

ART GALLERY OF NEW SOUTH WALES ARCHIVE BALNAVES FOUNDATION AUSTRALIAN SCULPTURE ARCHIVE PROJECT

Interview with Erwin Fabian

23 July 2015

This is an edited transcript of an interview with Erwin Fabian, and his studio assistant Emil Toonen, on 23 July 2015 in Melbourne, Victoria, by Leanne Santoro, assistant curator of Australian art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, for the Balnaves Foundation Australian Sculpture Archive Project.

The project focuses on significant Australian sculptors and sculptural practice. It was developed with a grant from the Balnaves Foundation in 2010, which supported the recording and transcription of interviews with artists and other figures in Australian art.

About Erwin Fabian

Erwin Fabian (born 1915) is known for his abstract pieces created from scrap metal. He turned to sculpture in the 1960s after working for many years as a graphic designer, and his body of work also includes paintings, drawings and prints.

This is an edited transcript of a recorded interview. Some adjustments, including deletions, have been made to the original as part of the editing process; however, the accuracy of all statements has not been verified and errors of fact may not have been corrected. The views expressed are those of the participants and do not represent those of the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Unedited audio files of this interview are in the Gallery's archive.

Interview on 23 July 2015

Leanne Santoro (LS): I wanted to talk to you about these works in these photographs we've just been looking at, the stone works that you did. When did you do them?

Erwin Fabian (EF): Three years ago [2012].

LS: And this is in France?

EF: This in France. This area is Cévennes, which is a hilly, semi-modern area and not so much part of the tourist setup like the south of France.

LS: Is this in the north?

EF: South-west. The railway station is Nîmes, and the nearest town to the house [where] my son and the kids live is Le Vigan, a small place. The largest town, which is a two-hour drive, is Montpellier. Montpellier has a gallery [Musée Fabre] that's been shut for the last six or seven years to be renovated. It's a 19th-century building which is very well set up. There was Victorian marble but also a lot of paintings. I don't know how relevant this is.

LS: I'm happy to hear it. Do you find those marble sculptures inspiring?

EF: They're life-size figures. Yes, they were my most favourite things to look at while I was there. There was a painting which I think I recognised straight away, the title's gone but the name of the painter was [Théodore] Géricault. I first saw his work in Rouen where he comes from and he painted limbs of criminals who got hanged and their limbs were kept and he painted them, and it was in that gallery in Montpellier and I saw that painting. No one else had done just an arm or half a leg or something. I've always thought that was a most remarkable work. And almost next to that was a painting of a dark-skinned woman by [Eugène] Delacroix and I thought that was moving. There was another painter, Frédéric Bazille, who was concerned with light on the skin. He painted figures and was concerned with the colours of skin against green backgrounds in the country. There were a number of rooms dedicated to his work in that museum. I think he died when he was 28 or 29.

LS: Do you find yourself more inspired by painters than sculptors?

EF: I don't know the difference. I don't mean visually, of course I know the difference, but it's not something where I like it better or not. I don't know that I was particularly interested in three-dimensional work [when I was younger] but I always looked at it of course. My father [Max Fabian] being a painter, painting was the obvious thing. My mother painted as well. She'd been my father's pupil. So that was maybe my first love.

LS: And what do you think of three-dimensionality now?

EF: Some of the big stuff that's being done it's not very accessible in Australia. It isn't necessarily three-dimensional. The woman who got the Turner Prize two years ago, a singing sculptor [Elizabeth Price in 2012], I don't know what I think of her work. Maybe she's got a lovely voice, I really don't know.

LS: I just wanted to talk a bit more about these stone sculptures [made in France]. You've told me it's just gravity holding them together; they're basically stones balancing on stone.

EF: Yes, they're granite, that's the stuff in that area. In Sydney, rock is sandstone and that looks grey; it's quite different.

LS: And what was it about this granite that made you want to work with it? The age, the shapes?

EF: I had a chisel and I had a hammer and I could play around a bit with it but most of it I tried to use the way it was. Some of the placing of it also depends on the ground and how level it is.

LS: And is stone something you want to work again or was this just a happy circumstance?

EF: I think that's been used up somehow. It's part of the landscape. When you drive there you can see plants and rocks. They're quite large pieces and they look good.

LS: So is it the lack of stone around here that makes you not use it and use the metal?

EF: They were just lying around the house so that was tempting. Just like the bits of timber that were lying around in Majorca.

LS: So you've also showed me some photos of some wood sculptures you did last year in Majorca in Spain. And again there's nothing holding them together so your next challenge is to figure out how to get them to stick together.

EF: How to make them solid and moveable. I gave them numbers for each piece so I can stitch them together. Of course I'll try to produce some more but I'll see what's available.

LS: Is it the texture that appeals to you, or is it the shape? What is it that draws you to collect these?

EF: Oh yes, I think it's the shape.

LS: I guess the main question I'm interested in is: how do you define sculpture? It's a hard question. Especially as technology has advanced and it's maybe not necessarily about using steel and heavy materials the way it was perhaps 50 years ago but how do you define it, what do you think it is?

EF: [Long pause] Yes, a big silence, I'm afraid. I don't know how rigid it is or if it derives from some human urge to mark things or leave physical traces on a rock or in the sand or something. I don't know. I think it's like building a snowman. There's something very tempting about trying to produce something three-dimensional. I don't really know that that is an answer to your question.

LS: Is that what you like about it, the physicality of it?

EF: The physicality is different from painting because it is three-dimensional. For myself I got onto working with scrap because it's what I found in the bush or at scrap yards or from a timber mill. I didn't start with a nice clean piece of marble or steel. I started with something which I'd found attractive looking. Trying to produce something or make use of these things because they were there. I find that fascinating.

LS: Is there an element of trying to solve a puzzle almost and seeing how the pieces fit together?

EF: Yes, of course it's essentially a puzzle but of course you don't know the answer. But I don't even know the question. I suppose there's lots of talk about theory and what's going on

and it changes every ten years or so but I don't know that I'm particularly fascinated by that, talking about sculpture. I just like doing it. That's it.

LS: That's perfectly fine.

EF: Is there great meaning or addressing problems [in sculpture]? I read somewhere that that was required, now in particular. Now is a special time but I think that was always the case. Addressing seems to me something for envelopes when you write a letter but nothing to do with culture. I just think it's marvellous to have a chance to play with any of that.

LS: Yes, that's very good. So, what you were just saying about working with steel. I guess there's nothing tempting for you about starting with a clean piece of marble. And it's the same with the wood and the stone.

EF: Unless you buy yourself some large planks and start playing with those but I've never done that so I find it hard to talk about that. I don't know how I'd feel about having a stock of it. It would technically be a different problem. You'd need a fair bit of space. I never regretted not having that but maybe it's just because I've had no experience using it.

Emil Toonen (ET): It's hard from an art perspective because it's not an ends to a means. It's not like you're making a chair and you need X metres of stock. You find the organic-looking stuff more appealing, Erwin. You're less interested in the straight, flat bits of material.

EF: Yes.

LS: When you find a piece of scrap metal are you immediately thinking of ways to use it or do you just collect things that are a bit different?

EF: You pick things up that you think might come in handy. I think I hardly ever pick up things and think 'I'm going to use that in this way'. I went to the scrap yard regularly and got all this stuff [in my scrap pile] myself. I couldn't pick up things that were aluminium because that was more expensive. There was a man there and I'd say, 'Can I have these?', and he'd say, 'Yes, if you pay for it' [laughs].

LS: Is this the Sims metal yard that I read about?

EF: Yes.

LS: Do you still go there?

EF: I have a feeling they'd laugh their heads off. I would like to go there with Emil but I don't think they'd let us in anymore. They'd be worried about us getting hurt. And by now I might not know the people at the weighbridge anymore. I don't think I'd be remembered by anyone there anymore.

LS: So you went there for many years?

EF: Yes, many years, since the 70s.

LS: So this big pile of scrap that you have here in your studio, have you had some of these pieces for many years?

EF: Yes, they've been either here or outside for many years and that's why they've changed colour.

LS: Is this your main source of material now?

EF: Yes.

LS: Do you remember what's actually in there?

EF: You can see nice things in there sticking out but you have to be able to drag it out and that's really a problem. A few years ago people used to work on the ground at the scrap yard sorting things out but now it's all machines that lift things up and drop things. I used to go there on Saturdays [to find material] because there wasn't so much. The big heavy trucks used to come during the week and drop stuff off.

LS: Why did you start making sculpture, or assemblage I guess, in the 60s? You had a background in printmaking and watercolours and design. What actually made you make those first pieces?

EF: Why on earth? [Laughs]

LS: Was it the material?

EF: Yes, quite true, finding the stuff in the bush.

LS: Was it just fun? An adventure?

EF: I found it intriguing. The metal bits obviously had nothing to do with here. I found them in the bush, lying on the ground. It was a weird contrast. I really don't know why. I mean I was also finding bits of cut-up timber. I like it all.

LS: You had your first sculpture exhibition in 1965 in Sydney at the Hungry Horse Gallery.

EF: Yes, that's right, my first show at the Hungry Horse Gallery. My parents-in-law came because they wanted to see the children. We had an older house in [the inner Melbourne suburb of] Hawthorn. There was a family car which had been a bit neglected but it ran perfectly well. But it was an older car and it didn't have a very good rear-view mirror. It was a station wagon so sometimes on the weekend the children and I drove out to the bush and that's how I came to see a bit of the bush and also came across a couple of timber mills. One particular mill I found the fellow who was in charge and I found being out there intriguing. Also I remember once a ute full of people. I was driving away from that timber mill, I think it was a national forest, and a small truck with young men in it when they saw me coming they all put their licence on the floor, but I didn't stop them.

LS: So this is in the bush around Melbourne.

EF: Yes, there was lovely bush around Melbourne from what I have seen.

LS: You said it was intriguing. It must have been very different from the landscape in Europe where you grew up. [Fabian was born and raised in Berlin, Germany, and later lived in London, England.]

EF: Yes, it's very different. It's attractive but you must be able to move around, you must have a car. In some ways it has become a museum because some roads have become closed.

LS: So that first show in Sydney, do you remember much about the works that were in that?

EF: No, I don't. I do remember I showed some very large monotypes as well and I was told not to glaze them because people don't like to see reflections in things.

LS: And is it true that Gordon Andrews, the designer, came to see that show and encouraged you to keep making sculpture?

EF: Yes, he came to see me because we'd been friends in London and he'd given me a very nice commission in London and he told me that things needed to be stuck together, either welded or glued, and that I've got to take photographs and use connecting slides next time he was coming down. I got myself a camera and took photographs and also got stuff welded. I got a welder because I hadn't learnt to weld yet.

LS: You learnt to weld in London a few years later?

EF: Yes, I took a course in welding.

LS: Were you still travelling back and forth between London and Australia at this time?

EF: Yes, but not that often. After that first exhibition I showed with Kym Bonython a few times, I think.

LS: Was that welding class the only training you had?

EF: Ever in my life. Yes.

LS: In sculpture?

EF: Yes. Or ever.

LS: No, I know you've had other training.

EF: I never went to art school.

LS: I know you went to a lot of night classes though.

EF: That was never proper art school though. I went to night classes in London and there was a model there but no one giving instructions.

LS: You just had to figure it out on your own?

EF: Yes. Before leaving Berlin I also went to an arts and crafts school [School of Art and Craft] but that was mostly drawing. There was a course and everyone was in the room where the drawing took place. The teacher came up and saw me. He wore a swastika and he said that I shouldn't worry about his swastika, he'd joined the Nazi party years ago but a relative of his was Jewish. He told me I'd have to leave as soon as possible. [Fabian is Jewish.] That was marvellously courageous. That was terribly good and helpful. I mean I knew I had to get out but coming from him ...

LS: You thought you'd better listen.

EF: He was encouraging and said nice things too. That was courageous.

LS: That was in 1938 and then you went to London and your sister was already there?

EF: My sister was there as an au pair. I stayed with friends and I then met a cousin who I'd never met before because they lived in Munich. He became a well-known photographer.

LS: Yes, I read about him. Helmut Gernsheim.

EF: Yes.

LS: I also read that you spent time at the V&A [Victoria and Albert Museum, London] library looking through art books and sort of teaching yourself about art.

EF: There were books on commercial stuff and also I could draw some of the things that were on display. There was hardly anyone there. It's been transformed. Now there seems to be vast numbers of people all the time. Last time I went there it was because I went to see Tony Cragg's exhibition. Some works were very large, three or four storeys high. One or two were smaller, inside the V&A, all based on computer work. I understand a computer now can create a three-dimensional model.

LS: Like 3D printing?

EF: Yes. I couldn't tell that was obvious. Some things made of wood; others, bronze and steel. I thought that was very impressive.

LS: You're not tempted to try 3D printing?

EF: I'm computer illiterate. The technology is incredible but I've never thought of doing it myself. I'd have to have Emil to help me. It's not a matter of disapproving [of it]. It's just changing attitudes to visual arts. I wouldn't say new technology makes things easier but what would have been impossible can now be done. And that's quite exciting, if the result is exciting. It might be big and shiny but do you really want to see it? That's a different thing. To draw something and have it made ... [shows a sketchbook of his drawings].

ET: Sometimes when you try to plan things and he's measured things and made drawings but the outcome is always different because it doesn't really work. Whatever is on paper is an abstraction to paper.

EF: It never helps.

ET: If you treat the thing as a literalism it gets quite stagnant because you don't have any room to change.

LS: So is this rare that you would take down measurements?

EF: No, I did that because I thought I might forget how it all gets stuck together.

LS: But then it doesn't look like this in the end anyway.

EF: Well, you forget where you left the sketchbook [laughs].

LS: So with this sketch, for example, do you have the particular bits of metal in mind when you make the drawing?

EF: I have nothing in mind.

LS: So do you make the drawing and then try and find the bits of metal to suit?

EF: No, it's quite independent.

LS: So you're not really trying to make a sculpture that looks exactly like this drawing.

EF: No, I'm not. I don't think I've ever worked from a drawing in metal.

LS: So the drawing really is a totally independent process.

EF: Yes ... I have quite a few monotypes here.

LS: Do you still make monotypes?

EF: Not for the last 18 months or so because I've had one exhibition and another coming up and I've been too busy.

LS: So is the printmaking, like your sketching, something that is separate to your sculpture?

EF: I don't know. If there's a relationship it's probably that the handwriting is the same.

ET: Your distinction is probably more that one is on paper and the other is not, it's three-dimensional.

EF: They're utterly different. Yes, they're quite different things. Very often sculptors can draw and do etchings. I don't know if the relationship with metal makes people want to do etchings. Anyway, I haven't done any etchings. But with etchings, treating the surface of the metal seems to me to be an attractive possibility. In the past I've liked the idea of polishing metal and working with pieces that are shiny but I've gone off that idea.

LS: Do you mean similar to these shiny black sculptures here in the studio?

EF: No, that material is what it is. It's plastic.

LS: Ah, fooled me.

EF: That's very ordinary plastic. I had thought of using that and then getting them cast in bronze. It was made out of very bright orange plastic. Nice colour.

LS: Is this the first time you've cast in bronze?

EF: I had two pieces cast from steel last year in bronze.

LS: Is this a new thing for you, plastic?

EF: They are bits I found at the metal yard and I took them because I liked the look of them and they were kicking around for years. After I played with them and set them up and also had to get a sculptor with a foundry to look at them and cast them. It's the first time I had anything cast [from plastic, not steel].

ET: The process is different because say that [steel sculpture] is cast that's the original and that's the cast so you can make editions. With the plastic it burns away in the casting process so then it becomes a one of a kind.

EF: You can't ever make an edition.

LS: Yes. And is there something about the one-off nature of using scrap that you like?

EF: I've never made an edition of anything.

ET: That's something inherent in all of your work, Erwin. You don't model things.

LS: You don't make maquettes?

EF: No, I don't do maquettes.

LS: Is there something about the process of just making one thing that is its own complete piece of work?

EF: You're making me feel almost guilty, like I should do more work! [Both laugh]

ET: It's also process-related though. What you do is direct, Erwin. It's a direct relationship with you and the material. It's not a mediated thing where you have to do this and then that gets changed and then you have an outcome down the track. You're trying to get straight to the point.

EF: Yes, that's what I like.

LS: And I guess even your printmaking reflects that. You make monotypes, which are by definition one-off. You don't make editions.

EF: Yes, and that's how it is, you can't change it but we edit all the time and a lot of it gets thrown away. I've never done etching. A friend of mine taught etching in London, somewhere in Hammersmith, and told me to come along but I didn't. I almost tried ... Arthur Boyd, we were friends, and he asked me to come to his place and try etching, sugar-lift etching, and I did go out to his place and he had a press and a stack of copper plates and that was the simplest way of producing an etching. You don't use acid. I think the sugar washes off and leaves there the impression. I can't remember [the process]. I felt like I couldn't do it. It was one thing for Arthur to say, 'Try this and look how it works'. I mean, that was terribly nice of him but I didn't really follow it up.

ET: We had to do those couple of screenprints because they wouldn't accept monotypes.

LS: What was that for?

EF: That was for Ursula Hoff. There was an exhibition at the Smithsonian in America but monotype wasn't considered a proper medium for artists and I had to do something else. I bought a book on doing silkscreens and I followed every step very carefully and did a couple of silkscreens. I was quite intrigued by the process.

LS: How did they turn out?

ET: You did duplicates of [your existing] monotypes, didn't you?

EF: Yes, you're quite right. I don't even know how I did it. I must have been quite clever then [laughs].

LS: And that was your only experience with screenprinting?

EF: I did a couple of others. There's some still in London. I did an edition and that did me quite well. Most people got interested, even the British Museum.

LS: Yes, you do have work in the British Museum collection.

EF: Now I understand you can do almost anything with silkscreening. At that time, [Brett] Whiteley in particular and a few others in London got their silkscreen printing done in a place in East London. I remember being told where it was and I went to see them. Faro [?] was in charge. He did very large prints of animals, monkeys, or maybe that was Whiteley, but now you can get ... The squeegee is not the thing you use anymore to put the paint on, it's all done automatically and of course there's no thought, no problem.

LS: Yes, it's all mechanical. It takes away the sort of 'hand of the artist' factor.

EF: Yes.

LS: I wanted to ask you about the abstract nature of your sculpture when a lot of your 2D work is quite figurative or representational, your early work anyway. Why do you not make figurative sculpture, or do you see your sculpture as figurative?

EF: [Laughs] Why indeed. A good question.

LS: I guess maybe you do see things in your sculpture that are representational.

ET: No, you don't like to see things, Erwin. You like it to be abstract.

EF: Yes, I prefer it. I mean I haven't done any figurative sculpture so I do prefer it [to be abstract]. I don't think I've ever done any figurative sculpture.

LS: I'm just interested because your 2D work is so figurative and then you leap into doing this completely abstract 3D work and I guess I'm just wondering how that happened.

EF: I've never thought about it actually [laughs]. I haven't. It's quite true. For drawing I never mind doing something figurative. And also the stuff that I've found [scrap metal] is quite intriguing in itself and has its own attitude, every piece of scrap has its own attitude. My father was a figurative painter and so it seemed natural to me that if I was drawing or painting it should be recognisable. It's interesting, it's quite true I've never done any figurative three-dimensional stuff. I've never attempted it.

LS: It's never even occurred to you?

EF: No, not really. I've spent quite a few days at the Rodin museum in Paris admiring it all but almost for the abstract quality in a lot of his work I thought I could see. It's an interesting point but, no, I haven't done any. Do I want to? I've left it too late, I suppose.

LS: Oh, it's never too late.

EF: That's exactly right.

ET: You've already got your 30-year plan.

LS: For the next 30 years?

EF: Yes. First I have to find out which gallery would accept it [figurative sculpture].

LS: Well, for example, this photograph here of this wood sculpture, to me, all I can see when I look at it is a torso, like an ancient Roman bust. Do you see that too?

EF: I didn't have to make it. [It's a found piece of wood.] But there it is and, yes, it looks like that.

LS: Is that enough figurativeness for you?

EF: Yes.

LS: And I guess this other photo of the ...

EF: The bosom.

LS: Yes, or even a backside. So you're quite happy for people to see those things but you're not deliberately trying to make figurative sculpture.

EF: No. I like working with what there is but I don't want to make a figure out of it.

ET: For instance, if we're working here and something looks [figurative] you say, 'No, it looks too much like a face'. So you can see that bust but if Erwin sees something [figurative] he doesn't want to see that so he deliberately changes it. The finished object is less descriptive, more open-ended. Everyone who sees it is going to have a different interpretation.

LS: And I guess that's what you're interested in, Erwin, people having different interpretations. I guess that's with all art.

EF: Yes, well ...

ET: He's not pushing an agenda.

LS: No, you're not. I wanted to ask you about the titles of your sculptures. They're very interesting. How do you come up with them, and do you want them to express an idea about the work?

EF: It's always a mighty sweat. It's very difficult. I've done in the past descriptive titles but ... [Anthony] Caro used the racing page of the newspaper, horse names, a clever idea I suppose. That is a form of abstraction which I don't know that I would want that for myself. I feel that the title should somehow in some way relate to what you can see. It doesn't necessarily mean I succeed with the title.

LS: With our work [in the collection of the Art Gallery of New South Wales] it's called *Enclosure*.

EF: Oh yes, that seems to be a reasonable title. That's OK.

LS: The artist statement for this work which you gave the Gallery talks about how the outside pieces really are an enclosure for the inside, so I guess that title suits this work.

EF: Yes, I think that's OK. Of course, if you have an untitled work you can do that always. And people do, of course.

LS: Yes. You're not tempted to call everything *Untitled*?

EF: I find that just too ... popular. Bob [Robert] Klippel uses numbers and has done throughout his life and I think that's quite a good idea but it's been done [now]. [Richard] Serra has very simple names for those large pieces. You remember titles.

ET: You often use origins of words too. You use Greek names.

EF: Yes, I'm quite pleased I thought of that. I never learnt Greek, maybe because I was a bad pupil. Anyway I found Greek words very attractive and even if it was *Untitled*, well, it's the same thing, it's all Greek to me.

LS: [Laughs]

EF: It creates a distance.

LS: That's interesting. I guess it also links to the ancient Greek sculptors.

EF: They did different things at different times but of course I admire it. The mythology is marvellous.

LS: And some of the mythic titles you give your work are very nice. Very pretty titles.

EF: I try and make them relevant in some way. You can find words that seem to echo what [the sculpture] is.

LS: I want to ask how exactly you put these works together. Is it instinctual or is there a lot of experimentation that's been done to know which pieces would go together, a lot of trial and error? Or did you know instinctively which pieces go together? Was it something that developed as you work with the material or do you have a finished work in mind from the start?

EF: I try to see what's possible when you look at something and, when you look at another piece, do they belong? Would they belong? Should they belong? That's hard and, no, I don't have ... Those sketches [we discussed earlier] are not something I want to make but of course sometimes they could be interpreted as looking three-dimensional. Also I've never learnt to work with the material, never learnt properly in a workshop where you use a material and ...

ET: But you have a language of objects. Like from the scrap pile you can describe something and I can generally find it from your description and then there's 'like objects' which have similar characteristics. Each might be different but they have something that's shared.

EF: Worth listening to ... Minimal stuff is tempting in a way but also I think generalising is not very clever but it seems you can read things or the way things are shown or what things are shown can look like they've been drained of almost everything so what you see is just ... would give you the feeling without specifying is not enough. I mean I can imagine doing all sorts of things but then I know people have done that sort of thing before but also what does it do? And is it enough? Some of Serra's exhibits at the new national gallery in Berlin were things that were hanging off the wall [made of] black rubber and apart from looking interesting, the black on the white wall, is it more than just a bit of black rubber hanging there? When I saw it I was a bit disappointed. I find it then becomes a question of ... although the shape becomes impressive because of its size and material but I think it always applies to sculpture if you have a piece, even a nondescript piece, blown up several metres it becomes very impressive.

LS: Which sculptors do you admire?

EF: I like quite a few of the ones from previous generations, like the Egyptians.

LS: [Laughs] Just slightly previous.

EF: The Babylon gate in the British Museum with the creatures with wings and claws ...

ET: It has several body parts, body of a lion, serpent tail ...

EF: Yes. That's quite terrific.

LS: What about anyone a little more contemporary? Anyone who works with steel?

EF: Caro I found sometimes disappointing. Of course he's done good work. I'm not actually all that keen on some of the work that's been praised forever. David Smith started painting his steel before he died and was it [critic Clement] Greenberg who didn't approve of it and got the paint taken off? Some people know so much more than the actual makers of the stuff [said sarcastically].

ET: You're quite interested in [Anselm] Kiefer's work.

EF: But he's not a sculptor.

ET: But you said there's no distinction earlier.

EF: [Laughs] Well, I like Kiefer's work. Those concrete towers of cranes I think are very impressive.

LS: Do you think your work is its own thing? You're not really trying to follow a style.

EF: Someone like Kiefer has done so many things and successfully. I've heard Kiefer talk about his work and I find it intriguing. I also was intrigued reading about his efforts wanting to make gold out of lead. That's quite true. I like both Kiefer's paintings and three-dimensional work. Serra, of course, is very impressive. There are all sorts of [things happening]. There was an exhibition at the Tate of sculptures and everyone was lying on the floor ...

ET: Olafur Eliasson?

EF: Yes. There's also a guy who makes little walls of bricks ... [possibly Jorge Méndez Blake] There's so many people and so much going on, so many people producing interesting things.

LS: I asked you earlier how do you define sculpture and is that just so difficult to define because people are doing so many different things and using so many different materials.

EF: People have different ideas about different materials ... It's [Claes] Oldenburg who does the soft sculptures, isn't it? And I think that's very original and amusing but I don't admire a heap of old clothing [as a material] which have been found worthy of an exhibition or being in a gallery.

ET: Who did that?

EF: I can't remember the name but I've seen it.

LS: So what's the difference between old rags and old bits of scrap metal?

EF: Well, the texture. There's an association with cast-off clothing – it's a different thing.

LS: Is there something about the robustness and strength of steel that you think is interesting?

EF: Yes, I suppose. I find it attractive.

LS: So this kind of rusted, brown surface of these sculptures that you don't often change or cover up ...

EF: No, I don't do anything to it except clean it.

ET: It just gets a wash. But that's more to get the dust off so that it's more true to the colour of the oxide of the rust.

LS: So again that's part of what you like about the material is that history that's visible in the surface.

EF: I think the rust produces a nice colour. I wasn't always sure. I did think it might be nice to have a shiny metal but steel without being painted rusts and I'm quite happy with the rusted surface.

ET: You've worked out a way to work with it rather than against it to a degree. Like you'd have to polish it all and then it would rust again.

EF: Yes, immediately.

ET: Yes, immediately. So it's trying to tell you something. [All laugh]

EF: Absolutely.

LS: Erwin, let's just go back in time because it's good to have things on tape as well. Can we make sure we have all the facts right. You were born November 15, 1915, is that right?

EF: November 5.

LS: OK, we had that wrong. So when is your next show?

EF: November 5.

LS: Oh, on your 100th birthday, that's exciting. And that's at the Australian Galleries.

EF: Yes.

LS: So born 1915 and it was around 1938 that you went to London and in 1939, after the war broke out, that you were sent to Australia. [As a German, Fabian was deemed an 'enemy alien' and deported.]

EF: Yes, I was interned after the war broke out and after France had fallen. Everyone [in Britain categorised by the British as an enemy alien] between 16 and 60 years of age – male, not females – got interned.

LS: So your mother and sister were in London at that time and they stayed but you had to leave.

EF: Yes.

LS: So you must have arrived in Australia in 1940?

EF: I think it was still 1939 but I'm not sure. I can only go by ... Sometimes I dated the stuff I did in the internment camp and sometimes I didn't. It wasn't summer, it wasn't hot but it wasn't cold either. I can't remember. Even years I can't remember properly. That book on *Dunera* [the ship that carried the internees to Australia in 1940] has got it all.

LS: I've been reading about it and if what I've been reading is correct the camp at Hay [in regional New South Wales] was completed in 1940 so it must have been 1940 when you arrived at Hay. [Records in the National Archive give Fabian's date of interment in Hay as 6 September 1940.] And there was quite an artistic community there. Ludwig Hirschfeld Mack was there.

EF: Yes, I remember meeting him. He was older.

LS: Did he talk about colour theory in the camp?

EF: Yes, he did but I thought it was very boring.

LS: [Laughs]

EF: I couldn't stay there [listening], I didn't stay there. I remember [Klaus] Friedeberger was much more interesting. And [Hein] Heckroth was the more important figure for the ones who were trying to do painting.

LS: He was a kind of mentor to you?

EF: We became friendly. In fact, we exchanged a few things and he was really a very helpful teacher without wanting to be a teacher. His attitude was always very suitable for that situation – where complete strangers are thrown together, you can't help forming some sort of community – and he was very good at talking about things that could be done and then looking at what people did do and talking about it or suggesting what could be done and saying what he saw. Of course, the experience there was very interesting.

LS: Very tough as well, of course.

EF: Oh yes, sure. But I think oddly enough there and perhaps even in the army I thought that people left you alone. I was sent to Stonington, which used to be the governor's palace [in the Melbourne suburb of Malvern], and during the war was run by the army. [Fabian joined the Australian Army after his release from internment.] It was a convalescent home, and people who worked there were women from the neighbourhood or around. Lots of people came there and were very friendly, very helpful. When I was there I did monotypes and drawings. I did monotypes. I think there's one in the Berlin catalogue [*Max und Erwin Fabian: Berlin, London, Melbourne*, Berlin, Stiftung Stadtmuseum, c2000] of people playing chess. I hadn't been in the army for very long and I don't know how I had the guts to do that, with others around. No one nagged me or said, 'Are you a bullshit artist?', or anything like that. Nobody did. I remember talking to Guy Warren about it and he said that when he was on a troopship people played cards and nobody looked at what he was sketching or drawing, nobody said, 'Well, what the hell are you doing?' And he also thought, 'How extraordinary'. Except once a fellow came up and looked at it and that was Oliffe Richmond. Of course they hadn't heard of each other then. They were on the same troopship and he came up to Guy not to talk but to have a look [at what he was drawing]. I like that piece that's outside the [Art] Gallery [of New South Wales] that's been there for quite some time. That male figure. It used to be right there at the front.

LS: Inside or outside?

EF: Outside.

LS: Hmm, I don't think that's still there.

EF: Maybe I'm wrong.

LS: I could be wrong.

EF: It's slightly smaller than man size.

[The work is likely to be Richmond's *Sentinal*, which has been displayed inside the entrance to the Gallery but is not known to have been displayed outside.]

EF: He's [Richmond's] one of the few non-Egyptians that I like. He was good.

LS: Was there a large German community in London before you came to Australia? Had you been very involved with other expatriates there?

EF: My best friend there, who was older than me, got married to the daughter of Erich Mendelsohn, the architect. I never met the architect but I met his wife, who was very helpful. Through her I met Walter Goetz, who was a painter who had been brought up in Switzerland and spoke German, French and English, but we lost touch after the war. I don't know what he did [during the war], there was no secret service or something. He was a designer and a painter also and he did things which I found very interesting, working with watercolour and wash but also using black ink for lines, and he gave me rather regular little jobs doing the lettering for his book covers for which he did the drawings, which was a big help. He had a housekeeper who would look after the place and he would leave things for me to do and when I went to pick them up he also left a lunch for me, and that was nice.

LS: So you did that design work in London and in 1942 you got out of the camps [Fabian was also interned in camps at Tatura and Orange in Australia] by joining the army and you also did design work in the army. That was in the education unit?

EF: That was towards the end of the war. I was only with the education unit for about a year or less but that was a marvellous stroke of luck to go there. That was quite marvellous.

LS: So you go back to London in 1950.

EF: I think it was 1949. Towards the end of 1949 I came to London and I got some work with Gordon Andrews and some other work. There was a very large exhibition. I can't remember ...

ET: Yes, that's the one with [graphic designer Abram] Games. He was doing posters.

EF: Yes, that's right. And I didn't know Games at that time so I don't know how ... I did something on photosynthesis on a brick wall, quite large, and I'd never even heard of the word.

LS: Photosynthesis?

EF: I was briefed and what they wanted me to show was how oxygen was sent out by plants. I did a plant ... I'm sure I haven't got any reproductions of it but I enjoyed doing it. It was marvellous. I went to a science museum and people there were marvellously helpful

and friendly. I wanted to know about potatoes and someone took me to a room which was top to bottom filled with everything written about potatoes. The people were helpful, not patronising.

LS: And you also taught in London at that time, before you returned to Australia in the 1960s, is that right?

EF: My teaching consisted of generally one or two days per week teaching at the London School of Printing and Graphic Arts [now the London College of Communications in the University of Arts London]. That was before things got formalised and were properly done, I suppose. I was asked on the phone would I like to come and join them. That would have been [done for] people like me who were freelance designers. There were a number of colleagues who were very good and I think I learnt something too.

LS: So this period in London was for around 12 years and then you returned to Australia in 1962 and that's when you started collecting scrap metal and sculpting?

EF: I trust you're right but I couldn't tell you the years. Yes, that must have been about 62 or 63.

LS: And it was always Melbourne you returned to? You never lived in Sydney?

EF: No, I never lived in Sydney. I often asked myself why did I stay in Melbourne and the reason was I was demobilised here and I'd worked here, I mean the army education unit was in town and I lived in a romantic, uncomfortable place in town where I could walk from home to the directorate. I didn't know until a year or so ago that it was a directorate. I was really quite unbelievably lucky. That was really very good to be given a chance to do things the way I thought they should be done, and others apparently thought so too. Actually I still have prints of some of those covers I did [for the army education unit] and one day someone can look at them and discover them because with due modesty, ha ha, I think they're quite good.

LS: I know many people who were interned here returned to Europe straight after the war.

EF: I stayed longer because I tried to make some money by doing graphic stuff and I also did some three-dimensional stuff which was photographed in some advertisement in some paper. It was for a cereal, it was wheat, but large and three-dimensional. It had a cow climbing up on it and a chook on the other side.

ET: There's your figurative sculpture. [Laughter]

EF: That was pretty well my first sculpture.

LS: You had one of your posters [a 1955 one for the *Financial Times*] reproduced in EH Gombrich's book *Art and illusion*.

EF: Yes, I had seen Gombrich many times but never met him. He had seen the poster in London. We found it for \$800 or \$1000 in New York, Emil?

ET: Yeah, we found an auction listing for some poster sales in New York.

EF: There you are, I'm famous [laughs].

ET: We've looked it up because quite a few people collect books for their covers and there are people who have found a lot of covers that Erwin did and then they post their collections on the internet.

EF: The wartime stuff?

ET: No, mostly the Penguin covers. [Fabian created numerous book covers for Penguin publishers in London in the 1950s.]

LS: Interesting. I wonder if many of the covers from before the war are still around.

EF: I don't think I did any before the war.

ET: Only the *Soldier's Journal* or whatever it was called [*Current Affairs Bulletin*].

EF: Yes, that was for the [army's] education officers. I suppose I've got a complete collection of covers in London.

LS: You still have a studio in London?

EF: Yes, I have but I haven't. I think legally it belongs to me. We bought a house, which was really a doss house, and it got sold bit by bit, it was flats ... It's a complicated legal thing but I think it belongs to me.

LS: You had better check into that!

ET: Basically he has a shed out the back of this house.

EF: A shed in the back of the garden.

[End]