let me tell you! Every morning us youngsters would arrive at work at 6:30 and our foreman, Ramón Vaqué, who didn't know how to read or write but was an ardent anarchist would make us read the gospel: excerpts from the writings by Kropotkin, Bakunin, Malatesta.... we read it all.

But getting back to when I got here, well we set up the press in Devon about a year later... My kids are dark skinned. Matthías, my son, who's now a movie producer, had the living daylights beat out of him once. We lived in a basement flat in Islington and he attended a school around the corner but he was too just dark in the eyes of the other kids. The beating seriously damaged his teeth... This scared us. My wife who looks so Mexican was harassed. Can you believe even Pakistanis would stop her in the street and scold her for "not dressing properly"?

So we moved to Devon, into a very very large old, nearly derelict house, thatched roof and all, it so happens it's listed in the Doomsday book ... It's now a beautiful B&B. And it was there that we set up the Beau Geste Press<sup>5</sup> and I started producing books, artists' books... They are now part of what's taught by academia. At that time they weren't! (*laughs*).

**VF:** ...and...?

**FE:** ...I think it was in late '72 that Echeverría called an amnesty<sup>6</sup>. Only, you don't just pack up your bags and go back, do you? We only returned home around March '74. By that time, my kids' mother had fallen in love with someone. We decided I'd take care of our kids so the three of us returned to Mexico ... that was it... I kept on truckin'... Things happen like that, you know...

**Michael Asbury:** How did you get involved with Gustav Metzger?

**FE:** How do you mean 'get involved'?

**MA:** I saw the little project room<sup>7</sup>.

**FE:** Ah yes! Of course...Well, just before I left for England, my friend, the poet Steve Levine and I, had published a book in Mexico<sup>8</sup>. When he found out I'd be travelling to London he wrote me: "Look for my friend Alec Trocchi". I never

actually got to meet him<sup>9</sup>. I did meet his friend Gustav Metzger –don't quite remember how, whose friends in turn were people like Stuart Brisley<sup>10</sup> and John Plant. Gustav at the time was organizing his second Destruction in Art Symposium, which was attracting attention... and I suddenly became very interested in the idea. They were going to hold a meeting at the Tate at one point and I thought, well, if I'm going to the Tate, I'll perform the way people look at art, which is with one eye, and the rest is... You know? One never really looks at art, LOOKS at it. There's so much hanging at the Tate that shouldn't even be there. So just before leaving the house I took a pillow and asked my wife to make a hole, because I would wear it and if anyone were to ask me why, I'd answer that it was a one-eyed look at art!

But I was stopped at door. I always carried my tape recorder around, so I turned it on and recorded this dialogue with a custodian at the entrance of the Tate that was published in *Studio International*, in March '70 I think<sup>11</sup>. The whole transcription's there... It's hilarious. A crowd gathered around us and the cops were called in. The poor custodian was exasperated. He finally asked me "but WHY do you want to come in like that?" I said "Well, because I'm a work of art". And that's where he found the perfect answer. He said "Well, works of art are not allowed in the Tate unless by permission of the Board of Trustees." He was right, of course, but with that phrase by a Tate employee, I had been acknowledged as a work of art! At that time, *statements* were works of art... so that was fun.

Gustav Metzger was the driving force behind the DIAS thing... and I became very interested in this elf-like person. He told me he was a citizen of the world, a passport-less citizen of the world, stuck in England... and he still is.... Well, I think he is a fascinating person! Later on I started meeting other artists that thought alike, mostly the Fluxus people. Gustav was too quiet. Fluxus was much more fun!

**VF:** What's the story of the raw chicken in a perspex box?

**FE:** Ah, yes! “The Seventh Day Chicken” show.... You know? There was a good crowd in London at that time. Richard Neville was around, Oz magazine, Time Out was just about to come out. Bob Hughes was anxiously waiting for an answer from Time magazine... I’d just slipped into Bartolomeu dos Santos’ printing class, took him about a month and a half to notice me: I went there to print because I needed to sell work... Recently deceased... Bartolomeu was a great Portuguese artist, a great teacher of teachers. After about 6 or 7 months that I’d been at the Slade, the director, Sir William Coldstream, called me into his office. He asked “What are you doing here?” I said “I don’t know, I’m just here, is that ok?” He said “Well no, that’s not quite ok, I mean, what ARE you doing here?” So I told him my story and he said “You should have said so before ... welcome!” I really liked him.

The Slade became my haven, and I started meeting more people there. Amongst them, Richard Kriesche. Richard’s a real pioneer of media art, he’s now an outstanding figure in Austria’s contemporary art. He was in the UK with a research grant to University College, I think. We liked each other and we started talking about art, you know, you’re 24, 25 years old and that’s how things go...

It was the so-called “Winter of Discontent” and dustmen all over went on strike and rubbish started piling up in many of London’s open spaces, including Clapham Common. Richard and I decided that the best way of understanding aesthetics was by studying what was happening with the dustmen, and it’s a pretty long and nice story.

The city gave out plastic bags, different coloured ones for each borough, and, of course, people used them for their rubbish. Orange boroughs would throw all their orange rubbish nearby, yellow boroughs would throw their yellow bags a few blocks away, but then you began seeing black bags in red boroughs and orange bags in green boroughs... Makes you think, eh? Who on earth will take the trouble to throw their rubbish in their neighbouring borough’s rubbish? But it actually *looked nice!* All that yellow and a couple of black bags and several red ones peppering the yellow piles... So naturally we

started talking aesthetics, and the breakdown of social relationships, and what a strike like this could contain and as a result, I even made a movie! It's called "It's a sort of Disease Part II/La Poubelle", it's now at the Tate<sup>12</sup>.

So Richard and I began recording how rubbish grew, like ideas grow, like concepts grow, like people grow... And we noticed people were getting used to living with so much smelly rubbish. We traced a walk downtown London and adopted a few piles along the way, photographing them every two days. Aerosol paint cans had begun selling widely, so we'd spray a line around the various piles to see them grow... we would stop at Sigi Krauss' frame shop gallery, next to Covent Garden and have our tea with him, and after the long, long strike finished and all the rubbish had been removed, we hurried back and photographed all the lines we'd marked around the piles. You have this scene, like a murder scene, a white line around the body. But our lines had grown like the rings in a tree, they were actually pleasing to look at so we decided to show everything we'd processed at Sigi's gallery. We actually produced an "unlimited edition" of miniature rubbish bags which we sold to help us recoup our expenses. We had a table full of rubbish bags and performed an "official transference and sale act"... lots of people bought the little rubbish bags (laughs), artists like Conrad Atkinson contributed...<sup>13</sup>

**VF:** Different colours?

**FE:** No they were all black. We were faithful to our borough.

**MA:** Empty or...?

**FE:** No no, full of rubbish. Limited edition miniatures. People had to queue up and fill out a form, then go to a desk and have the blue copy stamped, and the green one approved and Richard passed it over to me and I'd carefully study it and restapled it and approved it once more and Presto! You would then get your little rubbish bag with a certificate that you'd bought a rubbish bag. An unlimited edition! It was a little performance piece. For the show itself, we showed rubbish, of course! We got some sewer pipes, seven of 'em, stood



them on end and placed a little square glass pane on each one and went to the supermarket and bought various items which we ordered on each of the seven pillars and then, every day, we stamped the date on a little white tag underneath the glass. We had chicken wrapped in cellophane, we figured that by the seventh day something would be happening... we had butter and yeah... a half a cabbage, also wrapped up.

This cabbage was so beautiful! By the third or forth day, a little sprout broke through the wrapping and began growing. We were delighted! I've repeated it several times since. You buy a cabbage, cut it in half and put it anywhere... It's a very pretty plant. The chicken, on the other hand, started stinking horribly. By the seventh day that chicken was a really heavy smelly trip. That's why the show was called the "Seventh Day Chicken".

In another room we exhibited all our documentation, photos, recordings, notes and things we' found, vestiges, urban archaeology. During our garbage walk, people would ask us why we were spraying, and we taped those conversations. We had a lot of real life encounters with people, and we taped them all. It was really quite a meticulously, carefully done art work, the whole thing.

**VF:** Did people come into this stinking gallery?

**FE:** We received a lot of people. Once Richard and I were sitting there, you know, artists in a gallery like hookers waiting for clients, just sitting there, and this fellow walks in, corduroy trousers, elbow patches, moving in the typical Gallery Crouch, you know, hands held behind his back, turtle neck. And as he walks around looking at things one by one, he starts breathing very nervously, heavily... Suddenly, he freaks out! Starts screaming and kicking down our pillars: "THIS?? THIS IS NOT ART!!! AAARRRGHHH!!!! THIS IS NOT ART!!! We had to hold him down and throw him out –but he'd wrecked the whole show. We photographed the incident and after we had picked everything up, the incident went in the documentary room. We had another incident happen about 5 or 6 days later. By now the whole block was stinking –remember, we

were in Covent Garden. It was still a market and you had that heavy overnight smell of things rotting, but that chicken's smell was meaner! It really smelt bad! So we arrived one morning and the whole façade of Sigi's gallery had been splashed and smeared with paint, tooth picks stuck in the door lock. That too we photographed and exhibited it... So, yeah, people DID come and we DID have strong reactions to the show.

**María Iñigo Clavo:** I'm researching about some meetings in Cuba in '72 and '73 and was wondering if you were ever in Cuba around this moment?

**FE:** 72? No, no, I was here. I was in the U.K. from '68 to '74. Though we couldn't afford to travel very much, we did travel quite a bit to Holland. Not only were there quite a few Mexican friends living in Amsterdam but we were doing some political work there as well. I belong to a generation that sympathized with the beginnings of the Cuban revolution. I was already a thinking youngster when Castro came into power in '59. But I also belong to those few of my generation who became anti-Castro very early on.

**MIC:** When more or less?

**FE:** Well, more emphatically so when they started their first biennial. That for me was the last straw...

**MIC:** So, in the '80s?

**FE:** Yes.

**MIC:** So in the '70s people were still into-

**FE:** Well, you know, Cuba wasn't a big issue here in the UK. The Basques were a larger issue. In fact, people changed my name from Ehrenberg to Ehrenbergoyen, or Ehrenbergoitia...(laughter).

**MIC:** This is more Basque!

**FE:** Because organisers needed more Basque presence at demonstrations. So there's this Mexican with a German Jewish name turning Basque now! ... (laughter).

**MIC:** So the feeling was to be in favour of something?

**FE:** Definitely. The Beau Geste Press had a couple of Chilean poets as guests in '73. Cecilia Vicuña and Claudio Bertoni. They had come to publish a book each<sup>14</sup>. Cecilia's book was actually the first howl, the first cry of anger that got published right after Pinochet took over in Chile in '73. I was an absolute Latin Americanist, have always been so. But then I'm one of the few Latin Americans who include Quebec and Haiti when talking of Latin America.

Quebec and Haiti are just as Latin American as the Brazilians who speak Portuguese. So francophonic Americans are Latin Americans. I've always worked a lot with Canadians for that reason. Also, I won't sympathise with this or that governments for its leftist leaning, for example. I certainly sympathise with Evo Morales and his government, but not because he may or may not be a Leftist. I don't sympathise with Bachelet in Chile. There's nothing for me to sympathise with there... nothing special.

**MIC:** Because he vindicates a Latin American subject?

**FE:** Morales vindicates the Aymara, which Bolivia's Leftists rarely really vindicated. He's the first person ever, since those lands were invaded, since the Aymaras were invaded, the first Aymara to lead the country in 500 years. It's actually quite simple to understand their circumstance. It has nothing to do with Left or Right. Theirs is a distinctly different vindication.

**MIC:** Latin Americanist is different to left-wing...

**FE:** Yeah.

**MIC:** And what do you understand for Latin Americanism?

**FE:** Well, to begin with, we write “Latin” in small letters: “América latina” because you will never see the words “*Latin America*” printed on any map. Maps show you a land mass called “America”... makes you think, eh? There’s only one country in the whole world that doesn’t have a name of its own, the United States, they don’t have a proper name.

I mean, our continent has five or six federations of “united states” and all of them are “of” America. The United States of Mexico, the United States of Brazil -they’re all federations of America. The US merely appropriated the continent for themselves. Like the words “small” or “large”, the word “latin” is just an adjective, not a name. It’s like saying... ¿cómo decirlo? ... “América verde”, o “América linda”, o “América preciosa”... it was the French, I think, who coined the double word. They had their particular economic and political reasons for doing so.

**MIC:** The French?

**FE:** The French. They were Napoleonicly expansionist and wanted to control all three, the Spanish, Portuguese and French speaking parts of America.

**MIC:** It has sense because it’s like the “Latino” thing and-

**FE:** It’s a really crazy term. “Latino” is only applicable *within* the US because it is the way they classify people there, like they classify “Caucasians” or “Asians” or whatever. Some states use the classification of “Hispanics”, others use the word “Latinos”. It only becomes problematic thanks to the media, to TV stations that transmit from Miami, Florida. Their anchor people on screen will refer to themselves as “we Latinos”. Sure, they’re right to say that because they’re in the state of Florida. But our middle classes, new money in Mexico City, in Caracas, in São Paulo, well, you know them... They’d wish everything were Disneyland. They watch cable TV and now refer to

themselves as “Latinos”. They’re more than happy to lose the name “americano”. “Soy latino!” they’re proud to say.

**MIC:** The “Latino” thing is going farther away than just a Latin American place. This is the important thing.

**FE:** It’s all very strange. I remember a very nice afternoon in Chicago, late summer, early fall. Windows were open, beer was flowing, dope was smoked, nice music. There was this lady called Franceschini or Fratellini, from Philadelphia, I think. And she’s smiling at everybody dancing and suddenly turns to me and says “My god, you Latinos really know how to have fun!” And I answered “What do you mean, “*you*” Latinos?! You’re a Latino yourself!”. She frowns and says “Meee? I’m no Latino!”. “Your last name was Italian, right?” I asked, “well, you Italians invented the word Latino, you’re a Latin”. She actually seemed quite shocked by this concept. The point is, “Latino” is a demeaning word.

This “Latino” thing... the Mexicans... an enormous amount of Mexican Americans are not migrants. In the first place, what migrated was the border, not the people.<sup>15</sup> In the second place, most of the people that have migrated since then speak their own languages, not Spanish. They speak Nahuatl, Huasteco, whatever. So calling them “Latinos” on the basis of a language... I mean it doesn’t work. Mexicans in general do not accept the classification. They’ll accept “Hispanics”, sometimes. Puerto Ricans and Cubans, they love being called “Latinos”. Venezuelans absolutely adore it! The rich ones take their money out of Venezuela to Florida and say “We’re Latinos, we’re happy!” Some Brazilians say that too...

**MIC:** Spanish, also... I think.

**FE:** Really... the Spaniards?

**MIC:** I think they love to say that.

**FE:** Outsiders from Spain... really?!?

**MIC:** Yeah... not saying they're from Latin America...

**FE:** They just say "Latinos"...?

**MIC:** They don't say that. When they are in other countries they have this feeling... it's like a feeling, like you're "Latino"... especially in England because we see difference.

**FE:** That's very strange.

**MIC:** I understand what it means, "Latin" out of Spain.

**MA:** It's not "Latino", it's "Latin". There's a difference.

**VF:** "Latin", yes.

**FE:** Aahhh, well ...because "Latino" is like what happened with that Chicago lady. She certainly didn't like being called a "Latino".

**MIC:** I did not say we are "Latin", but we say que "somos latinos".

**FE:** Bueno, en español se dice "latino" pero en inglés también se dice así...

**MIC:** "Latin". But in the United States they don't use "Latin"?

**FE:** No. In the United States they say in English "LATEEEEEENO"!

**VF:** But in England we sometimes use the word "Latin".

**FE:** Latin, yes.

**VF:** Not meaning the language, meaning Latin countries or Latin culture or...

**FE:** Would you include Romania?

**VF:** ...no.

**FE:** French Canada?

**VF:** Well, French Canada, I would, you know, yes... no, I think that's...

**FE:** Romania's definitely Latin, let me tell you. It's all very strange, the use of these words... You wouldn't call a tenth generation Scot, an "aborigine", though he is, in point of fact, an aborigine of Scotland. But he'd take issue if you were to call him an "aborigine" because it's not acceptable to describe anyone in Europe like that. You use it for Australians and for people "who run around in bushes", not to Scots. Words are loaded and "Latino" is one of them. It's as pejorative a word as "Aborigine", "Indian" and "Native".

**VF:** Can I go back to the issue of racism, which you experienced in Islington. How was it in Devon? I mean Devon in the '70s is a...

**FE:** No problem.

**VF:** No problem?!

**FE:** No problem. We used to go wash our clothes in big washing machines, in the laundry store at Collumpton, and one day there was this long queue because a couple of his machines had broken down. I asked the owner: "What's the matter with 'em?" and he said (*putting on a fine Devonshire accent*) "Ah well ,bugger me silly! The spare parts haven't arrived". "Why don't you get it fixed here?" "No, well, er...", he says. "Come on, lemme take a look!" I open the damn machine and its... what do you call them, the blades? The propellers' shafts are broken! So I take the piece and walk to the ironsmiths. "Hey, could you put an iron ring here?" The guy scratches his head and says "Yeah, that'll be easy" and hammers a ring out and I take it

back to the laundry, "Now let's try it". And it works! That's Latin America for you! We fix things with chewing gum and spit and strings and whatever it is...! So afterwards what did the laundry man say? "My God, you coloured people are smart!" After that, I'd go bell ringing with him. I was in a bell-ringing club.

**VF:** How wonderful!

**FE:** Have you ever heard them?

**VF:** Yes.

**FE:** Ever seen them? It's wonderful, it's 6 guys... however many bells there are, and you learn how to... it's like milking a cow ... it's incredible and it's a very musical sport...

And then also, we smoked a lot of dope at that time and...

**VF:** What, bell-ringing?

**FE:** No no, at the press. And our neighbour was the village constable. Constable Head, some name for a constable, eh? Anyway, we'd baby-sit for them when they went out and actually became close friends. Well, he obviously noticed that I had a great plantation of Mexican pot plants in there. So he simply kept away from the window, from where you could see them. And that was all. And because we were printers we'd print all sorts of things, swimming pool and the student club tickets. Anything useful to the village folk there... "the natives", he he. We were absolutely well received. It was nice. When I left, I got so many gifts from our friends there, bottles of home brewed wine, dandelion wine, oak leaf wine, marmalades, it was so poignant, all so beautiful.

**VF:** Why Devon?

**FE:** It was the warmest part of the isle.



**VF:** Because there was quite a hippie exodus from the city to the country-

**FE:** In Devon?

**VF:** Well, all over the country... you weren't part of that?

**FE:** No, we weren't hippies. We were craftspeople, really.<sup>16</sup>

**VF:** What crafts?

**FE:** Printing crafts.

**VF:** Making things?

**FE:** Making things, certainly. We made very fine, very beautiful books, with very, very low budgets. We were not a commune. We were a community, which is quite different.

**VF:** Where did your press come from?

**FE:** We printed a lot with a duplicator, which is in fact a very versatile machine if you know how to use it. Michael Nyman produced his very first book ever, with his own hands, using our Gestener duplicator<sup>17</sup>. He was never a hippie, and Fluxus people weren't hippies. The managers of the Gestetner company were absolutely thrilled to bits with the things we produced. They'd send their people to photograph us, they'd send us free material. Then came Terry Wright's beautiful old Jardine flat pres. We then bought this fantastic German press, a Man-Roland, built in 1948.

We were artists, which is a different thing from hippies.

**VF:** Sorry, sorry...

**FE:** Well no, hippies dropped *out* of something, didn't they?

**VF:** Well, alternative or something... artists are alternative?

**FE:** Artists are alternative?

**VF:** Aren't they?

**FE:** Not to me they aren't. Artists are part of an ancient tradition of serving the community. Or at least that's the way I see it. I don't think artists are dropouts. I never saw myself as being marginalised. When you're young you go hungry until you figure things out and start charging for your work. Mexico had, up to a certain time ago, a very healthy relation to arts. Artists are a very vital part of the community. They're not a part of society's superstructure part of society. We're infrastructure. What may be alternative are distribution channels... co-op galleries and things like that. There are no alternatives to art. It's either art or it isn't. But there are *options* in art... a different matter...

**VF:** Earlier on we were talking about how in this period, late 60s-early 70s, Latin America had become the focus of the Left in a way... it was a very-

**FE:** We were paying attention to it, certainly.

**VF:** It was cool. It was incredibly cool to be interested in Latin America. The Labour party conference had the Quilapayún group to play, for example, that sort of thing. Did you feel that people were welcoming because you were-

**FE:** Were Latin American?

**VF:** ...Mexican or Latin American?

**FE:** Well, the people I came into contact with, people like Brian Darling, were in fact members of several leftist organisations... I remember them as being to the left of the (political) spectrum here in England, worried about the Basques

situation, not so much with Latin America. It was different in France. We're talking about late 60s still, and its only 9 or 10 years after the Cuban Revolution ... maybe you're describing the later 70s and early 80s.

**VF:** Well, I'm thinking-

**FE:** I don't remember any special interest in things about Latin America. But '73 was definitely a marker. A specific point at that time in politics, because there was quite a bit of lobbying in the U.K. against Pinochet, who was really a monstrous creature. '73 happened, but Brazil already had its dictatorships.

**MA:** Were you part of the boycotts of '69, the biennial<sup>18</sup>?

**FE:** The great fruit boycott in the United States against the great-??

**MA:** No, the São Paulo Biennial, the boycotts and protests?

**FE:** No. I was in one biennial, I don't remember which one.

**Isobel Whitelgg:** Paris?

**FE:** No, the São Paulo Biennial. I don't remember which one<sup>19</sup>. Walter Zanini, an incredible figure. He's a fantastic person, he got us down. And later, the art critic Aracy Amaral also was interested in opening links with Mexico. When living in New York, the Brazilian artist Rubens Gerchman and I became very close friends -he just died, as it happens- but my interest in Brazil goes way back, to when I was 19 or 20 years old. I'd been an assistant to Emiliano Di Cavalcanti the painter, who'd been commissioned by the airline Varig to paint a mural in the company's first branch office in Mexico...

**MA:** When was this?

**FE:** I was 18, 19. Maybe 65 or 64...

**MA:** And Gerchman, where did you meet him?

**FE:** In New York. We remained very very, very close friends all our lives until he died last year. I still see his children, who are grownups.

**MA:** Did you meet his wife?

**FE:** Ana Maria Maiolino? Of course. I was a very well welcomed guest in their apartment in New York. Then, through Rubens I met Gilberto Gil and Caetano Veloso in London.

**MA:** Oitica?

**FE:** No, he had already left. He'd had his show at Whitechapel. He had already returned to Brazil.

...it's 6.05pm now...

**IW:** What's the plan for the rest of the evening?

**VF:** Well, Felipe has to do something more with the technicians...

**FE:** Yes...it's going to come out well tomorrow.

*(break in the tape here; in the meantime the conversation veered to the terms "fine art", "fine arts", "bellas artes" etc)*

**FE:** Well, I have to admit that most of my life, I've mostly made some... not so very "fine arts"!

**MIC:** Not very fine! More rough arts!

**FE:** Yes, rougher arts. I'm sharing a talk with Dawn Ades at the Tate in a few days, it has to do with what's "outside the material world"<sup>20</sup>, and I'm sharing

my thoughts with her as to what's outside, what's inside, in my opinion. In fact, I actually sent her a little poem. One of my concerns has to do with all the adjectives that art seems to require. It seems that art can't survive without some sort of an adjective. There's a compulsion to tag art with names, to hyphenate it: "community" art, art "activist", they slot you into something. But then no one ever says, he or she's a "fine" artist, "Pure" artists are a part of a Parthenon called Basel or Arco, whatever.

**MIC:** Do you mean in Society in general?

**FE:** In Western society.

**MIC:** That's curious because in Spain sometimes I used to say that I'm an artist, even if I wasn't doing art because I was doing a PhD and so on, and now in London I started to say "I'm an artist. How do you do?", and here it doesn't mean anything because all people say that they're an artist.

**FE:** Really?

**MIC:** Yeah, so I'm a bit disappointed!

**MA:** She lives in Hackney though!

**MIC:** "So what are you doing?", "Oh I'm an artist", "Oh really, that's me!"  
Everybody is like this!

**FE:** Now wait a second. Birds of a feather do flock together. I lived for 13 years in a part of town where everybody was a shoemaker. "What do you do?" "I'm a shoemaker". "Oh, me too! I'm a shoemaker too!" So everybody was a shoemaker. Is that it? Anyway, I bought all my shoes, some nice sandals there.

**MIC:** The only thing is, they don't like it too much if you say that you make "conceptual arts". "What kind of art?" "Conceptual".

**FE:** I'd just say "I'm an artist", though actually I don't say I'm an artist. I've rarely used the word in the last 35 years. I consider myself a "neologist" because I don't really associate my work with art so much as with neologisms, which is a neologism itself. "Neólogo Felipe". It says so on my card, in my site, that in itself is a neologism.. So who is a neologist? Anyone that focuses on the new...

**MIC:** Neologist.

**FE:** Neólogo.

**MIC:** I would like more that if I do this thing, I would put "polemist".

**FE:** And you do polemics? You polemise? That's what the Guerrilla Art Action Group used to do. Their art form was about polemicising. And they made their point<sup>21</sup>. A strong part of my work is polemics, but I'm not a specialist in it. I just throw bombs every once in a while, fart where I shouldn't and things like that, take my teeth out at posh talks, but that all takes no more than 10% of my time away. I'm a general practitioner really, that's the way I describe myself because I never specialise in one thing.

Ah...I think they need me back there, the technicians...

**VF:** Ok, we should take Felipe back to the theatre.

More information about Felipe Ehrenberg and his work can be found on his website at <http://www.ehrenberg.art.br/> which is in Spanish, Portuguese, and English.

The interview was transcribed and edited by Ian Dudley with additional editing by Susannah Gilbert, and was revised by F.E., March 2010.

“Meeting Margins: Transnational Art in Latin America and Europe 1950-1978” is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC).

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<sup>1</sup> A short video extract from the documentation of “Xocoyotzin the Penultimate” can be viewed at <http://vimeo.com/9073322>.

<sup>2</sup> A major exhibition, “Moctezuma – Aztec Ruler” was then running at the British Museum, from 24<sup>th</sup> September 2009 to the 24<sup>th</sup> January 2010. The exhibition events programme invited visitors to “Rediscover the world of the Aztecs (Mexico) and trace the foundation of modern Mexico in this major exhibition, which explores the divine, military and political role of the last elected ruler, Moctezuma II”.

<sup>3</sup> More information about “Meeting Margins: Transnational Art in Latin America and Europe 1950-1978” can be found on the project website: [http://www.essex.ac.uk/arhistory/meeting\\_margins](http://www.essex.ac.uk/arhistory/meeting_margins). Meeting Margins is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC).

<sup>4</sup> Margaret Randall is feminist poet, writer, photographer and social activist who has published over 80 books. Born in New York City in 1936, she later spent extended periods living in Mexico, Cuba and Nicaragua. In 1962 she founded a bilingual quarterly in Mexico city “El Corno Emplumado / The Plumed Horn” of which 32 issues were published between 62 and 69. There was also a small press which published 20 additional titles of poetry and prose. Ehrenberg himself provided artwork for two of Randall’s books in 1967; firstly a series of drawings for “Water I slip Into at Night, Mexico City” (El Corno Emplumado Press) and then the cover for “So Many Rooms Has a House but One Roof” (New Rivers Press). She also participated in the Mexican student movement of 1968, after which the press ran into trouble due to the repressive actions of the government and Randall left Mexico. More information about her life and work can be found on her website at: <http://www.margaretrandall.org/>.

<sup>5</sup> The Beau Geste Press existed in England between 1971-1974. It was founded by Ehrenberg and Marta Hellion along with David Mayor, Chris Welch, among others (see note 15). They printed the works of poets and artists, many of whom were associated with the Fluxus movement. The name continued to be used by Ehrenberg and David Mayor after Felipe’s departure from England. The press also used the name “Libro Acción Libre”.

<sup>6</sup> Luis Echeverría was the President of Mexico December 1970 to November 1976.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Asbury is referring to a small exhibition of Ehrenberg’s works form the Tate’s collection and archive which was then on show in the new “Project

Space” at the University of Essex Gallery and coincided with “Xocoyotzin, the Penultimate”; [http://www.essex.ac.uk/artson5/Event.aspx?e\\_id=876#arts](http://www.essex.ac.uk/artson5/Event.aspx?e_id=876#arts) . The exhibition was curated by joint University of Essex/Tate PhD candidate Susannah Gilbert and included textual, photographic and recorded documentation of “Date with fate at the Tate” or “TaitBait” in which Felipe tried to enter the Tate Gallery (now Tate Britain) wearing a hood with a hole cut out for one eye, an episode he describes in the interview (see above and note 9). This performance was part of a series of anti-institutional events organized by Gustav Metzger as part of the Destruction in Art Symposium (DIAS).

<sup>8</sup> *Lovebeast and other Incarnations*, by Stephen Levine with illustrations by Felipe Ehrenberg, Unity Press / El Corno Emplumado; Sausalito, CA., EUA, 1965. Printed in México.

<sup>9</sup> Alexander Whitelaw Robertson Trocchi (30 July 1925 - 15 April 1984), a polemical and much traveled Scottish writer whose sporadic work of the 1960s was collected as *The Sigma Portfolio*, moved to London in 1962, where he remained for the rest of his life. He continued writing but published little. He became a book dealer and kept a small business in Kensington.

<sup>10</sup> Stuart Brisley (born 1933) is an artist and writer, whose practice has included performance, painting, sculpture, sound, video, texts, community projects and curatorial practices. More information can be found on his website at: <http://www.stuartbrisley.com/pages/4> .

<sup>11</sup> It was actually published in *Studio International*, March 1971, Volume 181, Number 931, pp92-3 as “Date with fate at the Tate, Felipe Ehrenberg”. A brief introduction sets the scene for the transcript: “On Tuesday morning 20<sup>th</sup> October 1970 the incipient but short lived International Coalition for the Liquidation of Art met to stage a demonstration at the Tate Gallery. Among those present were Stuart Brisley, Gustav Metzger, John Plant, Sigi Krauss and others. Felipe Ehrenberg, who sympathises with the coalition’s ideas, arrived at Tate dressed in a brown corduroy suit and a white calico hood with an opening for one eye, a cassette tape recorder hanging from his shoulder. He proceeded to enter the Tate Gallery.” The “Contributors to the issue” section states that “Felipe Ehrenberg is a Mexican painter and sculptor presently based in London. In some of his work he has gradually evolved towards undefinable events, using real situations as a context.” A copy of the tape recording is stored in the Tate’s files.

<sup>12</sup> “La Poubelle: It’s a Kind of Disease”, 1970, 16mins 53; this film can be seen on the Tate’s website at: <http://channel.tate.org.uk/media/46376932001> .

<sup>13</sup> More information regarding this exhibition and later activities in Devon can be found at: [http://www.artcornwall.org/interview\\_fluxshoe\\_stuart%20reid\\_felipe\\_ehrenberg2.htm](http://www.artcornwall.org/interview_fluxshoe_stuart%20reid_felipe_ehrenberg2.htm) .



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<sup>14</sup> *Saborami* by Cecilia Vicuña; illustrations by Nicholas Battye and Bill Lundberg; translations by Felipe Ehrenberg. Beau Geste Press, 1973, Langford Court South, Cullompton, Devon. In Spanish with English translations. Edition of 250 copies, of which the first 30 are signed. *El cansador intrabajable* by Claudio Bertoni; Beau Geste Press, 1973, Collumpton, Devon.

<sup>15</sup> This was as a result of the Mexico-USA war (1846-48), by the end of which, Mexico had lost a territory equivalent to Spain, France, Germany, Italy, the U.K., Portugal, Switzerland, Belgium, Holland, Hungary and Croatia, all put together.

<sup>16</sup> The Beau Geste Press community consisted of Martha Hellion and Felipe Ehrenberg and their children Mathtías and Yaël, David Mayor and later, Takako Saito, Chris Welch and Madeleine Ballard. It was later joined by Terry Wright who lived with his wife, Pat, in Collumpton.

<sup>17</sup> *Bentham & Hooker* by Michael Nyman, 1973; Beau Geste Press, Langford Court South, Cullompton, Devon.

<sup>18</sup> The opposition of artists to the military dictatorship in Brazil was especially strident at the 10<sup>th</sup> Bienal (1969), when, at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, a number of important artists and intellectuals signed the 'No to the Bienal' manifesto.

<sup>19</sup> Ehrenberg participated in the 16<sup>th</sup> Bienal (1981), curated by Walter Zanini and Julio Plaza, who organised the selection on the principle of the analogies in language between various works. Felipe was among a large number of artists who sent work through the post to the curators, in what was called the "Nucleo Arte Postal". Ehrenberg also participated in the 1977 Paris Youth Biennial.

<sup>20</sup> *Outside the Material World* was a conference organized by Susannah Gilbert that took place at the Tate Gallery on Saturday the 12<sup>th</sup> of December, at which Felipe Ehrenberg, the "special guest", was going to be interviewed by Dawn Ades. For more details see: <http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/eventseducation/symposia/20640.htm> .

<sup>21</sup> GAAG - The Guerrilla Art Action Group (1969-1976) was founded in New York by Jean Toche, Jon Hendricks and Poppy Johnson. Virginia Toche and Joanne Stamerra also took part in many of the group's actions.