

# The Eclectic World of Felipe Ehrenberg

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## Abstract

This interview with Felipe Ehrenberg was carried out by email in November 2009, prior to the artist's visit to Essex, where he performed his newly commissioned work *Xocoyotzin, The Penultimate*. By way of introduction to the interview, I introduce some of Ehrenberg's early work examining the importance of process and his beliefs about the role of art in society. By looking at his artistic production, I hope to show how Felipe Ehrenberg seeks to create new meanings, question received ideas and open up new ways of thinking about the world. Indeed, Ehrenberg calls himself a neologist - a maker of new words. Born in 1943 in Mexico City, his output spans graphic design, artists' books, mail art, film, murals, sculptural projects and performance. He was one of the first conceptual artists to emerge in Mexico in the late 1960s. By the late 1960s, as a result of mounting political oppression of the student movement in Mexico, the artist moved to England in 1968, remaining there until 1973. In London and Devon, Ehrenberg established many of the interests that continue to preoccupy his activities. These include alternative printing, publishing networks, Fluxus activities, mail art, anti-institutionalism and political activism.

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### Converting all the Systems into Poetry

Felipe Ehrenberg's *Telegraphic Works* (1970) provide a paradigm for understanding how he conceived the fusion of art and life through creativity. The works were telegrams that transmitted information far removed from the customary brief and impersonal messages of the business world. Consider the statement:

LET'S CONVERT/ALL/THE/SYSTEMS/IN TO/POETRY/  
AND/VISIONS/AND/LET THEM REMEMBER/THAT/CREATION/  
IS ENERGY/WHILE/ART/MEANS/POWER/  
I REPEAT/POWER/END/OF/MESSAGE  
/FELIPE/

Ehrenberg's call to 'convert all the systems in to poetry' is at once a promotion of the use of technological systems for art, and an appropriation of that system, the telegram, usually used for the efficient communication of information for business. However, more significantly, the brief message hails the opportunity for art to become life, not by representing reality but by infiltrating it.

Ehrenberg spent about two years in London before moving to Devon in 1971. There he enacted a number of happenings, events and exhibitions and recorded a 16mm film (Benítez Dueñas, 2007, p.25). The film, titled *La Poubelle: It's a Kind of Disease*, documented the mounting rubbish during the dustbin workers' strike in 1970. The film was post-produced at Francois Reichenbach's studios in Paris, where French lab workers tagged it 'la poubelle' - rubbish, garbage (author's correspondence with the artist, March 2009). Ehrenberg sprayed the peripheries of the piles of rubbish in the streets of London as they grew and spread, like the 'kind of disease' suggested by the title of the work. Ehrenberg documented what he called the 'way we can get used to anything', recording peoples' nonchalant progress through the increasingly disordered streets. Throughout the film, amidst a dystopian soundscape, the role of art is debated; Ehrenberg states that art is 'anything that breaks your programmations, that jolts you, pushes you, catalyses you, outside a mode of behaviour'. He insisted the film was not a work of art but a process of understanding both the strike

and the role of art. As he commented later: 'after using many rolls of film and lots of spray paint, the strike was settled...what we exhibited was not art but our capacity of comprehension' (quoted in Benítez Dueñas, 2007 p.25). Rather than a didactic revelation of social reality *La Poubelle* interrogated the possibility of knowing, experiencing and imagining. Later Ehrenberg further elucidated his ideas, saying:

Creation and art are two completely different concepts for me. Creation is organic, it is internal matter. Art is a historic definition – a solidifying element. The trash should point to a way out of this ossification, and therefore I'm in agreement with not converting this into an artistic activity but into an activity, into an act of creation, but not into an art work. (Quoted in Benítez Dueñas, 2007, p.25)

Ehrenberg's hope that 'the trash should offer a way out of this ossification' offers us a way of interpreting all actions and creations as aesthetic.

Ehrenberg is clearly a politically motivated artist; his involvement with the Independent Salon in Mexico began in 1968 and was a protest against excessive control of the art market through state governed institutions. By the third and last Salon in 1970 Ehrenberg was in England, having left Mexico after the brutal suppression of the student movement in 1968, which culminated in the death of 300 student protestors murdered by police and military forces at Tlatelolco just a few days before the beginning of the Olympic Games in Mexico. Ehrenberg's postal entry to the Salon was conceived of as a conceptual puzzle sent from London to Mexico. The work, *Upwards and Onwards... Whether you like it or not*, was a reference to Luis Escheverria's presidential campaign slogan during the 1970s elections. It was a kind of mural constituted by 200 postcards sent to the University Museum of Science and Art, where the exhibition would be installed. In Ehrenberg's own physical absence the assembling of the postcards required a collaborative collective action. The uncertainty of its passage mirrored the precarious political situation.

Ehrenberg asked that the postcards were mounted on a red backing so that any failure in the (governmental) postal system would be represented by a red gap, stimulating a visual equation between government carelessness and inefficiency and government violence and intentionality. The gaps would also resonate critically with the Mexican government's modernisation-project slogan 'Upwards and Onwards'. The image, taken from a soft-porn magazine printed in England to

celebrate the 1970 World Cup appropriates the official promotional material for the event, parodying the bureaucratic and commodified image of Mexico. Queen Elizabeth's profile on each stamp is overwhelmed in stature and undermined in authority by Ehrenberg's erotic figure that evokes the personal and intimate against the impersonal realm of nation-building and political machinations.

Ehrenberg considered the process and circulation of his work to be part of the finished product. The conceptual intent of *Upwards and Onwards...whether you like it or not* relies on its own passage and the collaborative act of its reconstitution on site. Fragmentation and reassembling are a constituent part of the work which is explicitly political in both its subject matter and in its appropriation of a bureaucratic system. The reconfiguration of the artistic processes of production, transportation and exhibition and the consideration of its possible censorship contain the work's meaning. Ehrenberg wrote in the accompanying instructions: 'I hope that this work is allowed to hang in the exhibition. If not, let's see what type of a stink can be raised.' This statement recognises that the transformative power of this work is in its actions, processes and provocations.

Ehrenberg's use of the postal system was an early act of engagement in alternative ways of distributing and exhibiting art as a kind of activism. It involved creating networks that were not censored or co-opted by government and implied freedom of information and expression in an atmosphere of the intense suppression of information. This desire to promote artists' networks outside of galleries and museums led Ehrenberg to set up the Beau Geste Press (BGP), an independent publishing company founded to publish artists' books and promote the *Fluxshoe* exhibition that toured England between 1971 and 1972. In Devon, the Ehrenbergs moved in to an old farmhouse with David Mayor and a number of other artists.

At the Beau Geste Press artistic collaboration was a way of life. In one event staged by the Press they travelled from London to Edinburgh by train, taking their Gestetner with them. During the journey fellow passengers were asked to contribute to a collaborative magazine with poems, drawings or stories. By the time they arrived in Edinburgh a copy had been printed for all the contributors. The processes had become more important than the content; Ehrenberg envisioned it as 'a new way of life' and a 'community of duplicators' (Debroise, 2007, p.157), enacting something akin to Benjamin's notion of the democratisation of art through mechanical reproduction.

During this time Ehrenberg made the work *Time Heals All Wounds*, ‘thanks to a pack of remnant pre-printed forms ... found in some printing shop’. (Author’s correspondence with the artist, March 2009) These found objects provoked Ehrenberg to diligently record the daily healing of a cut on his left thumb. The very literal interpretation of the English saying ‘Time Heals All Wounds’ provokes questions about time, exile, language and cultural adaptation. The conciliatory and simplistic cliché is at once disproved by the implicit dislocation of the author. The futile exercise of recording daily thumbprints emphasise the loss of power associated with exile, while clearly demonstrating that time doesn’t heal all wounds. Ehrenberg parodies the officious nature of state apparatus, the use of the thumbprint affirming his physical presence while evoking the spectre of state violence over the body, the bodily trace and the absent or disappeared body. Without any resolution apart from the literal healing of an inconsequential wound, the metaphorical meaning remains unresolved.

When Ehrenberg returned to Mexico in the mid 1970s he established a movement of alternative small-press publications called Neográfica. In the 1980s, acting on his belief in social and political activism, he ran for congressional election. Later that decade he coordinated relief support after Mexico’s 1986 earthquake. Ehrenberg has variously identified himself as teacher, politician, cultural attaché, artist, critic, neologist, editor, actor, filmmaker and living art work. For Ehrenberg these roles are all part of his ideological inclination that does not recognise the separation of art from life, and by extension artist from teacher, or politician from actor. As Jorge Alberto Manrique comments: ‘his life work as an artist is a result and at the same time, a part of his work as a person’, life and art are a ‘sole indivisible unit...not a specialised task but a manifestation of life’ (Manrique, 2000, p.1). Ehrenberg considers the potential of art to be through its enactment, its engagement with participants and as a way of engendering new ways of conceiving social reality and behaving.

Ehrenberg continues to question the assumptions of the art market and its classifications, particularly those of ‘folk’ or ‘indigenous’ art. He also concerns himself with the problems of historical memory. In December 2009, Ehrenberg performed *Xocoyotzin, The Penultimate* at the University of Essex’s Lakeside Theatre. The work responds to the way Moctezuma Xocoyotzin has been remembered in Mexico, and deals with questions of national memory. Moctezuma’s death at the hands of the Spanish Conquistadors, led by Cortés, marked the beginning of the colonisation of

present-day Mexico. The performance was narrated by a Witness, Ehrenberg himself, while the graphics and sound was designed by Macario Ortega. The pre-modern setting of the temple stage had as its backdrop visuals of contemporary Mexico accompanied at points by the voice of Nicolás de Jesús speaking in Nahuatl, a lament of sorts. Ehrenberg posits an alternative version of Moctezuma's death that makes explicit his murder at the hands of the Spanish; this account goes against the popular version of events in Mexico, propagated by what Ehrenberg calls 'Official History' that holds that Moctezuma was a traitor and offered his kingdom to the conquistadors. Opting to capture the senses with a heady mixture of visuals, sound and smell, the performance sought to reclaim Mexico's history from the clutches of its colonial past.

### **An Interview with Felipe Ehrenberg**

*ZG: As you are returning to England, where you lived between 1968-1973, I would like to start by asking you about your experiences here. How did this time affect you and how do you feel about coming back?*

FE: 'Coming back' is a wonderfully poignant phrase, especially when you're 64 (and more!). While browsing the Internet one afternoon I came across a photo of Langford Court, our home, the home of the Beau Geste Press (BGP), a community of printers, beautifully restored and converted into a Bed & Breakfast. I felt very touched by the wonder of cyber technology. At the BGP we relied both on highly labour intensive practices – collating, book binding and such, and state of the art technology, such as table-top mimeo machines, electronic stencil scanners and photocopiers. This made it possible for us to pioneer the field of mail art and more importantly, book art, or book objects or artists' books or whatever the genre is being called at present. At the same time, I couldn't help but think about the process of gentrification, indeed, about how poverty stricken artists (we were young, thus poor) have served real estate speculators, the curator-controlled art market and related phenomena.

Anyway, many of the conditions I faced at the time, as a struggling artist in tune with both the political upheavals tearing Latin American countries apart, the shifting paradigms in the arts, and at the same time, an exile having to care for a family of four; all this changed radically when I returned to Mexico in 1974. In that context, all the ideas and experiences I had developed in Europe took on

radically different meanings and applications. The small press experience, for instance, an exercise in unfettered, intimate artistic experimentation, morphed into a crusade, an experience that continued for nearly a decade. This led to the founding of over 800 collective community presses throughout Mexico, and even in Nicaragua, which at the time, had just toppled the dictator, Somoza, and was barely beginning its reconstruction. Small, portable press communities were a necessity, a *real* need!

*ZG: Although your work seeks to have no recognizable style, repeated practices and themes are noticeable throughout your career. For example, printing projects and book design. What is the attraction of books, publishing and printing methods for you?*

FE: Mayhaps I have just answered this question. I grew up in a family of readers ('book of the month' clubs and all). But the fact is that I trained in a printing workshop run by Catalunyan anarchists, who were exiled in Mexico during Franco's rule. In the mid 1960s, I became deeply involved with Margaret Randall and Sergio Mondragón, the prodigious poets who founded the legendary *The Plumed Horn (El Corno Emplumado)*. This was a bilingual, highly politicised and far-reaching magazine which gathered the most prominent and meaningful poets, writers and artists in Anglo and Latin America. People such as Bob Creely and Ernesto Cardenal and Jerry Rothenberg and Nicanor Parra and William Carlos Williams and Cecilia Vicuña and Phillip Lamantia were contributors. *The Plumed Horn* suffered a violent ending late in 1968. Actually, I've always insisted that I don't 'make' books ... books *happen* to me!

*ZG: Your work shifts between styles, from paintings in the style of Mexican 'folk' embroidery to conceptual works. How do you feel about these artistic labels?*

I guess life, for an artist of my time, could be divided in two. Art teachers, who were 'modernists', insisted on the need to "find your voice", that is, to develop a recognizable style *and keep to it!* This of course has a lot to do with the need to be distinctly recognised in the art market. Then there's the 'anti-matter' of conceptualism...

You know, I'm not a graduate of an art school. I was formed under the apprentice system, learning from older artists in their studios; a totally eclectic array of great people. Matias Goeritz, founder of the School of Altamira (1948); muralist José Chávez Morado, a powerful nationalistic artist; Feliciano Béjar, an experimental sculptor who used metal, crystal, plastic, and stained glass. I very

much enjoyed and was influenced by my mother's marvelous collections of what people call 'folk art'. Folk art is in fact a continuum of the various aesthetic systems which are still cultivated by various modern and contemporary First Nation artists in Mexico (Meshica, Mixtec, Zapotec, Maya, Pur'hépecha) as well as Rufino Tamayo, Francisco Toledo, Nicolás de Jesús and Germán Venegas. Being of European stock but very interested in and familiar with these aesthetic systems, I began questioning the reasons behind such deeply etched distinctions that Western art makes between 'itself' and non-Western expressions and/or ethnicity. In Mexico, this issue is a terrifying consequence of our racism: anything created by artists of European stock is *art*, whereas anything produced by brown-skinned First Nation artists is *craft* or folk art. I've always liked to insist that a Norwegian born in Norway is an *Aboriginal* of Norway, that a Roman born in Rome is a *Native* of Italy, and so on... And at the same time, that painters who use oil paint in their works are even more traditional craftspeople than a Quechua basket weaver. Tongue-in-cheek? Not at all, deadly serious!

*ZG: Your multifarious activities have, among other things, seen you run for congressional office; establish crisis support after the earthquake in Mexico; work as a cultural attaché; and create a national network of print workshops. What is the driving force of your activities?*

FE: Caramba, dear!! Is *joie-de-vivre* good enough for you? I can't conceive myself *making art* (just think of John Baldessari's 1971 piece) without enjoying doing so, without experiencing the deepest possible feelings, pleasure, fear, without being adventurous and unfettered (perhaps contemporary art accumulates the largest brunt of dogmas that art has ever had to bear). Anyway, if Penguin publishes acclaimed authors that have been "dishwashers, war correspondents, circus clowns, POWs, foreign ministers and college teachers", who can question an artist for seeking out source information ... who knows?

*ZG: Your new performance questions the way the Aztec leader Moctezuma has been remembered. Can you explain the significance of this historical figure for you? Why did you want to use performance to revisit this subject?*

FE: Funny you ask why I chose to create a performance piece to deal with The First Major Encounter on Continental Land Between Two Widely Differing and Powerful Civilizations (caps not accidental). Truth is, both were suggested to me by the University of Essex. I accepted the invitation

not only because I'm the only contemporary artist in Mexico to use the distant past as reference, but because no one in Mexico would even dare think of paying homage to this personage: the history of Mexico we're taught in school is the Spanish version, and this version disclaims any responsibility in the ruler's death.

Montezuma II, or better, Motecuzohma Xocoyotzin, was the antepenultimate ruler of an empire which was *not* called Aztec (the name was coined by Baron Alexander von Humboldt). He was *not* killed by his own people but was treacherously murdered by the Iberians he had grandly received as guests in the Palace Of Axayacatl. Learning about this, dealing with issues like this one, which is about the lies of Official History, strikes me as a fascinating possibility to understand the exponential forces of minute events. What if he had survived? What if the Europeans had come simply as traders, like the Chinese who first arrived 300 years before? The "what-ifs" of life are a major mystery; they lead to revolution and evolution.

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