

**Testo tratto dal catalogo *Jorge Eielson. Arte come nodo / nodo come dono*,  
Edizioni Gli Ori, Pistoia, 2008, pp. 120-121.**

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JORGE EDUARDO EIELSON AS AN ADOLESCENT ARTIST

*Fernando de Szyszlo  
Lima, September, 2008*

Before meeting Eielson in 1945 I had already read, and conserved, *Reinos*, his first collection of poetry that was published as an offprint, printed on green paper, of the *Revista Historia* that Dr. Jorge Basadre published. Later, I found out that Dr. Basadre had asked Javier Sologuren to submit a selection of his poems to be published in the magazine.

Sologuren, with his generosity, his detachment and his instinct for good poetry, which he maintained throughout his whole life, persuaded Basadre that before publishing his poetry he would print those of the young poet named Jorge Eduardo Eielson, as his verses contained a quality that merited their diffusion. So, this is how *Reinos* appeared and how, in the following month's number, *El Morador*, which was also Sologuren's first collection of poetry, would be published.

It was actually Sologuren who introduced us. It was an instant friendship, like the one I formed with Sologuren and with Sebastián Salazar Bondy; an instinctive recognition of the fact that we fought for the same things, that we read the same books and that we admired the same artists. We were readers of Rilke, of Neruda, of "Cemetery by the sea" by Valéry and of Vallejo. In painting, we discovered Cexanne and the Cubists at the same time. In just a few weeks time our circle grew, Sebastián introduced Blanca Varela and Raúl Deustua.

Without doubt Eielson, Sologuren and I were the ones who took the most interest in visual arts. It was also surely the lack of museums and galleries in Lima during the 1940s that drove us to start frequenting the Museum of Archeology of Magdalena assiduously, and taking root in these visits Jorge and I developed such an appreciation for pre-Colombian art that we started our own small collections.

We went to a silver dealer in Jirón de la Unión, called "Casa Salazar," where we made our first purchases. I must clarify that in Casa Salazar the pre-Columbian section was tucked back in an interior room to which Mr. Salazar led us, surprised by our interest, and where he showed us Mochica, Nazca and Chancay pieces.

What interested me the most were the Chancay canvases for their primitive execution and for their relationship to certain works done by Miró and by Klee. Jorge shared this passion with his interest in colonial sculpture. It is good to clarify that on one hand, our financial resources were scarce and on the other, the pre-Columbian art hardly cost anything. I remember that my first Chancay canvas, which is still in Blanca Varela's home, cost me twenty Sols or today's equivalent of three Dollars.

Since Jorge Eduardo's interest in colonial sculptures and figures continued to grow, we ended up visiting the antique dealers that were located in the vicinity of

Lima's Mercado Central. There was a magnificent one, Mr. Mazzini, who had sculptures and machines and toys from the Nineteenth Century that fascinated us. Jorge's room at his house was filled with *huacos* and saints and angels that, at the time of his departure from France, were problematic to pack.

Thus, we went from the Museum of the Magdalena (location of the Museum of Archeology) to the Mercado Central with its antique shops and from there to Jirón de la Unión and its pre-Columbian art dealers. Later, around 7 p.m., we fell in with a group of painters that the musician Raoul de Verneuil was with in a café in San Martín Square. It was a café frequented by the painters who were, at the time, dominated by the "indigenistas" who called themselves "los independientes" to separate themselves from and to oppose José Sabogal's group.

In this way we met painters such as Sérvulo Gutiérrez, Carlos Quispez Asín and Juan Manuel de la Colina, who were creating modern painting. I remember that Eielson took a special interest in the painting of De la Colina, at that time influenced by Rouault, whose dark forms and Expressionists were exalted in the column that he wrote in the daily paper "La Nación". From this café we went walking towards the Pancho Fierro circle in the San Agustín Square, where the Bustamante sisters, Alicia and Celia (Celia was married to José María Arguedas), hosted the best collection of Pop Art that had ever existed in Peru, which was dismantled, unfortunately, after their death.

The Pancho Fierro circle was a special place that, although it was the location of the Bustamante sisters' collection, was a meeting-place where painters from the Indigenista group, Sabogal, Julia Codesido, Alicia Bustamante exchanged ideas with José María Arguedas' writer friends, who were not necessarily Indigenistas but who had been companions of Arguedas at the University of San Marcos. However, they followed paths closer to Surrealism than to the committed literature that the presence of the "Indigenistas" would suggest. Also present in the circle were César Moro and Emilio Westphalen, who in the 1930s had published a Surrealist magazine, "el Uso de la Palabra," and both of whom had already published valuable collections of poetry and, in Moro's case, exhibitions of his paintings as well. "Las Insulas Extrañas" and "Abolición de la Muerte" were two brief poetry collections by Westphalen that marked milestones in Peruvian and Latin American poetry.

In the Pancho Fierro circle we found the authentic search for roots and identity that was Arguedas' driving force. For him, the Quechua language was practically his mother tongue and his desire was to see the actuality and validity of the world of the Peruvian high plain gain recognition without overlooking the new forms and discoveries of contemporary culture.

Around 1944, in the middle of World War II, Eielson, Sologuren, Salazar Bondy, Blanca Varela and I began to visit the circle on a daily basis.

With the triumph of Dr. Bustamante y Rivero in the 1945 elections, we began to publish a daily journal, "La Nación," which defended Bustamante's difficult position, chosen by a weak union of the Central Left party that included moderates and left-wing non-Communists, who represented the APRA. As soon as Bustamante was inaugurated, his government was caught in the crossfire of right-wing opposition, which, for the first time, frightened him. In reality, he began losing his privileges as soon as the government was inaugurated. At the same time, the extreme leftists, with the support of the APRA, planned to overthrow him shortly thereafter. For these reasons, it was necessary to publish a journal that sustained the government's position. "La Nación" was run by Dr. Jorge Basadre, whose Editor-in-Chief was poet Raúl Deustua. Javier Sologuren wrote a daily column called "Testimony of the spirit."

The paper featured, for the first time in Peru, a daily page dedicated to culture, in which Jorge Eielson wrote art criticism and in which a column was dedicated to commentary about various topics.

When General Odría—who, later, would have no qualms about overthrowing the democratic government and who would instate himself as dictator in 1948—was Bustamantes's Secretary of the Interior, Eielson published a note in his column in which he said that, after the military parades passed the streets stank of horse excrement. This message provoked the ire of General Odría, who presented himself personally at the editorial office yelling and demanding to know who had dared to write such insults about the armed forces. Discretely, Eielson's column was suppressed although he continued collaborating as an art critic.

In May of 1947, Jorge Eduardo generously published an entire page in "La Nación" about my first exhibition—it was an interesting month considering the lack of cultural happenings in Lima during that period. Emilio Westphalen published the first number of the magazine "Las Moradas," on his own and it would come to be one of the most important magazines ever published in Peru. In that same month he also published his manifesto called the "Agrupación Espacio" or "Space Association," a group formed primarily by architects, writers and artists who proclaimed their battle against the neo-Colonial architecture that was used in Peru, in which the values of contemporary architecture and the conquests of the world of modern art in all of its different aspects were exalted.

If I ever lived a bohemian lifestyle it was during the years between 1945 and 1949, in which period I left for Paris. Usually, after meeting with the Pancho Fierro group we would go to the Café of the El Patio restaurant, located in front of the Teatro Segura, where we would meet with Sérvulo and other painters; when the Spanish actrice Margarita Xirgú, exiled in Buenos Aires, came to Lima with her company we would reunite there with the actors and actresses of the troupe after the evening production. I remember Pilar Muñoz, Edmundso Barbero, don Paco Lopez Silva and Santiago Ontañón, the scenographer for Margarita Xirgu. As the political atmosphere was tense, there were discussions that sometimes turned into heated debates with Apristas, encounters that would finish very late in a Chinese restaurant in Chinatown.

Jorge Eduardo Eielson was, without a doubt, mysterious—we got the feeling that he lived a separate life that we would never be able to decipher. Sometimes he confessed to encounters with older women that we vaguely knew, but in general, I repeat, he was mysterious and in the same way that we would stay out all night with Sérvulo in a café in Pasaje Olaya, which never closed, he would also disappear for days without contacting us.

Ever since his first poems appeared he had sudden success with his readers. For us, his closest friends, he always held the prestige of a person with exceptional talents and we always regarded him as an outstanding poet. During this period, he was already painting but at the beginning he only used colored pencils on paper. They were works full of poetry that generally represented characters presented in a form similar to the Surrealist style.

In those years, we discovered the book, *Constructive Universalism*, by Joaquín Torres García and with him the painting we was doing, which seemed quite interesting. Torres' constructivism in some way brought us close to pre-Columbian art and a reproduction of the "Cosmic Monument" of Parque Rodó in Montevideo dazzled us. Jorge made a pyrograph that he detailed and painted called "La Puerta de

la Noche,” in which the impression that Torres García’s sculpture made on him is evident.

That year, 1948, Jorge was awarded a scholarship to go to Paris and at the request of Francisco Moncloa, the owner of the Gallery of Lima, Jorge and I held simultaneous exhibitions in his Gallery. Each one occupied one of the two rooms that the Gallery contained. In both exhibits there were paintings and objects (*Objets trouvés*). I presented a few sculptures that were assemblies made with bird bones that I found at the beach, I remember that one of these was called “Gimnopedia” and paid homage to Eric Satie. Jorge presented some beautiful colored drawings, as well as his sculpture “La Puerta de la Noche” that Blanca Varela and I bought. Shortly thereafter, she, Javier Sologuren and I accompanied him to Port of Callao, where he boarded the French cargo ship “Port en Bessin,” headed for Paris. After that trip, except for a few brief visits, he never returned to live in Peru, but in his artwork he maintained a perceivable connection with the landscapes and the experiences of his past.

In the second number of “Las Moradas” Eielson published an article entitled, “Rimbaud and fundamental conduct,” which seemed to me to be a sort of enunciation of the principles and intentions to which, in his future, he would continue being faithful and which demonstrates how clearly he envisioned what he wanted to accomplish and how he would go about it.

When one re-reads the article years later, it is difficult to separate quotes by Rimbaud from Eielson’s own words.

In that article, written in 1947, Eielson says: “Rimbaud is truly incapable of having faith in anything; apart from his own dynamic roots that announce his behavior and that regulate the ardent solitude of his actions, he suffers from that ‘intolerance of places’...a revealing intolerance or repugnance for his human condition distinct from all submission and aversion to him. His time on Earth is all that is free that he could desire. Nonetheless, he does not put his freedom to use for the defense of any worldly institutions. It is simply the ‘free freedom,’ the substantial free being, enclosed within herself, the immanency of freedom that he loves.”

All of Eielson’s life was a testimony to his quest for that fundamental conduct and he stubbornly clung to its conquest throughout the 1980s. Now, he has attained that supreme justice: nothingness.

*(english version of Ashlee Redfern)*