

# THE VERTICAL KNOT

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JORGE  
EDUARDO  
EIELSON

## JORGE EDUARDO EIELSON. THE VERTICAL KNOT

Imma Prieto

The universe opens up on the canvas through endless knots, knotted ropes that are at once writing, symbol and communication. Spatial tensions that cut through the place where they are to reach another beyond it, physical, real but invisible to human eyes. Another space that lies in the stellar firmament that still conceals so many meanings from us. Jorge Eduardo Eielson (Lima, 1924 – Milan, 2006) opens up and provides vertical spaces that change the course of time in a shamanistic way, aware that the temporal is a complex in which every image comes from a previous, infinite vision.

The exhibition presented here, entitled ‘The Vertical Knot’, offers the chance to examine the artist’s body of work from the late fifties through to his most recent creations. Eielson is an artist of multifaceted, radical poetics who presents different ways of questioning the world we live in through a synthesis of graphic pieces and cultural references. This retrospective exhibition, unprecedented in Europe, explores the relationship between the visual arts space with poetic literature in a fruitful dialogue featuring aesthetic reflection on language. A structure in which the symbol points to an origin that lies in graphic, visual codes that appeal to reason and intuition.

Eielson is known for his work as one of the groundbreaking poets of the Generation of ’50, alongside major figures in Peruvian literature like the poet Blanca Varela or writers like Julio Ramón Ribeyro, Sebastián Salazar Bondy and Javier Sologuren. Attention should be drawn to the work he did in European exile, a complex, constantly-changing body of work in which he entered into an unprecedented dialogue with elements of pre-Columbian culture, a key feature of this being the strong influence and updating of the

*Paracas Pyramid*, 1972 (detail). Photographic emulsion on canvas, 100 × 100 cm. Archivio Eielson Collection, Saronno

*kbipus* or knots of Andean culture. *Kbipus* make up a system of knots or knotted ropes used to record accounting and/or narrative information in the Andes. This form of writing without words or paper combined tactile and visual experience in the codification and de-codification of meanings. The knot acts as a formula for a metaphorical universal representation of the complexity that characterises society as a whole. If his writing of the fifties and sixties takes us to places that orbit around poetic imagery, his canvases portray landscapes and bodies in a contemporary way.

In his earliest landscapes blank space approaches our eyes as a surface scratched and twisted by memory. The place we find is not just the seen or remembered earth, but those instants experienced in fragments of the medium recognisable through a bodily, physical experience. They are bodies that divide out of absence and the presence of an infinite, timeless space that receives lively images. It is important to point out the appearance of the crack and the tear as a marker of a new horizon. These early works created under the influence of the landscape of the Peruvian coast are testimony to an ambiguous space, between the horizon taken as a spatial line and the gap and the opening that lead towards a tridimensionality adjusted to a moment of eternity.

His landscapes filter the different tonalities of the coast that was his birthplace, a projection of a grey, gloomy and foggy land. A colour palette in the medium that shows how Eielson incorporates objects and volumes containing a physical body into his painting. Remains of clothing, remnants of shirts, trousers or ties as symbols of a shared destruction and disfiguring; they are signs of the self-exile in which Eielson spent most of his life. As if the landscape were an image that contains much more than what it shows, his canvases expand this presence of the material, in which memory leads us to the human being.

At the same time, Eielson plays with these tensions derived from the fabric, in canvases that approach something

that was to be one of the constants through his career. The task of writing and reading *kbipus* fell to the *kbipukamayoc*, the real keepers and guardians of grammar, as a structured order in a world in which information in itself meant true power. The relationships between the pre-Columbian past and his time led Eielson to create representations in which this ritual, shamanistic cosmic order of things is synthesised through an expression of the essential. Bodies and presences that give life to forms originating in visions through scenes resulting from the experiencing of different states of consciousness.

Aware of the language system of his native land, Eielson does not differentiate between his writing on the canvas and on the page, setting out to reveal spaces for those signs that communicate body and language. This is how he was to generate a new space characterised by his use of these knots. Once more these were landscapes, understood as an interface where cracks open up, cracks able to reveal other forms of thought, as in his extensive series of *kbipus*, or above all in the work entitled *Alfabeto* [Alphabet] (1973). Spaces open up and dialogue on the surface of the canvas through knots and colour, creating a simplification and refinement of elements and concepts that lead us to wonder what there is beyond. This infinite body that is the universe was to become an obsession and guide in which to conceive of the unlimited.

In a way his knots were to begin to inhabit the real space in which they lay, generating new situations and presences. His research aimed at conceiving space in all its breadth and at pointing out how some elements start from a series of tensions that point to the beyond where the infinite runs through the universe. Some of the tensions generated once again point outside, conveying to us that everything goes on. It is important to underline that these works lead on to an exercise of a different kind where the body enters the scene, generating movement. These are

bodies covered in knotted fabrics, impossible writings that generate new dances of meaning, like the performance he presented at the 1972 Venice Biennale, entitled *El cuerpo de Giulia-no* [Giulia-no's Body]; the work *Paracas-Pyramid* (1974), and the installation-performance *Primera muerte de María* [First Death of María] (1988), which are part of this exhibition.

Jorge Eduardo Eielson's work is a corpus of worlds that converge and dialogue: the pre-Columbian past and the blue of a certain Mediterranean mythology, writing and visual art, the embodiment of the sign and the infinity of space. In short, a place constructed out of the communication between symbols clearly in debt to different realities, generating a new entity that points to communication. His work opens up meanings of the past that point towards a future where the constellations and their alignments are abstract symbiotes that link memory, writing and the infinite.

## EIELSON, BETWEEN EXILE AND MEMORY

Martha L. Canfield

Jorge Eduardo Eielson was born on 13 April 1924 in Lima to a Peruvian mother and an American father of Norwegian origin. His father disappeared when he was very young and he was told that he had passed away. His mother subsequently gave the baby up to be adopted by a family in the capital, which he always spoke of as if it were his own: his adoptive mother, two older sisters, and a younger brother who died prematurely. Only much later, as we shall see, would this picture be transformed by an unforeseen event.

From a very early age Jorge displayed exceptional gifts—for writing, painting and music. In those years, we should recall, the Peruvian capital did not yet suffer from the degradation of later times, which Eielson so presciently anticipated in his novel *Primera muerte de María* [First Death of María], written in the 1950s. Lima at that time enjoyed relative economic stability and a rich and vibrant cultural scene, open to stimuli from the great international centres, which enabled the young Eielson to imbibe, above all, European culture. He learned English and French, read Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Shelley and Eliot, the Spanish mystics and the Golden Age classics, the Iberian poets of the twentieth century and, of course, the great poets of the North and South American continents: Poe, Whitman, Darío, Vallejo, Neruda and Borges. With a restless, curious nature and a lively intelligence, the adolescent Eielson changed school several times. Then, towards the end of his secondary schooling, he was assigned as a Spanish language teacher José María Arguedas, who was beginning to make a name for himself as a writer and ethnologist. Arguedas, impressed by the boy's talent, took him under his wing and introduced him to the artistic and literary circles of

the capital. He also introduced him to the ancient Peruvian cultures, which were then ignored—or, even worse, looked down on—by the country's traditionally Hispanophile and anti-Indigenous official culture. This relationship with Arguedas was very important for Jorge and the world that it opened up to him was to expand even more during his voluntary exile, his life in Italy, where it would be intensely fruitful in his writing and his art.

At the age of twenty-one, in 1945, after having published his first book of poems, *Reinos* [Realms], Eielson was awarded Peru's National Poetry Prize. His predominant register in this first phase, which includes poems composed earlier but published later and others written later but always with their origin in Lima, is highly lyrical, very close to the neo-Baroque, metaphysical language for which the Cuban Lezama Lima had been cultivating an appreciation since the late 1930s. Eielson was one of the first to follow this path, showing an extraordinary sensitivity in his approach to the new form of poetic language and in his attraction to the experimental. It is also important to note how, in Lima, his gaze opened up to vast new horizons while rooting itself in the splendour of Ancient Greece and the Spain of the Golden Age, already evident in the poetic titles of those early years: *Moradas y visiones del amor entero* [Abodes and Visions of Entire Love] (1942), *Cuatro parábolas del amor divino* [Four Parables of Divine Love] (1943), *Canción y muerte de Rolando* [Song and Death of Rolando] (1943), *Reinos* (1944), *Antígona* [Antigone] (1945), *Ajax en el infierno* [Ajax in Hell] (1945), *En la Mancha* [In La Mancha] (1946), *Doble diamante* [Double Diamond] (1947). At the same time, two characteristics first appear in this early work that were to become constants: the multiplicity of his interests and his ability to handle a variety of expressive codes, always at the cutting edge, enamoured of novelty and often ahead of his time with initiatives that would later be widely accepted and canonised. We might recall here,

for example, *Ajax en el infierno*, from 1945, in which the revisiting of the myth highlights the nostalgia for classical values and the propensity for profanation typical of the contemporary world. This trend, present in Gide (*Theseus*, 1946), was to be especially marked in the following decades: in Borges ('The House of Asterion', 1947), in Dürrenmatt ('The Minotaur', 1985), in the Penelope recreated by various female voices in the poetry of the eighties (for example, *Viajes de Penélope*, 1980, by the Cuban Juana Rosa Pita), but it manifests itself above all in certain films by Pasolini (*Oedipus Rex*, 1967; and *Medea*, 1969), Eielson's interesting affinities with whom have yet to be explored. Meanwhile, in the field of art, as an example of a novelty that was soon canonised, we can remember his *Réquiem por Marilyn Monroe* [Requiem for Marilyn Monroe], from 1962, which anticipates the more famous series of portraits by Andy Warhol.

In 1946 Eielson's drawings appeared in various magazines and newspapers in Lima, and with his friends Javier Sologuren and Sebastián Salazar Bondy he published the anthology *La poesía contemporánea del Perú* [Contemporary Poetry of Peru], with illustrations by Fernando de Szyszlo, with whom a mutual appreciation was immediately established. In the same year he also received a national theatre award and in 1948 had his first solo exhibition of graphic work, paintings and sculptures, still marked by the influence of Klee and Miró.

All of this confirms that he was very well integrated into the intellectual environment of his city; but he wanted to see Europe and felt that he should, and that same year he obtained a scholarship from the French government, which enabled him to travel to Paris, then a natural destination for Latin American intellectuals, where he at once felt perfectly at home. He frequented the Latin Quarter, then in full Existentialist effervescence, and spent many hours of the day and night in the *caves* of Saint-Germain-des-Prés in the company of other writers from all over the world. He got

to know the art of Piet Mondrian and made contact with members of the group MADÍ (for MATERIALISMO DIAléctico), who invited him to take part in the first manifestation of abstract art at the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles. The MADÍ group, headed by the Uruguayan artists Carmelo Arden Quin and Volf Roitman, had developed in Buenos Aires with the involvement of Lucio Fontana, Tomás Maldonado and Gyula Kosice. As a consequence of his participation in MADÍ, Eielson was invited to exhibit at Colette Allendy's prestigious avant-garde gallery, where he presented abstract and geometric works, as well as mobiles.

In 1950 he was awarded a second scholarship, this time by UNESCO, and moved to Geneva, where he began to produce poetry that was very different from anything he had done before, opting for the graphic and visual experimentation seen in *Tema y variaciones* [Theme and Variations] (1950). The first of the poems in the collection may serve as an example:

*Solo for sun*  
 alone the sun  
 the sun only  
 alone in heaven  
 and I'm so lonely  
 alone with the sun  
 I simply smile

In 1951 he made what would be the fundamental and decisive journey of his life to Italy, in the company of Javier Sologuren, for a simple summer vacation. As soon as he set foot on the peninsula, he realised that he had found the land of his choice and by the time he got to Rome he had decided to stay. Asking his friend to send some of his books and personal effects from Paris, he thus set out on the long and intense exploration of his Latin roots. Over many more or less brief trips and numerous internal and external travels, Italy

revealed itself to be his permanent place of residence, and was so for more than fifty years, until his death. In Rome he was able to support himself by working as an art and literature correspondent for various Latin American newspapers and magazines. At the same time, he became part of the Obelisco group, making friends with Piero Dorazio (1927–2005) and Mimmo Rotella (1918–2006), with whom he held several exhibitions. However, between 1954 and 1958 he concentrated almost exclusively on literary activity. These were the years in which he produced the collections of poems dedicated to the city of Rome, and also his most experimental poetry. He did not immediately publish these ten collections of poems but kept them and brought them out much later, without modification: *Habitación en Roma* [Room in Rome] (1952), *La sangre y el vino de Pablo* [Paul's Blood and Wine] (1953), *mutatis mutandis* (1954), *Noche oscura del cuerpo* [Dark Night of the Body] (1955), *De materia verbalis* (1957–58), *Naturaleza muerta* [Still-Life] (1958), *Acto final* [Last Act] (1959), *Ceremonia solitaria* [Solitary Ceremony] (1964), *Pequeña música de cámara* [Little Chamber Music] (1965) and *Arte poética* [Poetic Art] (1965).<sup>1</sup>

In these first years of his Roman residence, Eielson became acquainted with a young Sardinian who was doing his

1. The dates correspond to the year of creation. Eielson published only a part of this body of work. *Noche oscura del cuerpo* came out first in a bilingual Spanish and French edition, and with certain variant readings, as *Nuit obscure du corps*, translated by Claude Couffon (Paris, Altaforte, 1983), and subsequently in Spanish, in the definitive version, as *Noche oscura del cuerpo* (Lima, Jaime Campodónico Editor, 1989). He later collaborated with Rafael Vargas in the composition of a short anthology in which *Noche oscura del cuerpo* appears in its entirety, alongside only a very few poems from the other collections (J.E. Eielson, *Antología*, Lima, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1996). Finally, I brought together the ten collections of poems written during his years in Rome in full and in a definitive version (J.E. Eielson, *Poeta en Roma*, Madrid, Visor, 2009).



military service there. Michele Mulas, who had a great vocation for painting and the visual arts in general, was born in Bari Sardo in 1936. A remarkable affinity immediately sprang up between the two, a deep affection that Jorge always characterised as ‘fraternal’ and that united them for the rest of their lives.<sup>2</sup>

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, Jorge and Michele were often on the move between Paris and various places in Italy. Jorge was invited to the Venice Biennale in 1964, 1966 and 1972, to the Latin American Art Show at the Festival dei Due Mondi in Spoleto, and to the Paris Biennale, where exhibitions were also organised for him. In 1967 they went to New York, where they formed part of the scene centred on the Chelsea Hotel, and a little later went on to Lima, where Jorge had a major exhibition at the Galería Moncloa. That trip to Peru was especially important for Michele because he was struck there by pre-Columbian art and especially pre-Inca art, which he immediately associated with the prehistoric art of Sardinia and in particular with the Nuragic civilisation. This is seen in the evolution of his pictorial and sculptural work, about which Eielson himself has specifically expressed himself in several catalogues and in critical texts.

In this period Eielson was as active in the visual arts as he was in the literary sphere. His novel *El cuerpo de Giulia-no* [Giulia-no’s Body] was published in 1971 in Mexico under the Joaquín Mortiz imprint, but the fundamental event for him was his meeting, in Paris, with Taisen Deshimaru, an encounter that guided him in his discovery of Zen Buddhism and would lead him to an iconic, visual and conceptual writing, with the consequent rejection of literature

2. In my conversations with Michele, he more than once told me with a laugh that many people believed he was homosexual because of his relationship with Jorge, and that this belief didn’t bother him, but that in fact he was not.

in its more traditional and elocutive form. At the same time, Taisen Deshimaru, whom Eielson always considered his teacher, afforded a special perspective on Michele, assuring him that he was not lacking a ‘natural teacher’, an observation that Jorge understood as referring to Michele’s spontaneously harmonious relationship with nature and rich spirituality.<sup>3</sup>

At the end of the 1970s, Jorge and Michele moved to Milan, where they would live for the rest of their lives, with the exception of the summers, which were spent in Sardinia, in a beautiful house in the province of Nuoro, thanks in part to an inheritance from Michele’s family. Restored and refurbished to meet the needs of the two artists, the house had two large studios, one for each of them, a comfortable outbuilding for guests, and a huge stretch of land on which Michele loved to grow fruit and vegetables. In addition, the Barisardo stream, in which they often went to bathe or to fish, crossed the rear of the property. It was quite clear to Eielson that he would never live in Peru again and that Italy was now his definitive home. What few people know, however, is that he chose never to apply for Italian citizenship—which would have spared him the tiresome and periodically repeated procedure of renewing his residence permit—because he felt it would have been a betrayal of his Peruvian origins. Although he had left his country very young, at the age of twenty-five, and had enthusiastically installed himself in Paris, Geneva, New York, Rome and finally Milan, the memory of his homeland, and with it his reverence for its original Inca and pre-Inca culture, was ensconced in his heart and strengthened over time until it became central to his vision of the world and to his art. He liked to remind people that the discovery of pre-Columbian art, together with African art, was the most significant

3. Eielson, Jorge Eduardo. *El diálogo infinito. Una conversación con Martha L. Canfield*. Sevilla: Sibila / Fundación BBVA, 2011, p. 113.

artistic development of the twentieth century, touching the heights of the sublime and relegating classical realism to obsolescence.

Although Rome, where he lived from 1951 to 1966, completely seduced him and encouraged him to develop new artistic techniques and to write poems with the Eternal City at their centre, at the same time the memory of Lima was growing within him, invading even the Roman realm. In the sixties, nostalgia led him to create a whole series of abstract paintings, to which he gave the title 'Paisaje infinito de la costa del Perú' [Infinite Landscape of the Peruvian Coast], and for which he mixed the pigment with sand from the beaches of Barranco, some of which he brought himself and some he had brought by friends. By that time Rome occupied a pre-eminent place in that phase of his creative output, but the distance from his homeland began to awaken in him memories, nostalgia and a strong awareness of his own roots, sometimes to exalt them, sometimes to deplore the implicit pain. For example, in a poem from *Habitación en Roma*, 'Azul ultramar' [Ultramarine Blue], where that 'blue' is undoubtedly the colour of the Mediterranean and where the Eternal City is presented as the object of unconditional love, he wrote:

[...] this city that is yours  
and yet is mine  
this city I kiss day and night  
as I kissed Lima in the fog

In other words, quite unexpectedly, his Roman present, evoked with the music of drums and trumpets, with the vital noise of car horns and engines and the sun that dances on the roof, is invaded by the memory of Lima, not beautiful, not vivacious, but on the contrary shrouded in fog, but still and always the object of his love. In the same collection, 'Poema para destruir de inmediato sobre la poesía la infancia

y otras' [Poem to Destroy Immediately on Poetry Childhood and Other Metamorphoses] focuses in even greater detail on memories of Lima associated not only with its constant 'grey sky', but also with Eielson's childhood, with the distant image of his mother, and above all on the incomparable milk he was given at home and which from then on was to give rise to numerous poetic texts, paintings and installations.

As the years went by, Eielson's interest in the pre-Columbian world intensified and he began to collect pre-Inca objects and fabrics, obtained mainly from French and Milanese collectors; at the same time there started to emerge in his poetry and in his art, in his studies and essays,<sup>4</sup> traits and precise references to that world 'of his ancestors', as he liked to insist. But undoubtedly knots are the key element of his art and must be regarded as a point of arrival in his evolution, as the crystallisation of an inner process. This process started with garments, which in turn had come from those 'infinite landscapes', because he saw them as if they had been unearthed from the sands, like archaeological remains. He himself commented that after pulling the garments taut and rumpling, burning and cutting them, he ended up knotting them and it was then that he understood he was performing an ancient, primordial gesture, and the name *quipu* seemed to him to come naturally, as an identifying function, because with it he was paying just tribute to his ancestors, to the Incas who had converted that primordial gesture into a highly sophisticated code.<sup>5</sup>

4. For example, he studied pre-Columbian sculptures in different minerals, and with J. D. Márquez Pecchio published *Escultura precolombina de cuarzo* (Caracas, Editorial Armitano, 1985). In recognition of his dedication to pre-Inca art and its impact on his own work, the Centro Studi Jorge Eielson in Florence organised the exhibition 'Eielson artista e collezionista' at the Palazzo Medici-Riccardi, from 6 May to 2 June 2013.

5. Eielson, Jorge Eduardo. *El diálogo infinito*, op. cit., p. 63. Here Eielson defines *quipus* as a 'sophisticated language' rather than a



The knot, then, is a privileged moment of Eielson's art. With it, the movement stops, the canvases are fixed, time interrupts its course and the soul, freed from all suffering, concentrates on contemplation. Álvaro Mutis wrote that Eielson's canvases lead us into 'a world of serenity and limpid beauty'. We might add that the impressions communicated by the fabrics and by the knots are similar to the inner peace that emanates from the final images of *Noche oscura del cuerpo*, the magnificent collection of poems from 1955, just as they are in perfect harmony with the vital 'celebration' implicit in the last works that Eielson wrote and published: *Sin título* [Untitled], from 2000, and *Celebración* [Celebration], from 2001. As the poet said in the last body of *Noche oscura del cuerpo*:

Everything seems simpler and closer  
And even the moonlight itself  
Is a gold ring  
That passes through the dining room and kitchen  
The stars come together in the belly  
And they no longer hurt but simply shine  
The intestines return to the blue abyss  
where the horses  
And the drum of our childhood lie

At the end of the initiatory journey described in that masterpiece, after having travelled through tissues, glands, excrement and blood, the purified self finds the stars of the lower sky (*Stars Like Knots*, as the title of one of his paintings says), which, by holding fast to childhood in the depths of memory, fix it in the present, to illuminate and comfort. Past and present, self and not-self, union and separation: the teaching we receive from Eielson, thanks to his constant,

code because he was convinced that they were not only an accounting system but also a form of writing.

vertiginous and diversified experimentation, is a teaching of hard-won serenity in which we can see what humans have always been looking for: the harmony of opposites. In this conjunction, life and death meet with all the naturalness of an endless circular cycle:

# I KNOW PERFECTLY WELL THAT MY HOME

Is a star  
That is called life  
And that that star is the earth  
And that after I shall have another home  
In another star  
Called death

(*Sin título*, 2000)

In this cycle the whole universe is latent and the work of art condenses that totality in its complex and ineffable harmony. This is how the artistic object, like poetry, can be enigmatic, and yet potentially contain, in an allusive or symbolic way, the universe and thus its perfection and its indisputable logic; that is, its very 'clarity':

The darkness of this poem  
Is only a reflection  
Of the unsayable clarity  
Of the universo

(*De materia verbalis*, 1957–58)

This is an *argumentum poeticum*—irrational and sublime as was Borges's more famous 'Argumentum Ornithologicum'—with which Eielson seems to demonstrate the existence of God or, at least, that of an absolute and superior clarity, beyond human reason yet somehow perceptible.

While such potentiality, concentration and energy are, as we have said, manifested especially in the knot, over

the years Eielson distanced himself from knots, though not from symbolic objects themselves, which, on the contrary, acquire an increasingly intense consistency, both in their colours and in their formal complexity. See, for example, the forty elements from 1993 that constituted a tribute to Leonardo da Vinci; or each and every one of the knots in jute and acrylic fabric from the nineties; or the most recent, in red velvet, with a mysterious glass sphere hidden in its centre (*Nudo* [Knot], 2001). Eielson separated himself from knots in his last performances, in which the human body is covered by pieces of cloth and wraps. The garments that he formerly ripped and knotted (blue jeans, and shirts) were also the mask that was broken to reveal or knotted to concentrate, as he himself had said:

my shame is only a cloak  
of words  
a delicate golden veil  
that covers me daily  
and without pity

(*Habitación en Roma*, 1952)

But perhaps for this very reason, a point is reached where one aspires rather to *unknot* and *discover* or *undress*. The mysterious process by which the two Latin etymons *nodus* (knot) and *nudus* (naked) came to be confused in the Spanish *nudo* has yet to be clarified, but in the Castilian imaginary the two verbs, undress / *desnudar* and untie / *desanudar*, are conflated, and in Eielson's work they take on a suggestiveness that is at once disturbing and fascinating. Clothes with knots [*nudos*] give way to huge fabric wraps that, in a first phase, completely cover a body, whether still or in motion. But in no case are there nudes [*nudos*], and the discernible silhouette of the woman thus draped is indicated by the external colour, almost always blue, suggesting a celestial as opposed to a terrestrial dimension, and in general aerial or ascending.

We might think here of the performance *Interruption*, in Lima, in 1988, where the figure that climbs the stairs of the church may be a virgin or the Celestial Mother, without a visible face, with her enormous mantle capable of sheltering everyone; or of the installation from the same year, also in Lima, *Primera muerte de María*, in which the motionless figure, dressed in blue, seems to be Mary, in readiness for the Assumption.

The last phase of Eielson's journey corresponds to a poetry attentive to the visual effect on the printed paper, with an association between verbal and non-verbal language (see *Nudos*, 2002), while at the same time his lyrical impulse led him to recreate landscapes lived and loved, such as the Sardinian countryside, and to portray people close to his heart, and therefore to 'celebrate' with a song both new and capable of becoming 'visible' (*Celebración*, 2001, and *Canto visible* [Visible Song], 2002).

After having accompanied the famous knots with installations in which the human body was enveloped in abundant vesture, fixed with knots, in later years the body appeared, still immobile and in a kind of serene enchantment, but draped now in loose fabrics that suggest the ease with which it could be stripped naked, a sign of essentiality and purity. The viewer is infected by this atmosphere of suspension and indefinable pleasure. The naked, covered bodies, which can easily be uncovered, suggest a vision and a promise. *Des-anudar*, *des-nudar*, *des-cubrir*: un-knot, de-nude, dis-cover. Perhaps the happiness, once the artist has taught us to contemplate knots as objects of an absolute energetic intensity, comes now from liberation, both from the dress-mask that alters as it covers, and from the self-same knot that contains and detains, that binds and generates, thus inducing waiting and hope.

Like a Buddhist monk, all through his life Eielson knew how to surprise us even in repetition, changing precisely what we had just understood. Because, as suggested by a kind

of *kōan* that emerges from his lines (I quote again here from *Sin título*), to really knot it is not enough to only knot:

IF EVERYTHING THAT KNOTS

Only knots  
All is nothing  
If a shoe is tied  
The foot is tied too  
And the shoe becomes all  
If nothing is tied there is no knot  
No foot nothing and in place of all  
There is once more a shoe whose size  
Is a null number that knots us to nothing  
And again  
To the shoe

From the year 2000 on, Eielson's name became increasingly well-known and his work was included, as it continues to be, in numerous anthologies, catalogues and critical volumes. After a period in which he concentrated above all on art and left off writing, in 2000 he returned to poetry with renewed enthusiasm and published new collections of poems that put forward a new form of lyricism; intense, emotional, formally cultivated and often touched by humour and a fondness for play. This gave us *Sin título* (Valencia, 2000), *Celebración* (Lima, 2001), *De materia verbalis* (Mexico, 2002) and *Nudos* (Tenerife, 2002). In the last of these he wanted to clearly establish the union of the two languages that he had kept separate for so long: that of verbal expression, or 'written poetry', and that of formal or figurative expression: in *Nudos* the pages of the book alternate drawings of knots with short poems on the theme of the knot.

But in the midst of this creative richness, accompanied by widespread recognition at the highest level, accepted with

the same serenity and humility that always characterised him, the year 2002 was to bring quite unexpected changes, at first heart-breaking and then miraculously comforting. In the middle of the year, after a trip to London together, Michele was diagnosed with a very severe form of leukaemia, and though he resisted the illness with great poise and determination, he nonetheless died on 19 December that same year. His loss was a terrible blow for Jorge and was manifested in the worsening of the disease that was slowly consuming his organism and had already notably reduced his autonomy. In spite of this he continued to produce and write and to keep up his many working relationships and his contacts with friends. And in 2005 he published his last book of poems, *Del absoluto amor y otros poemas sin título* [Of Absolute Love and Other Untitled Poems], which opens with a long poem in which he evoked Michele and exalted his life.

And as an unexpected gift of fate, the year after Michele's death, two women with the surname Eielson, having discovered him on the Internet and feeling sure they must be related, contacted him and flew to Milan to see him. On investigation it emerged that one of the women, Olivia Eielson, from Oklahoma, was Jorge's half-sister, daughter of their father Oliver, who, after deserting his family in Peru, had returned to the United States, where he had married and had two daughters. The other woman, Kari Eielson Mork, from Zurich, was the daughter of Oliver's brother, and therefore Olivia's and Jorge's cousin. Kari had also brought to the get-together in Milan her young daughter, a beautiful, lively little girl who filled the days of her newly discovered uncle with joy. For Jorge, all of this was a wonderful gift of destiny and it never ceased to surprise him, but he felt the greatest emotion over the encounter with Olivia and the discovery of the deep affinities between them, as she too wrote, painted and made music; Jorge played the piano, Olivia the cello. And it was such a pleasure

to be together that they decided to spend the coming summer in the house in Sardinia, which was to be the last of his life. Returning to Milan in October 2005, Jorge was serene and happy, albeit much weakened by his illness, which was already in its terminal phase. He passed away on 8 March 2006. In accordance with his last wish, his remains were cremated and the ashes placed to rest in the little cemetery of Bari Sardo, near Michele.

Also in keeping with his wishes, the Centro Studi Jorge Eielson was founded in Florence in September of the same year. Olivia Eielson is honorary chair of this study centre that bears her brother's name and is dedicated to the dissemination of his and Michele's work, and of Latin American culture in general in Italy. Her involvement with the centre is permanent and she looks forward to bringing several projects to fruition in the near future.

To close this summary of his life and work, I want to recall one of the many conversations I was privileged to have with him. When I asked him the real reason why he had asked NASA to scatter his ashes in cosmic space, he answered me thus: 'Like other artists whom I admire and love, I too have tried to make my life a masterpiece. I don't think I have done that. But I shall try to do so with my death. It is the last chance I have left.'

I was by his side in so many important and simple moments of his life, and of his death, too, and I believe I can say that he succeeded in doing so: with the simplicity and the splendour that were his wonderful and exceptional characteristics.



*Paesaggio infinito della costa del Perú (serie II-14)*  
[Infinite Landscape of the Peruvian Coast (II-14 Series)],  
1960. Mixed media and cement on canvas, 100 × 130 cm.  
Private Collection, Milan





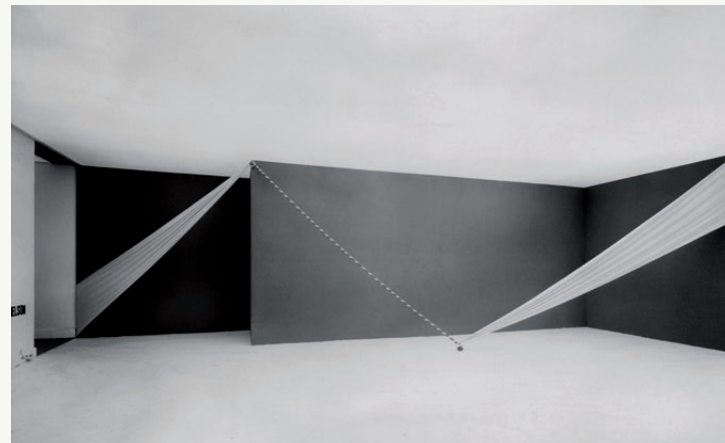
*Oh vita più vecchia delle stelle* [Oh Life More Ancient than the Stars], 1963. Shirt and acrylic on canvas, 150 × 95 cm. Private Collection, Milan



*Quipus 27 ton 1a*, 1966. Acrylic and burlap on board, 95 × 130 × 19 cm. Angela and Beppe Bonetti Collection



*Quipus*, 1965. Acrylic on canvas on board, 73 × 72 cm. Private Collection (1); *Quipus blu 12*, 1965. Acrylic and fabrics on board, 120 × 120 × 13 cm. Private Collection (2)



*247 metros de tela de algodón crudo* [247 Metres of Raw Cotton Cloth], Venice Biennale, 1972. Installation. Black-and-white photograph (1); *El cuerpo de Giulia-no* [Giulia-no's Body], Venice Biennale, 1972. Performance. Colour photograph (2). Centro Studi Jorge Eielson Collection





*Il Paesaggio infinito (Prima morte di Maria)* [The Infinite Landscape (First Death of Maria)], 1988. Installation. Mannequin, ladder, three chairs, table, bread, cup, plate, spoon, knife and bottle, dimensions variable. Centro Studi Jorge Eielson Collection



*Poema escultórico* [Sculptural Poem], 1978-1980. Chair, glass bottle and a sequence of photographs, 90 x 40 x 40 cm (chair), set of ten C-Print photographs with frame, 26 x 21 cm each. Archivio Eielson Collection, Saronno



*Nodo* [Knot], 2003. Black velvet with black wooden sphere, 40 × 45 × 40 cm. Private Collection.

*Nodo bianco e nero 3* [Black-and-White Knot 3], 2003. Cotton fabric, 17 × 22 × 19 cm (2); *Nodo bianco con strisce nere* [White Knot with Black Stripes], undated. Cotton fabric, 18 × 30 × 29 cm (3); *Nodo blu* [Blue Knot], 2000. Fabric, 17 × 25 × 23 cm (4); *Nodo di iuta e colori a rose* [Knot of Jute and Colours as Roses], undated. Acrylic and burlap, 25 × 47 × 50 cm (5); *Nodo* [Knot], 2001. Velvet and crystal ball, 50 × 90 × 50 cm. Centro Studi Jorge Eielson Collection

## AS YOU SEE, I AM NOTHING

Carla Guardiola Bravo

Every time José wove a net he did it sitting on the sand, with the weight of his head forward, cooling his torso and casting a cone of shade, which prevented the sun from reflecting off the needle. No one ever heard him say a word while he was weaving. At those times, José seemed not to exist in the present, nor to grow old, nor ever to have been a child. [...].<sup>1</sup>

A figure covered in a blue mantle approaches a blue room. The floor is covered with sand. Leaning against the wall, a ladder, and in front of it a blue table on which are placed, also blue, a loaf of bread, an empty bowl on a plate, a spoon and a knife. In the middle of the table, a bottle. Three blue chairs, unoccupied, two of them unstable.

This would describe the set of *Primera muerte de María* [First Death of María], an installation presented by Jorge Eielson as part of his exhibition 'Paisaje Infinito de la Costa del Perú' [Infinite Landscape of the Peruvian Coast] (Lima, 1987). Like everything in the Eielsonian universe, the scene moves in three times: past, present and future. Originating as a poem almost forty years before, the image is replicated in the first chapter of the homonymous novel, conceived between 1959 and 1980. In that initial fragment we find José, a *mestizo* fisherman from the Paracas region, making his net on the beach, not saying a word. It is a scene of time suspended in which the fisherman recalls the starry sky, the sea and the sand, the tomb of his ancestors and as such

1. Eielson, Jorge Eduardo. *Primera muerte de María*. Mexico City: Fondo de la Cultura Económica, 1988, p. 9.

a place of eternal protection. His present, Lima, a city also covered in sand; at his feet, a pyramid of human bones that, not without difficulty, José tries to avoid. His character is the point of the triangle completed by Pedro, also a fisherman and José's best friend, and María Magdalena, who at nightfall appears as Lady Cyclotron before an audience that, mad, demands the shedding of each garment of violet satin—the colour of death and human misfortune—that Mary wears. The present of Pedro, María and José is intertwined with autobiographical passages written by Eielson in 1980, once again connecting times and spaces.

Going through his own work from end to end, Eielson transports us by means of archetypal figures to different moments of searching or exploration. Thus the staircase, the ascending vertical that takes us up to the firmament, reappears, now white and pyramidal in form, in the installation *La scala infinita* [The Infinite Staircase] (Lorenzelli Arte, Milan, 1998); the chair, for its part, the seat of the poet's eternal vigil, refers us back to an early moment and his incipient attempts to bear witness, through the written word, to his first vital experiences. However, having recently left Lima and arrived in Europe, an 'intolerable love of existence' and a radical awareness of the insufficiency of literary language to communicate it led him to give up writing, convinced that to express an authentic fact it is necessary to exceed the limit of words:

It is something like lovers who get tired of writing letters to each other and take the train or the plane or the car and rush to be together. Words are no longer enough [...]. I am the desperate driver who races to be with humanity, to whom until a few years ago he only sent poems, beautiful letters, messages of love, supremely well-crafted and sincere, but inconclusive [...]. Dream and reality began to divide sharply for me, in favour of reality. It is more important to

grasp by the lapel a humanity that is running towards chaos, than to transmit to it one's own poetic visions.<sup>2</sup>

That race to meet humanity led him to try to arrive, over and over again, at the essence of existence itself, codified in his eyes by the everyday, the humble and the ineffable. At the same time, it directed him towards his ancestral roots, to the pre-Columbian cultures, which he studied with fervour and admiration. It was in the funerary bundles, the ancient *buacas* and the textiles embroidered by his ancient forebears, that Eielson was to find the point of differentiation and the basis of potential splendour of a nation that, as long as it adhered to its conquered gaze, could find no possibility of advancement other than in imitating Europe. In addition to a splendid past, Eielson discovered in these ancestral cultures a way of life or, perhaps, a way of being in the world, in communion with nature and the arts, through which art and life are embraced as a single undifferentiated experience. As part of this vision of global creation, he also encountered the figure of the shaman, in whose condition as philosopher, poet, doctor and priest he perceived the total artist, capable of guaranteeing a universal creative capacity and repairing the cosmic fabric.

Another of the mysteries that he unearthed in the desert is the figure of the quipu, a system of knot-making used by pre-Columbian cultures to keep accounts and transmit stories. In his visual work, the knot—already an archetypal element in his written poetry—is named with the pre-Columbian term in honour of his ancestors, and becomes the centre of energy of his most recognisable series. These spatial structures are born at the limits of the canvas itself: it is the very material that, stressed, twists and knots itself, almost self-generating as a 'new place' on the plane,

2. 'El hombre que anudó las banderas'. Interview with Michel Fossey. *Caretas*, No. 469 (Lima, 1972).

vertical surface of the canvas. The movement suggested by the diagonal tensions that maintain the suspension of the knot contrasts with the impassive and unquestioning stillness of the structure. The union between the pre-Columbian icon and the frame, a classic element of European culture, connects two moments and two territories. From his first poems, in which he speaks of 'tying the soul with the viscera, the sky with the earth, the body with the stars', Eielson manifests that effort to tie the visual to the invisible and ineffable. The knots, or quipus, are constructed as meeting points, as places of intersection between contrary impulses. With an impeccable balance of opposing forces, Eielson conquers the terrain of ambiguity, the exactitude of the midpoint where his work attains a transparent, pure and universal character.

Although every day I feel more Peruvian, every day I believe more firmly that all border, ethnic, geographic, linguistic, social, political limitations are the greatest error of humanity. From now on, and although it seems utopian, we must begin to lay the foundations of a planetary society.<sup>3</sup>

It was with this open and universal gaze that Eielson prepared his participation in the *Spielstrassen*, the cultural programme organised within the framework of the Munich Olympic Games in 1972. The project included the construction of the *Gran quipu de las naciones* [Great Quipu of the Nations], a large structure erected in the public space from the daily knotting of the flags of all the participating countries. Using simultaneity as a means to mobilise the idea of planetary unity, Eielson was also preparing his *Concerto Urbi et Orbi*, which would be performed during the closing ceremony of the Munich Games in Paris, Stuttgart, Rome,

3. 'Cultura y Olimpiada.' Letter to Francisco Igartua Rovira. *Oiga*, No. 490 (Lima, 1972), pp. 28–30.

Mexico, New York, Tokyo and Santiago. When the proposal to celebrate the concert in his native Lima was rejected by the authorities, Eielson invited the 'kind inhabitants of the city of Lima to suspend all activity today, between 12:00 and 12:15 midday, in order to greet their fellow citizens, whether acquaintances or not, to exchange friendly words, smoke a cigarette, have a drink, et cetera'.<sup>4</sup> More than delivering a new text or a new painting, what Eielson desired was to transform the work of art and enable his compatriots to experience a real poetic moment by making them its protagonists and initiators—the work as none other than life itself, a daily gesture, a moment of authenticity. It was 'to make of life a true work of art, and art a vital activity'.<sup>5</sup>

Moving and tying himself, in his third participation in the Venice Biennale Eielson again linked one of his novels, *El cuerpo de Giulia-no* [Giulia-no's Body]<sup>6</sup>, to a visual piece, in this case performative. The action takes place inside an installation whose title is *247 metros de tela de algodón crudo* [247 Metres of Raw Cotton Cloth].

The space is articulated in two colours: ecru for the floor, orange for the walls. A diagonal tension in raw white is born from the centre of the room and expands towards the highest point of the righthand wall. A second braided line, raw and orange, starts from the same centre and ends on the opposite side. A young woman appears, naked under a white sheet whose metres-long tail is twisted and knotted by Eielson. The ritual operation ends when the swathed body is no longer capable of any movement.

In this exercise of creating an area of direct connection with the work and abandoning the mediation of the support,

4. Ibid.

5. Jorge Eielson, self-presentation published in the magazine *Flash Art*, No. 40 (Milan, 1973).

6. Eielson, Jorge Eduardo. *El cuerpo de Giulia-no*. Mexico City: Joaquín Mortiz, 1971.

Eielson deconstructs the quipu, reducing it to its essential elements: knot, rope, fabric, colour and tension. In that area of colour and luminosity, the covered and immobilised body of the young woman is no longer that of María, but is now that of Mayana, a symbol of purity in the novel. As suggested in the death scene of the Giulia character, laid out on the marble table, there is an element of rituality, of passage to the sacred, in the fact of covering a body. In both cases the rituality is enacted by Eielson as shaman or master of the ceremony.

Covering in the case of Giulia, baring in that of Lady Cyclotron: the two actions share the fabric—be it cotton winding sheet or violet satin dress—as an intermediary element. If for the former her covering up means her death, for the latter it means liberation from what oppresses, perverts and masks her.

The idea of nudity as something linked to life and death was perfectly synthesised in the summer of 1965 on the beaches of Sardinia, where Eielson spent a good deal of time with the family of his close friend and collaborator Michele Mulas. There he built the *Piramide di stracci*, or pyramid of rags, a small figure with a triangular silhouette, in the image of the pyramids of Ancient Egypt, with the bathing suits of the Mulas family. Like the funerary bundles interred by the ancient Paracas culture along the southern coast of Peru, the piece is buried in the place where it was made, to become a part of the underground world and assume the condition of myth. The sand that hides it is the same as that we walk on in the space of *Primera muerte de María*, and on which, in the novel, he sits to weave.

The textile triangle comes to life in the performance *Paracas Piramide*, first presented in 1972 at Studio Maddalena Carioni in Milan. A new figure—a cross between those in *Primera muerte de María* and *El cuerpo de Giulia-no*—covered by a sheet imitates the undulating movements of the Paracas wind, a storm of dust and sand characteristic of central Peru, where José was born. Both the sand that buries and the sheet

that drapes allude to the beginning and the end, the cradle and the grave of life. Here again, two opposites linked by the invisible that generate a movement of eternal return.

The act of burying, of turning invisible, entails the generation of a mystery, a notion that Eielson sought and affirmed. In this spirit he conceived a new place where he situated his ‘Esculturas subterráneas o esculturas para leer’ [Subterranean Sculptures or Sculptures to Read], a series of five invisible sculptural pieces, carefully and specifically conceived to be impossible to materialise. Described on paper, each of these was to be buried in a different place with which its creator had a special relationship; namely, Rome, New York, Lima, Paris and Stuttgart. In an attempt to transcend not only the limits of written language but also the frontiers of visibility itself, the pieces are conceived to exist in the realm of thought, in cyclical time, because they are simultaneous, and in a non-place, by virtue of being invisible.

In his goal of approaching the ineffable, Eielson moved in opposing directions: towards the centre of the earth through his ‘Esculturas subterráneas’, and towards outer space with the *Nodos*, the free knots that he equated to stars, or *Tensión lunar* [Lunar Tension], a sculpture that he wanted to send to the moon, as he explained in a letter to NASA. The total encounter between the subterranean and the cosmic directions was to take place in *Alfa Centauri*, another point of inflection in his work, which appears first as a visual poem and later as an installation. The elements replicate: a line of blue light that originates on earth and shoots out to infinity. At the base a mound of sand and in front a line of script: ‘This blue vertical comes from Alpha Centauri.’

This movement towards the unattainable, be it inward or outward, is ‘a way of approaching the great mystery of existence and the cosmos’,<sup>7</sup> a vindication of the enigma. As

7. ‘Eielson: desacralización del arte’. Interview with Seymour (Alfonso de la Torre). *El Dominical* (Lima, 1977), pp. 13–14.



against the neurotic need for validation prevailing in today's society, and the principles of rationalisation and efficiency imposed by the Establishment, Eielson proposes the acceptance of the mystery as such, as mystery; the championing of ambiguity as a vital space and of transversality and the rejection of a deterministic categorisation.

In a certain period, which lasted only ten years, I wrote poems and was called a poet. And in a later one I dedicated myself to the visual arts and did not write poems [...]. I have written newspaper articles and I am not a journalist. I have written some plays and I am not a dramatist. I also make sculptures and I am not a sculptor. I have written stories and I am not a storyteller. A novel and a half and I'm not a novelist. In 1962 I composed *Misa solemne a Marilyn Monroe* [Solemn Mass for Marilyn Monroe], and lately I have been preparing a concert and I am not a musician. As you see, I am nothing.<sup>8</sup>

Guided by his planetary and indeterministic vision, Eielson travels from language to language while rejecting the absolute truth of any of them. The word, fabric, colour, space, sound, the action, the knot, weave the 'celestial matrix' that is his universe:<sup>9</sup> an invisible network in a constant state of expansion that constitutes it as a whole and as nothing at the same time. An open and continuous displacement that opens it to infinity.

8. 'Eielson y *El cuerpo de Giulia-no*.' Interview with Julio Ramón Ribeyro. *Oiga*, No. 463 (Lima, February 25, 1972), pp. 32-34.

9. 'La matriz celeste en Jorge Eduardo Eielson.' Interview with Claudia Posadas. *Espéculo. Revista de Estudios Literarios*, No. 28 (Madrid, Universidad Complutense, November 2004 – February 2005).

*The Vertical Knot*  
Jorge Eduardo Eielson

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