“Once Upon a Time an Artist’s Book Was Born” Conversation with Felipe Ehrenberg

We are in Mexico, in the house where Ehrenberg has been living temporarily for the past few months, since returning to his hometown after years in São Paulo. At the entrance there is a small garden. It is cold today. Firewood crackles in the fireplace and two mixed-breed kittens move among the furniture: Chiste, ginger-coloured, and Cheché, white and silky with small black spots. The house is full of interesting things. Mexican handicrafts coexist with Brazilian ones. Large paintings and small drawings hang from the walls. We see very different themes living side by side, all made meaningful by the vital character that underlies Felipe’s personality.

From the kitchen we hear the sounds made by Lourdes Hernández Fuentes, with whom Felipe has been married for thirty years; she holds a degree in Hispanic literature and is a renowned gastronome. She is a demanding accomplice, an adorable woman with a ready smile who supports and shares that great vitality. There are always guests around their table. Lourdes cooks, experiments, shares, becomes enthusiastic. Meanwhile Felipe offers those of us who arrive there the whole environment that summarises him: what occupies him at this moment, his current passion. From time to time they say something affectionate to each other in Brazilian Portuguese.

For me, Felipe is someone like a member of my close family. A great friend whom I trust. We sit down to talk about the years that have passed, when he returned to Mexico in 1974 after living in England; we also talk about his project Beau Geste Press and Schmuck, and about when I arrived in Mexico in 1976, which was when we met. We decide to centre our conversation on the artist’s book.

Felipe Ehrenberg: What do you think if, in our conversation, we address those who are emerging these days—artists who are interested in artist’s books? Most likely they ignore how this beautiful and delicate genre came about. Or rather, they do not know the reasons why what is now already a genre emerged. Because it has indeed become one. It has been legitimised by academies all over the world. So much so that it has been turned into yet another artistic product for conspicuous consumption… don’t you think? Perhaps I could offer them some guidelines to follow, different routes from what seems to have become a globalised trend around artist’s books. You surely know the fair organised by the Codex Foundation, founded in San Francisco by my friends Peter and Susan Koch, don’t you? One of the most successful. I was a special guest at its very first edition, in 2005. I still keep the PowerPoint I made for the occasion. It’s hilarious. Codex has grown so exponentially that I wouldn’t even come close to being able to rent a space there…

Angustias Freijo: Yes, of course. It’s an event with a lot of prestige. In Germany there are also some very important ones. But when you say that the genre of the artist’s book has already established itself as just one among many tendencies, what do you mean?

Felipe Ehrenberg: Look: in its beginnings, in the early 1970s and until almost the end of the 1980s, it was something like an ugly duckling, a tiny aberration among many that were emerging during the period of conceptualism. That period—incidentally—lasted eight or fifteen years and, in my view, marks the transition between modernism and what the Germans and French called postmodernism. It was a stage of many ups and downs and rearrangements. And of course, people close to artists appeared who looked for ways to commercialise our production. I

remember a man called Jack Wendler, who in the early 1970s opened the first conceptual art gallery in London…

Angustias Freijo: Do you remember any exhibition?

Felipe Ehrenberg: Honestly, no. But I was struck by his effort to make money from something that even declared itself anti-market. I was already living in Devon. Jack must have been someone with means, more or less young, who had noticed a very prominent group. They were called Art & Language.

Angustias Freijo: Ah yes, of course. About a year and a half ago I saw an important exhibition at MACBA, with many historical pieces. Lots of display cases. A lot of theoretical material.

Felipe Ehrenberg: Without a doubt the members of Art & Language stood out as one of the great theoretical turning points of the moment. That was in England, in Europe. But how could their ideas be applied to my Mexican reality? Impossible! The fact is that in Latin America (and please write the adjective latin in lowercase) we cannot assume that theoretical proposals arising in the United Kingdom or France are applicable to our realities. Every country and every culture has its own realities and imaginaries—different realities, neither worse nor better. Simply different. First of all, the arts of each culture respond—or should respond—to their own imaginary, to the reality that gave birth to and surrounds the artist. This idea that the arts are "universal", as Western theorists and historians insist, is nothing more than a myth. They use it to legitimise themselves and impose their criteria on us.

Felipe Ehrenberg: The conceptualism that emerged in Argentina in the 1970s with Tucumán Arde, or in Montevideo with Clemente Padín and Jorge Caraballo, or in Brazil with Paulo Bruscky, was not the same conceptualism that emerged at the same time in Germany and England, or in Czechoslovakia and Hungary, which were enclosed behind the Iron Curtain. English conceptualism arose in the post-war era of growing prosperity. The combative, cryptic, fierce, satirical and dangerous conceptualism of Latin American countries arose under military regimes, at the height of the Cold War, under the boot of military governments or omnivorous regimes like Mexico's PRI. I think it is very important to emphasise this element of danger and precariousness. Those artists on our continent who faced multiple dangers demonstrated how artists respond to the moment they live through in the country where they live.

So there I was in England with two small children aged four and five, without a fixed income and very eager to contact, connect and engage in dialogue. I approached my English peers and the Latin Americans, who almost without exception were exiles in Europe like me… (sound of an aeroplane passing) But anyway, it is a story already known: I bought a mimeograph, simply because in Mexico it was dangerous to have one of those machines, whereas in England it was not.

Angustias Freijo: Of course, it was 1968. When the Tlatelolco massacre occurred. Another subject that has been buried. Another unresolved and unexplained issue.

Felipe Ehrenberg: I bought it in England because there…

Angustias Freijo: …there was no such precedent. That means of reproduction was not seen as subversive.

Felipe Ehrenberg: Exactly. So I began publishing a magazine called DT. It meant Documento Trimestral (Quarterly Document), but it also meant delirium tremens. (laughs) My intention was to gather together the Mexicans and Latin Americans who were in London at the time and ask them for a fragment of what they were doing. I sold my DT, and a couple of strange publications—Cantata Dominical and another simply called Ehrenberg—in London, outside Tube stations, at cinema entrances, at art openings…

Angustias Freijo: In the street?

Felipe Ehrenberg: Yes. Our situation in London was not only economically precarious. I realised that my children, who are dark-skinned, were suffering bullying at school. So we moved to Devon and shared the rent with several friends. It occurred to me to use my mimeograph to publish colleagues whose work I liked. That was how I founded the mimeograph publishing house Beau Geste Press. We were a kind of community of printers. We began distributing what we already had—my Documento Trimestral and Ehrenberg—and then we devoted ourselves body and soul to organising the now legendary FLUXShoe, which was a project by David Mayor.

Angustias Freijo: I have that issue by you, Stuart Reid and Barry McCallion in my library.

Felipe Ehrenberg: Our proximity to Fluxus allowed us to come into contact with many more people—people like us: poets, writers and visual artists who challenged the status quo. That was when the poet Ulises Carrión, who lived in Amsterdam but happened to be visiting London, came across our publications. He wrote to David Mayor, our colleague, and the rest is history.

Angustias Freijo: Did he join you?

Felipe Ehrenberg: Not exactly. We became accomplices.

Angustias Freijo: And what can you tell me about Ulises?

Felipe Ehrenberg: Well, he and I had known each other since Mexico. But look—there are the letters. So I invited him to visit us in Devon, where we decided to publish his beautiful book Arguments. It was financed by his friend Tania Erlij, an anthropologist working in London. It cost the enormous sum of twenty-six pounds! (laughs)

Angustias Freijo: Do you still have a copy?

Felipe Ehrenberg: They're all… in museums now.

Angustias Freijo: And how do you remember that first copy, looking back?

Felipe Ehrenberg: Well, Ulises's was not our first book. But all the books we produced were handmade, with very artisanal tools and techniques. They were the result of accumulated experiences. I had always been an enthusiastic printmaker since I was very young. But in the situation I found myself in London—without a workshop, tools or money—think about it: we arrived with absolutely nothing. So it seemed logical to resort to mimeography.

Angustias Freijo: It was a form of engraving—and a clever solution.

Felipe Ehrenberg: Yes, of course. Especially if we use the word engrave: stencils can indeed be engraved. Perhaps you don't know this, but they were made with Campeche wax, a kind of very fine synthetic silk covered with wax. So I learned to engrave very delicate images into the stencils with pins and dried-out ballpoint pens. (sound of another aeroplane passing) Now that I have been rummaging through my warehouses and archives, I've come across a good collection of those engravings. I mounted them in passe-partouts and sold them outside cinemas, at gallery entrances, and so on. Going out into the street—because I also drew with chalk on the pavements—is wonderful for meeting people. Not, as they say in quotation marks, "art lovers", but ordinary people.

Angustias Freijo: Citizens from all walks of life.

Felipe Ehrenberg: Exactly. People of flesh and blood, busy going about their lives. It allows you to test immediately what strangers might or might not like. And that, by God, influences what you do.

Angustias Freijo: It also relates to what you said earlier—that thought is not universal. It was your way of understanding English thought from a Mexican perspective.

Felipe Ehrenberg: Yes. I remember that around that time a doctor—a very good collector—diagnosed me with something called Asperger's syndrome. As I understood it, it manifests in different degrees, from the mildest symptoms to total alienation. I like to think that if I have it—I would say I enjoy it—it must be fairly mild. Those who have it perceive the signals of the world like anyone else, but they do not reach conclusions considered logical. Mine are different. I connect pieces of information in ways completely unexpected by others.

Angustias Freijo: The illogical is sometimes quite normal in certain lives.

Felipe Ehrenberg: Obviously I observed life in England and drew conclusions that were, let's say, not obvious. I liked frequenting marginal environments, such as those organised by Gustav Metzger, a greatly admired master.

Angustias Freijo: A Polish Jew. Creator of auto-destructive art.

Felipe Ehrenberg: Yes—the Destruction in Art Symposium. And well, not only did I arrive at conclusions that most participants did not think of, but suddenly I began to be noticed by English colleagues.

Angustias Freijo: Such as?

Felipe Ehrenberg: People like the performer Stuart Brisley, who ate and vomited during performances; Joe Tilson; and Richard Hamilton, who said: "Hey, hey—this fellow isn't so crazy".

Angustias Freijo: Did you actually meet Richard Hamilton?

Felipe Ehrenberg: Yes. Richard asked me for the transcription of a tape recording I made in front of the Tate during an incident that was reported in newspapers and magazines. Hamilton wanted the recording to publish it in Studio International, and it appeared in the March 1973 issue. He had already become interested in my work when he saw the intervened postcards I was making at the time.

Angustias Freijo: Mail art?

Felipe Ehrenberg: Not yet. I made them but didn't send them. They were altered postcards that I showed to Angela Flowers, and she included them at the last minute in a postcard exhibition at her gallery—which still exists today, run by her son. Richard, who also had postcards in the show, saw mine and phoned me. That's how connections begin to form. Soon afterwards I sent two hundred postcards to Mexico for the Salón Independiente. As poor as I was, the cost of stamps was nothing compared with what it would have cost to send a painting of the same size—packing it, insuring it, paying freight and customs bonds. (laughs) You know what? I think the financial realities of artists are the real origin of conceptual art. (laughs again) And speaking of coincidences: I did not hear about Ray Johnson until much later, even though he is often credited as the inventor of mail art. That's proof that what "peripheral artists" do—however innovative—often goes unnoticed. At that time I mixed with artists and people interested in art. But the people who actually fed me were those who knew absolutely nothing about art—the ones who bought my mimeographs and other odd creations in the street. (He falls silent for a moment.) Now that I think about it, there must still be English people today who have one of my little mimeograph prints hanging on their wall… or perhaps their grandchildren do.

Angustias Freijo: Let's return to the artist's book and the difference you were mentioning earlier…

Felipe Ehrenberg: Well, at that time we distributed our publications—which were not yet called artist's books—in second-hand bookshops or small bookshops that had space for unusual publications. It was in one of those that Ulises Carrión saw what we were publishing with Beau Geste Press and wrote to me through David Mayor. Our books were really very rough, very rustic. How should I put it…

Angustias Freijo: Handmade?

Felipe Ehrenberg: Exactly. And look how useful my knowledge of Mexican crafts turned out to be. Add to that the fact that I grew up in a carpentry workshop, the one belonging to Don Gonzalo Hernández, a great master carpenter who taught me how to sharpen chisels, how to use a jointer plane, how to read the grain of wood. Later I became an apprentice to Catalan printers, anarchists who had taken refuge in Mexico. All that with the incredible capacity for learning that a child has.

Angustias Freijo: How old were you?

Felipe Ehrenberg: Nine, ten, eleven.

Angustias Freijo: During the holidays?

Felipe Ehrenberg: All the holidays.

Angustias Freijo: What did you do with the money you earned?

Felipe Ehrenberg: I don't remember.

Angustias Freijo: (laughs) How wonderful!

Felipe Ehrenberg: Isn't it? Well, it was that combination of early knowledge that allowed us to make books by hand, using tools and techniques as modest as the mimeograph.

Angustias Freijo: So that was the difference of the artist's book?

Felipe Ehrenberg: Of course. The point is that the author himself gets his hands dirty with ink and glue in order to reach the very guts of that piece of furniture, that receptacle, that display case, that platform we call a book. You eliminate outsourcing. You eliminate intermediaries. Ideas germinate and bear fruit when everything is within reach: materials, tools, supports. You cannot develop an idea in the same way when you hand your creative product over to intermediaries. Today I would say that Photoshop and publishing software are also forms of outsourcing. Ulises is a perfect example. Having everything at hand—everything required to produce—thrilled him to the point of delirium. To a large extent, it was this manual work that allowed him to abandon the restrictive field of "literature" and move into everything that followed the publication of his first five books at Beau Geste Press. I remember that during one of his first visits to Devon we were sitting in the kitchen and he suddenly said he had an idea for a book. I told him: "If not now, when? Let's make it right now". He said: "How?" And we locked ourselves in the workshop until the next day. The result was a clever little book called Lines.

Angustias Freijo: Of course. It was like a laboratory. The book as a space for creation.

Felipe Ehrenberg: Exactly. It was a laboratory. When circumstances forced me to return to Mexico, we made all kinds of plans to continue the work. David and the others published a few more things, but it was impossible for me to continue Beau Geste Press in Mexico.

Angustias Freijo: Why?

Felipe Ehrenberg: First, because I returned with my two children without their mother. I settled in a very small town near Xalapa, the capital of Veracruz. I would have liked to run the publishing house of the university there, but the only job I managed to get was something I had avoided all my life: teaching at the School of Fine Arts. But the academics couldn't tolerate my Asperger-style opinions—for example, when I said that art is only an excuse. And since I sympathised with the emerging teachers' union movement that was growing at the university, I lost my job. Fortunately, my expulsion coincided with receiving a Guggenheim Fellowship. I used the money to build a proper studio in Xico. After that began the long struggle to earn a living. I travelled constantly between my home and Mexico City in search of buyers. I presented several exhibitions of what we might call "normal" work.

Angustias Freijo: What do you mean by "normal"?

Felipe Ehrenberg: Well, although I continued working conceptually, circumstances required material, tangible works. In fact, I enjoy creating objects very much. I tried to materialise the abstract. My first major exhibition was called Zapata Today. It included assemblages, object-works and, on paper, my anamorphoses around the figure of the great southern revolutionary leader. To my surprise it became a media sensation. Although I didn't sell anything, it stirred the waters quite a bit. Still trying to survive, I presented an idea to Manuel de la Cera, director of Cultural Promotion at the Mexican Ministry of Education. I proposed a workshop on editorial production using the mimeograph. I called it "The Editor with Sandals". My job would be to train

instructors who would then teach others. Since by then we had already begun the collective movement that started in 1976, I was able to include several colleagues.

Angustias Freijo: That's the year we met.

Felipe Ehrenberg: Yes. My group kept growing. Eventually there were 26 instructors. I called the group Taller de Comunicación Haltos2Ornos, with a "2" in the middle: H2O.

Angustias Freijo: Altos Hornos isn't that huge steel company in Monclova?

Felipe Ehrenberg: Yes. I thought it was a good name—no one would forget it. (laughs) For almost ten years we travelled all over the country teaching people: rural teachers, cultural centres, secondary schools, municipal halls, prisons, even the army.

Angustias Freijo: What exactly did H2O do?

Felipe Ehrenberg: We taught people how to become publishers using mimeographs. And where there were no mimeographs, we taught them how to build one out of wood. I called that machine "Pinocchio". At that time almost every rural school had a mimeograph. But the rural teachers' college in Mactumactzá, Chiapas, didn't have one. So they built sixty Pinocchios. If there was no ink, they used soot mixed with cold cream. For the screens we used synthetic silk nightgowns. We built binding presses and light boxes to engrave designs. It became an entire micro-publishing industry.

Angustias Freijo: That must have been around 1976–1978.

Felipe Ehrenberg: Yes. In fact in 1979 I took the project to Nicaragua, when the poet-priest Ernesto Cardenal had just been appointed Minister of Culture. I trained instructors there and then returned to Mexico. Something extraordinary happened the night before my return flight. Do you remember Carlos Mejía Godoy and the musicians from Palacagüina?

Angustias Freijo: Of course.

Felipe Ehrenberg: Well, we had met in Mexico, and they invited me to a party where I met the pilot who would later fly me home on what they call a milk run flight. We stopped in El Salvador. We weren't allowed to leave the plane. It was incredibly hot. Some passengers got off, others got on carrying cardboard boxes and even chickens. When we finally arrived in Mexico City, we disembarked and walked across the runway toward the terminal. We were almost at the building when suddenly, behind us—BOOM! A huge explosion.

Angustias Freijo: From the plane you had just left?

Felipe Ehrenberg: Exactly. Everyone threw themselves to the ground. Soldiers came running and pushed us inside the building.

Angustias Freijo: What happened to your luggage?

Felipe Ehrenberg: Forget the luggage. I have no idea what happened to it. Three days later I was in my small office at the Ministry of Education when they told me a visitor had arrived: a young man, blond, wearing a blazer and tie. He said he had

come to ask me some questions about the explosion. He wrote everything down carefully. He told me: “Professor Ehrenberg, you were sitting in seat such-and-such. Who were the passengers beside you?” He explained that the explosion had been caused by a pressure-activated bomb that had not functioned properly. In other words, we had survived by pure luck.

Angustias Freijo: Did they discover who placed the bomb?

Felipe Ehrenberg: How would I know? Don’t even ask. When he was leaving I asked him: “What happened to the captain and the flight attendant?” The agent stopped, looked at me seriously, and sat down again. “What do you know about them?” he asked. I said I knew nothing—I was just asking. He replied: “They are both alive. She suffered scratches on her back and he injured a knee”. I asked why. He answered: “Because they were… well… having sex in the bathroom when the explosion happened. That saved them”. (laughter)

Angustias Freijo: You’re kidding!

Felipe Ehrenberg: No, it’s true.

Angustias Freijo: But you still haven’t told me what happened with Beau Geste Press in Mexico.

Felipe Ehrenberg: The problem was communication. When we lived in Devon everything worked through the postal system. In England letters arrived the next day. But in Mexico the postal service was terribly inefficient. Letters could take weeks to arrive even within the same city. So continuing the publishing project in the same way was impossible. However, something else happened: I managed to spark a movement of artist’s books across the country.

Angustias Freijo: But that was more of an educational impulse, wasn’t it?

Felipe Ehrenberg: Yes—but something very important happened. People learned not only how to make books, but also how to organise themselves to publish. Once they understood the concept, they began producing their own books. Today there is a huge collection of those works in the MUAC museum. They were made with mimeographs. Some are poetry books, others contain drawings, gossip, personal stories—whatever people wanted. Many of the creators didn’t even consider themselves artists. These books are completely different from what is produced today in art schools such as the School of the Art Institute of Chicago or UCLA, where students have access to the best materials, acid-free paper and sophisticated equipment. What we were doing was something closer to the spirit of William Morris in late nineteenth-century England. The precariousness of the materials gave those publications a special charm.

Today you design a book on your computer, send the file to a machine and it comes out perfectly bound. But 80% of the books that call themselves “artist’s books” today are not actually made by the artist. The artist simply designs them.

Angustias Freijo: So they are more like editorial design projects.

Felipe Ehrenberg: Exactly. That can be excellent work—but it is not the same thing. It is a different conceptual universe. In its purest origins the artist’s book could be something radical. Someone once called a stone an artist’s book. The artist had covered the stone with sodium bichromate to develop a photograph and text on its surface. That was declared to be an artist’s book. Why? Because the artist made it

and declared it to be one. It may seem like extreme conceptualism—but it was also one of the wonderful excesses of conceptual art. Today we see books designed on computers and printed with luxurious outsourced binding. But there are still artists who make beautiful handmade books.

Angustias Freijo: Like the publishing project of my friend Pepe, called La Más Bella. Sometimes their magazine is an apron with texts in the pockets, or a box filled with objects.

Felipe Ehrenberg: Yes—playful inventions. The beauty of it lies in the fact that content changes according to the form you give your publication. You might begin with a text or an illustration, and suddenly decide to add folds, hidden compartments, or paper engineering that forces the reader to open, unfold, pull. Then your original idea changes. It becomes richer. Just look at the wonderful pop-up books created in the nineteenth century by the German artist Lothar Meggendorfer. They were magical. You opened them and entire scenes emerged—people, castles, moving parts. The same thing happened with my own work Codex Aeroscriptus Ehrenbergensis. While producing it in the workshops of Nexus Press, the book evolved and became completely different from what I had initially imagined. Everything—from the aerographic spray images to the printing and binding—I made with my own hands. That is what gives an artwork its material presence. I don't reject conceptual art at all. But we cannot abandon handmade work: drawing, printing, making things with our hands. Soon there may be almost nothing left that is handmade.

Angustias Freijo: Someone once said that in the future museums will exhibit people's shopping lists, so anthropologists can understand how we lived.

Felipe Ehrenberg: Art is not anthropology. But it must be shared immediately. Artworks should not remain trapped inside galleries, becoming more and more expensive until they belong only to collectors. That is why I like producing editions. To make my work accessible to more people. And that principle was one of the foundations of my publishing projects.

The interview, however, did not end there. There was a second scene, which took place days later in a very different place. It was 5 January, the Day of the Three Kings. We finished our interview with a reflection on the democratic idea that art should reach the greatest number of people possible. But what I did not tell you is that the interview had actually begun twelve days earlier, on 24 December. It was Christmas Eve and we were sitting in the waiting room of the National Institute of Cardiology in Mexico City.

Felipe Ehrenberg: (aloud) Merry Christmas Eve!

Voices in the waiting room: Merry Christmas!

Angustias Freijo: We had just wished each other well…

Felipe Ehrenberg: Look at us. It's 24 December and here we are in this kind of cloister, one of the bunkers of the National Institute of Cancerology. The place is full of patients. Look at that enormous television hanging on the wall. We watch it every afternoon. It shows one of the most disgusting programmes I've ever seen—even by Mexican television standards. It's hosted by… what's her name… Laura Bozzo. All it shows are arguments between couples, cheating spouses, confrontations, screaming, people pulling each other's hair and slapping each other. What a vulgar spectacle. But what can we do? The patients here get along well. We talk to one

another, exchange stories, and try to convince ourselves that we are not just numbers. But we are. Look at my patient card: 000153069. Until now I have never been treated by the same doctor more than twice. We are numbers.

Angustias Freijo: Yes… I see. And that clock over there?

Felipe Ehrenberg: Ignore it. It has been showing 2:55 since the first day I came here. (laughs) But to be fair, this medical institution truly surprises me. From the security guards posted everywhere to the staff behind the windows, the cleaners, the nurses, the radiology technicians who attend six times more patients per hour than they are supposed to… Everyone is kind, attentive, compassionate without being condescending. Even the hundreds of street vendors outside the hospital are good people. You saw the man from whom I buy my amaranth bar every day? His name is Salatiel. His family has been making traditional sweets for generations in large copper pots that are almost a century old. We chat every time I go outside to smoke. (laughs) (Loudspeaker announcement) “Philipp Christiaan, please drink water”.

Felipe Ehrenberg: That’s me. I just need to drink this litre of water and then it will be my turn to enter the bunker. You see… my whole life I have socialised horizontally. This strange environment is a good example. Last week a Guatemalan painter recognised me. His name is Edelberto. We discovered that we had many mutual friends in Guatemala—some already deceased—like Otto Raúl González, Carlos Illescas, and Tito Monterroso. Another friend of mine whom he didn’t know was Mario Monteforte Toledo: poet, thinker, fencer, and once a presidential candidate. So here we were, Edelberto and I, in this bunker, both being treated thanks to public healthcare. The other day Lourdes and I calculated how much we would have spent in a private medical system. It would already have exceeded half a million pesos. Here I have spent less than a thousand. This is the kind of life lived by millions of people. A reality that art collectors and gallery owners know nothing about.

Angustias Freijo: (laughs) Don’t tell me that.

Felipe Ehrenberg: Their world is completely different from mine. It is a world where people wear black clothes to ritual events, where academics who claim to be left-wing mingle with wealthy socialites who attend openings simply to be photographed for society pages. There are heavily made-up groupies who present themselves as curators, tight-lipped curators who present themselves as geniuses, theorists trained in private universities, and young artists behaving like courtiers hoping to reach Art Basel. It’s what my friend Roger Díaz de Cosío called the “cultosphere”. To be honest, I don’t know how to move in that world. I prefer my neighbours. Wherever I have lived: Tlacopac, Tlalpan, Islington, the Bowery, Clyst Hydon, Xico, San Jerónimo, Tepito, Portales… Brooklyn… and now the modest neighbourhood of Colonia Nápoles. My buyers have almost always been my neighbours, my friends, people close to me. (Loudspeaker) “Philipp Christiaan”.

Angustias Freijo: Did they call you?

Felipe Ehrenberg: Yes. Wait here—I’ll be right back.

In the waiting room there were people of many kinds, but all of them humble. There was even a prisoner escorted by two policemen who had brought him for radiotherapy treatment. From time to time volunteers arrived bringing small snacks to share with everyone. I was tempted to try one—little bread rolls called teleras in Mexico. Among all those people Felipe stood out like a leader. Everyone admired

him, and he treated everyone as equals: nurses, policemen, patients. He was proud of being close to ordinary people and of learning from their realities. One of the most moving memories I have of him was when he came to Madrid for an exhibition in my gallery. Showing me his newest works, which he had brought under his arm, he explained the inspiration behind them: Six Windows to My House/Mexico — with Anger and Sadness.

With a broken voice, deeply moved and indignant, he spoke about the massacre of the students. He told me that when he returned from England and created the Pinocchio mimeograph, many of the people who attended those workshops became close friends over the years. One of them was the father of one of the disappeared students. Felipe always felt close to those people who had been unjustly treated. In truth, he had always chosen to belong to the people.

That evening we celebrated Christmas Eve at his house. Under the Christmas tree he had placed a toolbox for each of his grandchildren—one for the girl and one for the boy. He had carefully chosen the tools with which they should begin learning to work with their hands. While he played with them, cutting pieces of wood and hammering nails, the rest of us drank and ate the dishes prepared by Lourdes. For a moment, surrounded by family, he managed to forget the illness that had entered his life.