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C de Bordeaux

02.02.

28.05.2017

BEAU GESTE PRESS

EN

**c musée
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c de Bordeaux**

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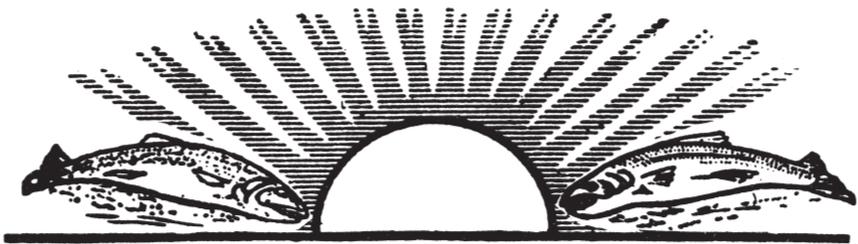
This gallery guide was devised for the exhibition
Beau Geste Press (02.02.–28.05.2017)

Curator: Alice Motard
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BEAU GESTE PRESS
Langford Court South . Cullompton . Devon

Carolee Schneemann and Felipe Ehrenberg working on
Parts of a Body House Book, 1972. Photo Anthony McCall



The independent publishing house

Beau Geste Press (BGP)

was founded in 1971 by the Mexican artists' couple Martha Hellion and Felipe Ehrenberg. Together with their two children, they moved into a farmhouse in Devon, in the English countryside, where, joined by a group of friends that included the artist and art historian David Mayor, the graphic designer Chris Welch and his partner Madeleine Gallard, they formed **'a community of duplicators, printers and artisans'**.

Beau Geste Press was active until 1976, printing publications by visual poets, neo-Dadaists and international artists affiliated with the Fluxus movement. Specialising in limited-edition artists' books, it published the work of its own members, but also that of many of their colleagues worldwide. In the spirit of *cottage industry*, Beau Geste Press adapted its methods and scale of production to its needs, keeping all stages, from design and printing to distribution, under the same – bucolic – roof.

Although it operated from the periphery of the main artistic centres of its time, Beau Geste Press was undoubtedly one of the most productive and influential publishing ventures of its generation.

A COMMUNITY
OF DUPLICATORS,
PRINTERS,
AND ARTISANS.—
OUR PRESS
IS NOT A BUSINESS,
IT'S A WAY OF LIFE.



Beau Geste Produces Books in Limited Editions, Mimeomultiples, Concept booklets and pamphlets, Magazines.

We work within the satisfying boundaries of an operation sponsored by no one, and thus not committed to any pressure but that of meaningful survival.

We produce in co-operation with the artist, and welcome inquiries and visits.

Write for our latest list of productions.

BEAU GESTE
PRESS

Langford Court South
Cullompton, Devon, U.K.
Tel.: PLYM TREE 340

The exhibition on the independent publishing house Beau Geste Press shown at CAPC musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux as part of its programme of exhibitions and events around artists' books opens with a manifesto-style press release.

The exhibition surveys the history of Beau Geste Press through the 75 books published by its founding members and their guests or occasional visitors during its five years of existence.

The exhibition is structured around these books. They tell the story of Beau Geste Press and document the creativity, productivity, working methods and international influence of this short-lived community, a forerunner of today's artists' residencies. All the texts in the exhibition are taken directly from the output of the Press – from the enlarged excerpts on the walls to the bibliographic notes, which quote the often funny and sometimes cryptic blurbs from BGP's sales catalogues.

The Beau Geste Press community at Langford Court South, 1971 or 1972. From left to right: Felipe Ehrenberg, Sergio Tovar, Madeleine Gallard, Ada Dewes, Chris Weich, Yael Ehrenberg, Matthias Ehrenberg, Martha Ehrenberg Hellion. Photo Paul Weich



LANGFORD COURT

Devon, England, 1971. Introducing the location and its inhabitants, the first room sets the stage for the story of Beau Geste Press to unfold.

To one side, a walldrawing based on a sketch made by one of the visitors to the Press (Sandy Nairne) captures the magnificent setting of Langford Court. Until 1974, Beau Geste Press rented the south wing of this sixteenth-century mansion located in the small community of Clyst Hydon, not far from Exeter. Sitting on a property bordering on a pond and surrounded by fields populated by sheep and cows, this half-timbered house with a thatched roof in true Devon style offered a living and working environment away from the urban life that Martha Hellion and Felipe Ehrenberg had known in London, after emigrating from Mexico in the aftermath of the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre¹.

**‘we spend our lives trying to find a place like this
we can miss later’²**

1. The Tlatelolco massacre refers to the killing of student protesters by the Mexican authorities shortly before the opening of the 1968 Summer Olympics.

2. Felipe Ehrenberg quoted by Carolee Schneemann, ‘Parts of a Body House Book, 1972’, in Sabine Breitweiser, ed., *Carolee Schneemann: Kinetic Painting*, exh. cat. Museum der Moderne Salzburg (London: Prestel, 2016).

The first room of the exhibition, which functions like an antechamber, holds a herbarium made by Hellion and a watercolour by Ehrenberg, both of which emphasise the rural and idyllic dimension of life at Langford Court.

On the opposite side, the pages from *C(l)ues*, a play written by David Mayor, present the house and its inhabitants through the rooms in which they live and their occupations:

‘Felipe reads aloud from the newspaper’,
‘Pat is typing’, and so forth.

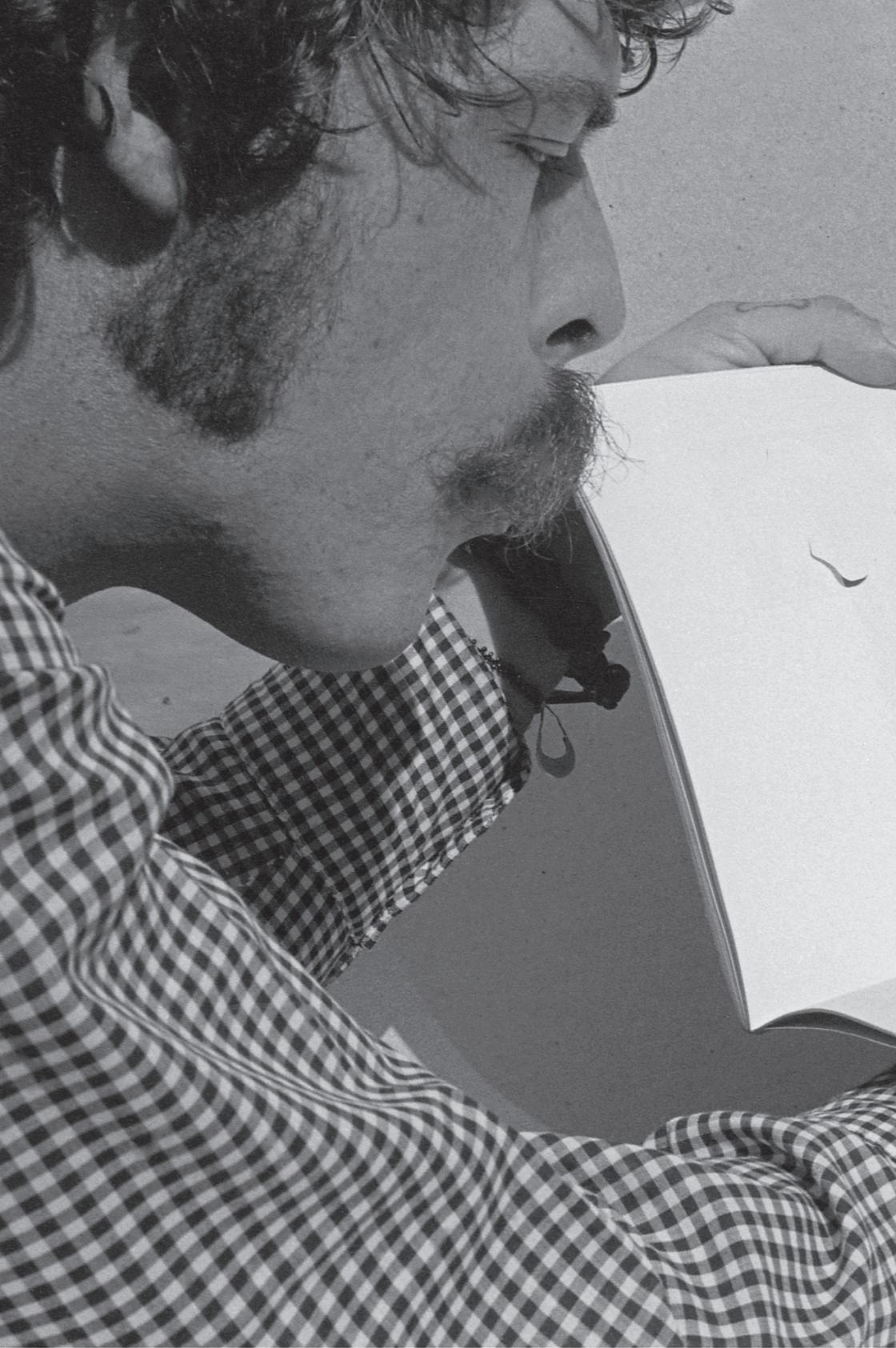
Several books bear testimony to the radical change in the lifestyle of its protagonists: *A Sightseeing Tour in Exeter* retraces a performance by the Polygonal Workshop collective (of which Ehrenberg was a part) during a week of actions in Exeter organised by Mayor. Another book recounts Mayor’s and Ehrenberg’s encounter at the exhibition *The Seventh Day Chicken* at Sigi Krauss Gallery in Covent Garden, London, where Ehrenberg presented works ‘documenting’ the dustmen’s strike in London in 1970.³

3. *La Poubelle* (dir. Felipe Ehrenberg, ca. 1970, colour, 16 min 48 sec), now in the Tate Collection, London.

PUBLI- CATIONS

The backbone of the exhibition is formed by the 75 books, flyers, leaflets and multiples published by Beau Geste Press from 1971 to 1976. The publications are presented in a chronological display that highlights the variety of its output and offers an insight into its organisation.

From a material standpoint, the publications evidence the group's attachment to craftsmanship, paired with a great economy of means: several publications consist of plain mimeotyped pages held together with staples. The succession of books highlights its geographical reach – with contributors from as far afield as Mexico, Chile, Japan, Iceland and Canada – but also the diversity of creative practices it embraced by publishing the work of musicians, composers, writers, poets, performers and filmmakers. It also nurtured ties with the English scene, as can be seen from the publications by Allen Fisher, Mick Gibbs, Michael Leggett, Opal L Nations and Michael Nyman, to name but a few.





The first resident artists at the Press were Carolee Schneemann and her English boyfriend Anthony McCall; they eventually married in Langford Court in 1972. The books they produced during their stay – *Parts of a Body House Book* (Schneemann) and *Wipes/Fades/Dissolves: Work in Progress* (McCall) – epitomised the ‘BGP style’ and were important stepping stones in their respective international careers. The same can also be said of *Arguments*, the first book by the Mexican artist Ulises Carrión: radical in both form and content, it is composed exclusively of letterpress-printed first names, which acquire new meanings through repetition, permutation and positioning – proof, according to the author, that

**‘good Spanish-
language
literature can
be written using
English’.**

Beau Geste Press proudly affirms its autonomy and independence in the forewords of its magazines, books and other promotional publications. It is not accountable to anyone, refuses to adhere to the conventions of artistic production and refutes the mechanisms of cultural validation. In a letter (dated 1972) to Paul Brown, publisher of *Transgravity Magazine*, Ehrenberg explains what motivated the formation of Beau Geste Press:

‘ . . . the main reason we (anybody) set up our press was to cut out all the grievous bullshit about submitting work “for consideration”; and the ensuing stress’⁴,

he wrote.

4. Letter from Felipe Ehrenberg to Paul Brown, 5 July 1972. Tate Archive, 815.3.2.1 BGP Correspondence 1971–1973, A–F.

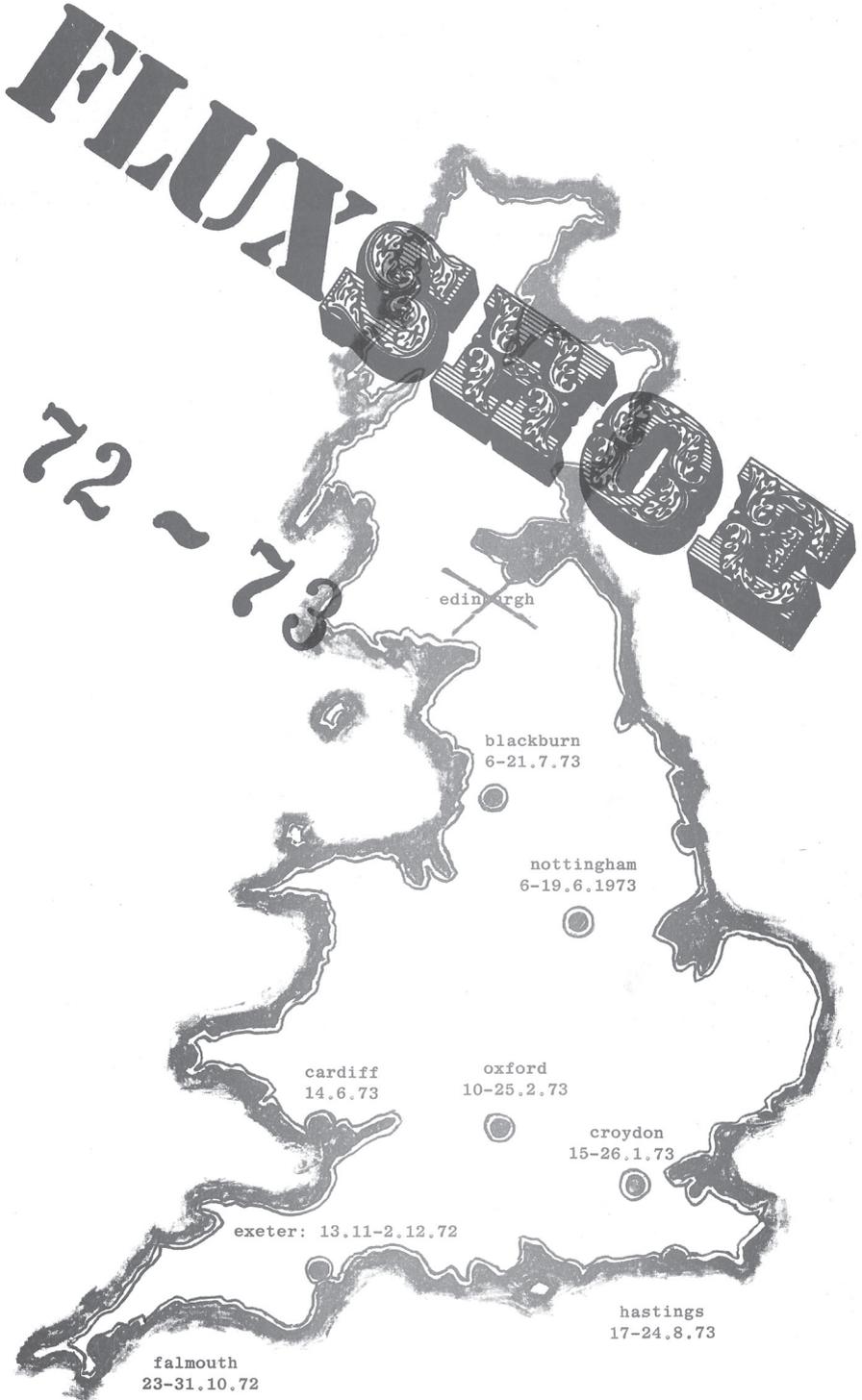
The chronological display of books manifests the political dimension inherent in the Beau Geste Press project: *Sabor a mi*, a book by the Chilean artist Cecilia Vicuña, was published a few months after the coup in Chile and the assassination of its democratically elected president Salvador Allende by the military junta.

Finally, the atypical character of Beau Geste Press as a changing community that gravitated around a family nucleus and put values such as sharing and hospitality at the core of its project, also transpires from several books, most notably *To My Friends* by Takako Saito, *Generación F. Ehrenberg* by Felipe Ehrenberg with Martha Hellion, and *Dibujos*, a collection of drawings by their children Matthias and Yaël, aged seven and eight.

The display is strictly chronological while highlighting key moments in the history of the Press, such as the event that prompted its formation and gave it its *raison d'être*: the travelling exhibition *FLUXshoe*.



Map showing the cities where the *FLUXshoe* toured, contained in *FLUXshoeADD END A*,
edited by Felipe Ehrenberg, David Mayor, Terry Wright, March 1974



When he first met Felipe Ehrenberg in London, David Mayor was a PhD student in art history at the University of Exeter, where he had been charged with coordinating a Fluxus exhibition in England on behalf of his professor Mike Weaver, head of the university's American Arts Documentation Centre, and Fluxus West's American representative, Ken Friedman (with the remote blessing of George Maciunas, the **'father'** of Fluxus).

A few months into his research, Mayor joined Ehrenberg and Hellion at Langford Court, where together they developed the Fluxus show, which was initially planned to be shown in the library of the University of Exeter and at the Royal College of Art in London, into a much larger project.

Resulting from a call for participation and a series of invitations, the exhibition eventually travelled to seven cities in England (Falmouth, Exeter, Croydon, Oxford, Nottingham, Blackburn and Hastings) between October 1972 and August 1973, deliberately avoiding the country's artistic centres of the time.

Called *FLUXshoe* (after an inspired misspelling of the word **'show'**), it acted as a springboard for many emerging British artists at the time, including Ian Breakwell, Stuart Brisley, Helen Chadwick, Marc Camille Chaimowicz and COUM Transmissions (Throbbing Gristle), who were not affiliated with Fluxus but shared its experimental spirit. The aim of the *FLUXshoe* was not to resuscitate Fluxus but to present contemporary works, many performative or participative in nature, that adopted the philosophy and often immaterial forms of the original Fluxus

Assembled in a deliberate confusion of genres, more than one hundred artists participated in this **'travelling circus'**, as Ehrenberg once described it⁵, including nine first-generation Fluxus artists (Eric Andersen, Ay-O, Davi Det Hompson, Alice Hutchins, Per Kirkeby, Takehisa Kosugi, Carla Liss, Knud Pedersen and Takako Saito) who travelled to at least one of the seven cities, while others took part remotely (Joseph Beuys, George Maciunas, Yoko Ono and Ben Vautier).

5. http://www.artcornwall.org/interview_fluxshoe_stuart%20reid_felipe_ehrenberg2.htm.

All tangible works fitted into a van and were displayed in a modular system of cardboard cubes designed by Martha Hellion. The catalogue of the show was one of BGP's first publications. It was followed by the *FLUXshoe ADD ENDA*, a compendium, including photographs and press clippings, of the highlights of each stage, from Eric Andersen's performance *Free Drink, Free Music, Free Sex* in Falmouth to the Taj Mahal Travellers' endless games of mahjong in Exeter.

The latter, a Japanese experimental band consisting of Takehisa Kosugi, Yukio Tsuchiya and Ryo and Hiroko Koike, formed a special bond with Beau Geste Press, spending several weeks at Langford Court. Another important figure in the history of the Press was Takako Saito, who took part in three stages of the *FLUXshoe*, during which time she became David Mayor's partner and moved to Langford Court.

Another key episode in the history of Beau Geste Press had taken place a few months before the *FLUXshoe*. On 21 August 1972, the BGP community⁶, together with a host of performers and artist collectives, embarked on a train from London to Edinburgh chartered in the framework of the experimental music festival ICES '72⁷. During the journey, using their Gestetner manual duplicator, they produced *The Thomas Alva Edison Centenary Issue Commemorating the ICES-72 Brain Drain Music Train*, an eighty-two-page publication with artwork contributed by the passengers of the train and collected by Carolee Schneemann wearing nothing but roller skates (*Ices Strip Performance*).

Reflecting the diversity of its output, the chronological display alternates working papers, press releases, advertising material and personal photographs offering a glimpse into the workings of the Press. Alas, like any collective experience, this publishing venture too was bound to end one day. The community effectively collapsed after the departure of Martha Hellion in early 1974. After a short stay in Belgium and a residency in Norway,

6. Felipe Ehrenberg, Allen Fisher, Martha Hellion, Jeannie Lewis, David Mayor, Dick Miller, Patricia and Terry Wright.

7. The International Carnival of Experimental Sound (ICES) was an avant-garde music festival conceived by Harvey 'Job' Matusow and held at the Roundhouse in Chalk Farm, London, from 13 to 26 August 1972.

Hellion settled in Maastricht, Netherlands. She took up studies at the Jan van Eyck Academie and married the Dutch artist Jan Hendrix, whom she had met at Beau Geste Press at the end of 1973.

Ehrenberg returned to Mexico with their two children in March 1974. David Mayor and Takako Saito moved to Cullompton and tried to keep the press alive under the imprint Beau Geste Press / Libro acción libre, with Felipe contributing remotely, but in 1975 Saito left for Italy and Mayor moved to Surrey. The press ceased all activities in 1976. The final image on the timeline is an enlargement of a photograph showing David Mayor in front of a big fire. Written by the performers' couple Genesis P-Orridge and Cosey Fanni Tutti, the caption on the original print reads **'The Beau Geste Bonfire'**, suggesting that what we see going up in flames is the remaining stock of BGP publications.

This image also closes the Beau Geste Press chapter in Mayor's life, who for a while continued to operate the press by outsourcing the printing operations and worked with small distributors to disseminate the books. After a radical career change a few years later, he has been working as an acupuncturist since 1979 and is currently conducting research on electro-acupuncture.

SCHMUCK

While Felipe Ehrenberg can be said to have been the **'artistic director'** of Beau Geste Press, David Mayor played a key role in its day-to-day management and outreach. Thanks to his editorial, linguistic and organisational skills, he became the public-relations manager of the Press, in charge of disseminating its activities and distributing its books.

In this function, he spent much of his time writing letters and keeping a meticulous inventory of everything concerning the life of the Press, from sales and production figures to potential buyers' lists, while also keeping an eye on the accounts. This probably explains why he never completed his thesis on Fluxus, which he had begun at the time of the *FLUXshoe*, the travelling show he organised more or less on his own. Mayor was also the driving force behind *Schmuck*, a magazine whose name, meaning **'penis'** in Yiddish and **'idiot'** in American slang, contrasts with the rather dainty-sounding imprint of the Press.

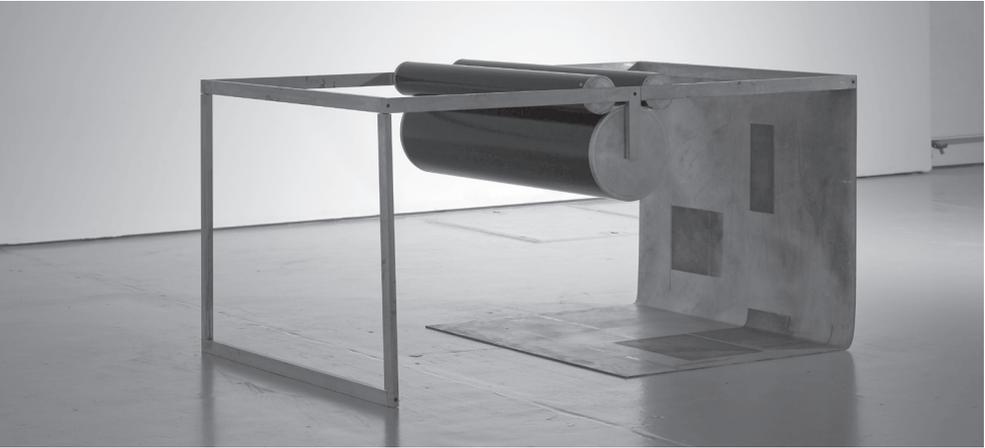
Between 1972 and 1976, Beau Geste Press published eight issues of the magazine dedicated to the local art scenes of Iceland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, France, Germany and Japan, respectively. Each issue was edited and assembled by one or

more artists from the scene under survey, many of them more or less closely related to Fluxus such as Robert Filliou, Kristján Gudmundsson, Milan Knížák, Takehisa Kosugi, Endre Tót and Wolf Vostell. Besides these 'national' editions, Beau Geste Press also published two general issues, the first *Schmuck* (the **'real'** *Schmuck*) and the *General Schmuck*. In his very first editorial, Mayor writes:

'Schmuck wants the real meat and no fancy dressing. I have no specific ideology to push and would like to see Schmuck develop, if not as an open forum for discussion of some of the problems relating to art, at least as a vehicle for artists to present their ideas as well as their art (when the two don't overlap!).'

The *Schmuck* issues, like the other books produced at the Press, were distributed via the post, the main channel of communication and dissemination at the time. The international readership with which Beau Geste Press thus actively corresponded formed a network that anticipated the Internet.

The printed matter on display is punctuated by a series of aluminium sculptures by the French artist Xavier Antin that conjure up operations or gestures related to the duplication or revelation of images, purposely aestheticising the myths surrounding the sacrosanct space of the workshop.



Original loose pages from *Schmuck* no. 5 and no.8 (the Japanese and General issues, respectively) are shown in a publication mock-up in two of these sculptures, which resemble large panes of insulation glass as used in silkscreen printing or vertical scanners.

Each of these dysfunctional machines, or sculptures suggesting a function, captures a different moment of the same process of image reproduction, feeding a narrative in which **'making forms is synonymous with making sense'**, in the artist's own words.

The **'freeze frames'** formed by each of the elements of this mechanical landscape function like a mise en abyme of the exhibition; as if, in trying to understand and retell the history of Beau Geste Press, the circulation of its entire printed output had to be momentarily halted to be analysed and scrutinised.



HUMPHREY

This space gives an insight into the production mechanisms at the Press. The display unfolds around the original Victorian press owned by Terry Wright, a local printer who had been commissioned by Beau Geste Press to print the cover of the *FLUXshoe* catalogue. In 1973, after becoming friends with Felipe Ehrenberg, Wright moved his press to Langford Court and, together with his wife Pat, joined the community to lend a hand in operating and maintaining the equipment. This Jardine Platen Press, on loan from Wright, who has owned it since his apprenticeship at the age of 15, bears the traces of time and many momentous events. It was on this very machine that Beau Geste Press printed most of its letterpress work, including the two entirely letterpress-printed books *Arguments* by Ulises Carrión and *Or* by Kristjan Gudmundsson.

For its first books, Beau Geste Press used a stencil duplicator, or mimeograph, bought in London. This machine, which Ehrenberg and Hellion had come across on City Road in Islington, inspired the name of the press, a contraction of **'beau tiful Geste tner'**. (**'Beau Geste Press'** also refers to the exotic Victorian novel of the same name by P. C. Wren about the adventures of British officers in the French Foreign Legion.)

In 1973, Beau Geste Press acquired a double-cylinder press from the 1940s, which was baptised **'Humphrey'**, in reference to the sound it made when running in full gear. A slide show documenting its christening in the spring of 1973 frames the print produced during this inaugural session. This self-referential **'birth certificate'**, which was written and laid out collectively, highlights the community's affinities with concrete poetry.

The use of various printing techniques lay at the heart of Beau Geste Press, as it constantly introduced new equipment and methods of manual or mechanical reproduction, from stencil duplication and typeset to offset, hand-colouring and bespoke fold-outs. The skills learned along the way were shared with its temporary residents and helped it to operate on a shoestring budget.

In the audio recording that can be heard in this space, Felipe Ehrenberg speaks about the production process. In this recent interview, which is interspersed with highly entertaining anecdotes on life at the Press, he reminds us that empowerment supposes knowledge and control of the tools of information production and diffusion – whether this means operating a stencil duplicator or ringing the local church bells.

The highlight in this space are the 62 plates with the original photographs used in *Generación F. Ehrenberg*. The photographs of Martha and Felipe, which were taken and instantly developed by street photographers in Mexico, are exhibited here for the first time. They testify to the couple's fascination with popular modes of image reproduction. Shown here are the positive and the negative, which they carefully collected after each pose – a ritual that finds its ultimate formal expression in the book they produced from them. The protagonists of *Generación F. Ehrenberg* are Martha, Felipe and their children, but also their extended family, in other words, their circle of friends, which includes dancers, writers, painters, anthropologists, doctors and, later, the collaborators and residents of Beau Geste Press – all sharing Ehrenberg's credo that

'art is just an excuse'.