

**DAVID
ROBERTS
ART
FOUNDATION**

**CURATORS' SERIES #6: FRIENDS OF LONDON.
ARTISTS FROM LATIN AMERICA IN LONDON FROM
196X – 197X**

07.06.2013 – 03.08.2013

Opening Reception:

Thursday, 06.06.2013 from 7–9 pm



David Lamelas, London Friends, 1974. Courtesy of the Artist, Jan MotBrussels/Mexico and Sprueth Magers Berlin London.

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An exhibition with Diego Barboza, Ulises Carrión, Felipe Ehrenberg, David Lamelas, Leopoldo Maler, Hélio Oiticica, Pablo & Delia, Cecilia Vicuña, with additional works by Artists for Democracy, Signals Newsbulletin, Ray Barrie, John Dugger, and Clay Perry.
Curated by Pablo Léon de la Barra with Carmen Juliá.

For personal, artistic, and political reasons, from the late 1960s to the early 1970s London became home to a number of artists from Latin America who developed original, experimental and radical bodies of work. While in London, they forged new connections between their artistic practices and poetics, conceptualism, situationism, collaboration, participation, activism, and politics¹.

Less preoccupied with notions of regional or national representation², the exhibition investigates the artistic freedom these artists found in London, focusing on the works that connect who they were before arriving with who

they would later become. It also makes clear their symbiotic relationship with London's cultural and artistic scene, which influenced them but was also influenced by them. In this way, *Friends of London* attempts to correct a cultural blindness and amnesia towards most of these artists, many of whom do not exist within official art histories, and others only as footnotes. Their artistic practices have largely been ignored by mainstream British art history³, even by recent exhibitions like Tate Britain's *Migrations*⁴, in 2012, which attempted to remedy some of this neglect. *Friends of London* therefore seeks to rescue a historical but unrecognised moment in London's artistic history. As curator Hans Ulrich Obrist would say, quoting the late historian Eric Hobsbawm, this is 'a protest against forgetting' and a recovery of many of these discontinued and forgotten histories. *Friends of London* is thus an homage to the pioneers who came to London from Latin America in advance of those who are here today.

The exhibition title is a rephrasing by David Lamelas of his 1974 work *London Friends*, which celebrated his adopted London family. Although the artists in this exhibition do not constitute a unified group but, rather, singular voices and practices, they shared the experience of exile, occasionally collaborating on projects. Leopoldo Maler, for example, included work by Felipe Ehrenberg in *Silence*, an exhibition he curated for the Camden Arts Centre in 1971. And as co-founder of Beau Geste Press, Ehrenberg, in turn, published the work of Ulises Carrión and Cecilia Vicuña. Central to the development of these artists' careers in London were those 'London Friends' who embraced them as hosts, facilitators, and collaborators, helping them to integrate into

¹ A binary differentiation between North American conceptual art and Latin American conceptualism of the 1960s–1970s was formulated by Mari Carmen Ramírez: "In contrast to other parallel avant-garde tendencies centered on formal innovation, the outstanding feature of the conceptual avant-garde [in Latin America] was the merging of art and politics into a socio-artistic project of emancipation". Mari Carmen Ramírez, 'Tactics For Thriving On Adversity: Conceptualism in Latin America, 1960-1980' in *Vivenicas/Lebenserfahrung/Life Experience*, exhibition catalogue, Generali Foundation/Walther Konig, Wien/Köln, 2000, pp. 53-71.

² Yve-Alain Bois noted a similar approach by Latin American artists in Paris in the 1960s: "The Latin American artists I met in Paris had no great desire to be cast as Latinos, but they did share an essential condition that greatly impinged on their work – that of transculturalism. As such, their early experience is particularly resonant in our present decentralized, multicultural world." Yve-Alain Bois, 'Some Latin Americans in Paris', in *Abstraccion Geometrica. Arte Latinoamericano en la Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros*, Harvard University Art Museum/Fundacion Cisneros, Yale University Press, 2001, p.78.

³ "My own understanding of the last twenty to twenty-five years is that the official barometers – the rooms of the Tate, the countless British Council 'surveys' – have never registered where the real energies lie." Guy Brett, 'Internationalism Among Artists in the 60s and 70s', in Rasheed Araeen (ed.), *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain*, exhibition catalogue, Hayward Gallery, London, 1989, p.111.

⁴ *Migrations: Journeys into British Art* at Tate Britain, (31 January – 12 August 2012) attempted to reveal how British art has been fundamentally shaped by successive waves of migration. Of the artists presented in London Friends only David Lamelas was included.

London's art scene. Important instances include Guy Brett's invitation to Hélio Oiticica to exhibit in London; David Medalla's instigation of *Signals*, Exploding Galaxy and Artists for Democracy; David Mayor's collaboration with Beau Geste Press; Lynda Morris's friendship with David Lamelas; and Stuart Brisley's collaborations with Felipe Ehrenberg; not to mention institutions like Whitechapel Art Gallery, Camden Arts Centre, ICA, and Camden Arts Festival who opened their spaces to many of these artists.

IMMIGRATION, EXILE AND TRAUMA

Being an outsider allows one to observe with critical distance one's own culture. At the same time, one also notices things taken for granted by the host country. While there is a freedom in not belonging, there is also a sense of loss, especially traumatic⁵ when the move was prompted by a repressive political regime. Felipe Ehrenberg and his family had to leave Mexico after the October 1968 student massacre, which happened just ten days before the start of the Mexico Olympics, arriving in Britain in November 1968 with 'permission granted under attenuating circumstances'. For others, like Hélio Oiticica or Cecilia Vicuña, the situation in their home countries worsened while they were in London: state terrorism intensified in Brazil with the arrival in 1969 of its third military government and in Chile with the American supported coup d'état on 11 September 1973.

Under these circumstances, artistic activity became not only a tool for political resistance, but also a lifeline for personal survival. This is evident, for example, in Felipe Ehrenberg's works of the period. *A Date with Fate at the Tate* demonstrates his condition as an outsider trying to access the establishment; *A Stroll in July* and *Tube-o-Nauts* are attempts to find his way within a foreign landscape; in *Time Heals All Wounds*, a cut on the thumb serves as a metaphor for the wound inflicted by exile, while in *Living in my Art Room* Ehrenberg illustrates the claustrophobic confinement produced by exile. Here again, art, friendship, and artistic networks were of vital importance for survival.

DOCUMENTMANIA

Friends of London raises important curatorial questions about how to deal with past artistic practices when, due to its nature, little remains of the work, and how to avoid archive mania or necrophilia when handling the existing documentation. The scarcity of documentation has made it almost impossible to present some works. Where possible, and when the artist is alive, we have chosen, in David Lamelas's words, to restage or reread the work within the current context and thus to link the past with the present and the future. In other cases (sometimes in frustration at our inability to borrow the original work due to inflexible institutional policies), we have resorted to photocopies or digital prints, in the awareness that what is most important is the transmission of the essence contained in the works and actions, and not the aura of the 'original' document, the real question here being how to re-activate works and memories and keep them alive beyond the archive and document.⁶ In doing so, *Friends of London* becomes a living archive of works, documents and actions, but also of politics, poetics, friendships, and affections.⁷

⁵"The trauma of these experiences leaves behind the poisonous stain of disaffection with life and the impossibility of thought — a wound in desire that can contaminate everything, halting movements of connection and the invention that they mobilize." Suely Rolnik, 'Deleuze, Schizoanalyst', *e-flux journal #23*, March 2011, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/deleuze-schizoanalyst>.

⁶ "Looking back at those events consigned to oblivion should allow us to recover their salutary force, their emancipatory thrill and at the same time to activate a nostalgia for the future. We do not recover the past in order to make it exist as a bundle of skeletons, but to disturb the orders and assurances of the present. The task of reintegrating the subversive component of whatever we happen to be historicising can't be resolved by communicating as truth what we apparently know. It is neither a question of producing exhibitions or books on a certain theme, nor of drawing up lists, directories or summaries. It is a question of making the event spill over and break down established modes of thinking about the past and the future, and generating ways of allowing for whatever is excluded to eventually challenge the consensus and bring back the parts of an unresolved conflict". Miguel Lopez, 'How Do We Know What Latin American Conceptualism Looks Like?', *Afterall*, issue 23, Spring 2010, p. 20.

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196X TO 197X

The exhibition takes as point of departure more or less the period around March 1966 with the printing of the last issue of *Signals Newsbulletin* and October 1966 with the closing of Signals Gallery. After Signals closed, Guy Brett continued his efforts during 67 and 68 towards making possible for Oiticica's exhibition originally planned for Signals gallery, to happen at the Whitechapel Gallery in London. In December 1968, Oiticica arrived to prepare his exhibition, a few months after David Lamelas, then aged 22, began postgraduate studies at Saint Martins (after participating in the 34th Venice Biennale) and Felipe Ehrenberg fled to London from Mexico. The period covered by *Friends of London* ends with Leopoldo Maler's exhibition at Whitechapel Gallery in 1976, by which time most of the other Latin American artists had left London.

GALLERY GUIDE

Gallery 1 serves as an **Acclimation Room**, in acknowledgment of *Signals'* role in opening the London art scene to an international avant-garde during the sixties. The organisation set up a network of artistic exchanges between London and Latin America by exhibiting and publishing the works of artists such as Sergio de Camargo, Lygia Clark, Carlos Cruz-Diez, Jesús Rafael Soto, Alejandro Otero, and Mira Schendel, amongst many others. The inclusion here of *Signals Newsbulletin* prepares the present-day visitor – as it did the British public of the period – for the work of artists arriving from Latin America in the post-Signals period; it also marks the artistic shift from kinetic and op tendencies towards more conceptual, participatory, and socio-politically engaged artistic proposals.

Gallery 2 is the **Transition Room**. David Lamelas's work *28 Plaques Placed in Two Unconventional Forms* was originally presented in Argentina for the exhibition *Materiales, Nuevas Técnicas, Nuevas Expresiones* at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Buenos Aires in 1968. The piece was installed in a passageway connecting the classical main building of the museum with its new modern extension. Square metal panels were placed on the floor, loosely and randomly at first, acquiring gradually a geometrical order. The remaining panels were laid out on a table made of material left over from cutting the 28 plaques. For his St Martins degree show in 1969, Lamelas restaged the work, but this time, to please his tutor Anthony Caro, he painted the steel.

Gallery 3 is the **Documentation Room**, in which original works are exhibited alongside copies and documentary material. Whereas his '28 Plaques' dealt with physical space, Lamelas's photographic series *London Friends* and the film *Knots*, expanded the understanding of conceptualism by exploring personal, emotional, and psychological space. Also on exhibit are documents regarding Helio Oiticica's *Whitechapel Experiment*, as well as his relatively unknown work *Nitro Benzol & Black Linoleum*, which signalled Oiticica's transition towards more esoteric and sexual work. Ehrenberg's journeys and performances deal with the experience of being an outsider in exile, while Diego Barboza's processions, which he called 'experiences', take the participatory practice inspired by Oiticica out of the gallery and into public space. Seduced by London's fashion world, the artistic duo Pablo & Delia found in fashion magazines a medium to

⁷ "[Archiving] should be distinguished on the basis of the poetic force that an archiving device can transmit rather than on that of its technical or methodological choices. I am referring here to their ability to enable the archived practices to activate sensible experiences in the present, necessarily different from those that were originally lived, but with an equivalent critical-poetic density. Facing this issue, a question immediately emerges: How can we conceive of an inventory that is able to carry this potential in itself – that is an archive 'for' and not 'about' artistic experience or its mere cataloguing in an allegedly objective manner?" Suely Rolnik, *Archive Mania*, dOCUMENTA (13): 100 Notes - 100 Thoughts, No. 022, Hatje Kantz, Germany, 2011, p. 4.

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reproduce and disseminate their work. Ulises Carrión's drawings document his passage from literature to art through his contact with Beau Geste Press. Also documented is Cecilia Vicuña's participation in Artists for Democracy, the group she formed with Guy Brett, John Dugger and David Medalla. A restaging of her *Ruca Abstracta* (Abstract Hut), originally created for the 'Arts Festival for Democracy in Chile' at Royal College of Art in October 1974, is installed in Gallery 3.

Gallery 4 is the **Emancipation Room**. Here Leopoldo Maler's *Crane Ballet* investigates the relationship between human beings and industrial machinery. In the same room, inspired by Oiticica's 1969 Whitechapel exhibition, visitors are invited to play a game of snooker before leaving.

Friends of London does not attempt to be the final word on artists from Latin America who were in London in this period, or a definitive survey of works produced by them. On the contrary, its aim is to showcase significant works and artists as part of a process of re-evaluating their representation in official art histories. In this respect, *Friends of London* is both an evolving exhibition and an ongoing research, presenting what these artists contributed not only to the London art scene, but to our understandings of artistic practices today, in the hope that in future they will be read not as footnotes in art history but as emblematic cases that changed our understanding of art and life.

Pablo León de la Barra and Carmen Juliá

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David Roberts Art Foundation (DRAF) is an independent, non-profit foundation founded in 2007. It is directed and curated by Vincent Honoré. DRAF seeks to develop an ambitious, international and collaborative programme of contemporary art exhibitions, commissions, live art events, discussions and projects. Having operated in Fitzrovia for four years, DRAF moved to a renovated, 19th-century furniture factory in Mornington Crescent in September 2012. With a larger and more flexible exhibition space, measuring approximately 475sqm, DRAF is a meeting point and an evolving resource for both the art and local communities. Creating a platform for collaborations, DRAF will continue its commitment to produce, share and disseminate knowledge.

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