INTRODUCTION TO FELIPE EHRENBERG'S "IN SEARCH OF A MODEL FOR LIFE"

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Felipe Ehrenberg's "In Search of a Model for Life" provides a schematic overview of the autonomous, experimental art movement known as *Los Grupos* (the Groups) based largely in Mexico City during the mid- to late 1970s. The Groups can be characterized by their critical attitude toward the academicism and burgeoning experimentalism of the country's state-run art institutions, their emphasis on the collective process of artistic production, and their critical reappropriation of the revolutionary and postrevolutionary traditions of open-air workshops, public art, and artists' syndicates in Mexico.

Born in 1943, Ehrenberg began exhibiting his work as an artist in 1963 in Mexico City, in a long and varied career that has made its own contributions to the currents of conceptualism, mail art, Fluxus, performance, and neographic art. While in political exile in Britain between 1968 and 1974, Ehrenberg took part in a number of collaborative projects including Beau Geste Press, an artisanal publishing house, and the collective Taller Polígono (Polygon Workshop) with the Austrian artist Richard Kriesche and the Mexican photographer Rodolfo Alcaraz.[1] Upon returning to Mexico, Ehrenberg cofounded

1 Issa María Benítez Dueñas, "Reconstruir el vacío y recuperar el espacio: Ehrenberg conceptual," in *Felipe Ehrenberg: Manchuria país periférico* (Mexico City: Editorial Diamantina, 2007), 24.

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one of the earliest Groups, *Proceso Pentágono* (Pentagon Trial), together with Víctor Muñoz, José Antonio Hernández Amezcua, and Carlos Fink, officially taking shape in 1977 after several years of collaboration between its members and those of other early and politically oriented artists' collectives, including *Tepito Arte Acá* (Tepito Art Here), the *Taller de Arte e Ideología* (TAI) (Art and Ideology Workshop), and *TACO* (*Taller de Arte y Comunicación*) (Art and Communication Workshop).

In a tone representative of this early wave of the Groups, Proceso Pentágono described its task as one of artistic investigation and experimentation, positioning itself in explicit opposition to the state's bureaucratic administration of culture and the formal conventions and liberal ideology it supported.[2] The proliferation of politically engaged artists' collectives beginning in the late 1960s emerged both from within and as a response to the Mexican state's violent repression of the 1968 student protests and its dirty war against the radical left over the decade to follow. As fine arts students at Mexico's highly traditional academies at the time, *Generación 65* (Generation 65), for example, participated directly in the production of graphic art for the student movement, while other protagonists cite the more general crisis of political representation as the impetus behind the Groups' critical stance.[3] Though they formally organized as Groups only in 1977, a distinctively critical approach to the visual arts pervaded the spirit of these early artists' associations, an approach that would also characterize the Groups movement a few years later. This is particularly notable in the integral role played by journalists, writers, and theorists: TACO worked directly with the employees' union at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) in producing its own literary journal, while TAI grew out of Alberto Híjar Serrano's aesthetics lectures at UNAM, strongly influenced by structural Marxist approaches to ideology and artistic production.

Though in their statements from the late 1970s Proceso Pentágono often cited the irreparable chasm that separated it from the state-sponsored academies and salons of the Mexican art world at the time, it is important to remember that the Groups' brief history as a cogent

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2 Grupo Proceso Pentágono, "De lo frío a lo caliente," in *Frentes, coaliciones y talleres: Grupos visuales en México en el siglo XX*, ed. Alberto Híjar Serrano (Mexico City: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 2007), 319–22.

3 The fall of 1968 also witnessed the first Independent Salon just a month after the massacre, as a form of protest against the criteria and format of the National Institute of Fine Art's own annual artists' competition. See Dominique Liquois, *De Los Grupos los individuos* (Mexico City: Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil, 1985), 11.

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movement was also strongly punctuated by its institutional appearances. Indeed, it was the call to exhibit in the Latin American section at the X Paris Youth Biennial in 1977 that spurred many informal artists' associations to define themselves more definitively as Groups.[4] The biennial's ultimate censorship of allusions to Latin America's military dictatorships and the opportunity for the four participating Groups to duplicate and exhibit their work simultaneously in Mexico City helped to further consolidate the movement, giving rise to the short-lived Mexican Front of Cultural Workers' Groups in 1978. Set against the backdrop of the Sandinista offensive in Nicaragua, the Front would emphasize the solidarity with proletarian struggle and its recuperation of control over the means of production and circulation of art that already subtended much of the Groups' activity. It would also go on to organize several exhibitions of national and international public and graphic art.[5] The novelty of these shows lay less in their outright rejection of the art institution than in their internal opposition to both the academicism of the National Fine Arts Institute (INBA) and the growing commercial market for experimentalism within the national context at the time.[6] Indeed, the INBA's First (and only) Annual Experimentation Section, 1978–79, has often been seen as the Groups' culminating experience and, perhaps appropriately, the academic establishment's first official recognition of nonobjective art broadly speaking. The organizers' purposefully marginal placement of the Groups' works, in contrast to that of less politicized pieces, and the utter lack of publicity or public response were perceived as a definitive parting

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4 The sculptor Helen Escobedo, then curator of the Museo Universitario de Ciencias y Arte (University Museum of Arts and Sciences), was charged with putting together the Mexican pavilion for the X Paris Youth Biennial. Escobedo's decision to select from among the burgeoning scene of mostly informal artists' collectives, ultimately sending Grupo Proceso Pentágono, Grupo Suma, Grupo TAI, and Tetraedro, helped to mobilize the definitive constitution and public presence of the Groups as collective actors and producers. Many thanks are due to Felipe Ehrenberg for his very generous and meticulous revision of this translation and introduction, and, in particular, of the chronology of the Groups movement presented here.

5 These exhibitions include Muros frente a muros (Walls against Walls), Arte y luchas populares en México y América Latina (Art and Popular Struggles in Mexico and Latin America), and América en la mira (America in Sight). See Liquois, *De Los Grupos*, 33.

6 Like the Institutional Revolutionary Party, the INBA was, in the mid-1940s under the presidency of Miguel Alemán and amid the ferment of national industrialization via import substitution, giving way to what is often recognized as a postwar period of purported political stability. See Héctor Aguilar Camín and Lorenzo Meyer, *In the Shadow of the Mexican Revolution: 1910–1989* (Austin: University of Texas, 1993), 159–70.

of ways between the Groups and the quickly growing market for and official administration of contemporary art in Mexico.[7]

The ideological, professional, and organizational disputes that would dissolve the Front and the apparent triumph of a depoliticized approach to experimentalism at the Annual Experimentation Section play a central role in the teleological narrative about the Groups espoused in *De Los Grupos los Individuos* (From the Groups, Individuals), the exhibition catalogue to which Ehrenberg's "In Search of a Model for Life" appeared as one of three external appendices. This retrospective of the Groups was held from June to August 1985 at the Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil in Mexico City.[8] The catalogue's history of the Groups ends by posing their fate in terms of an artificially forced choice: they could either live on a professional "subsistence" diet and remain independent or promote their works in the market, the "inevitable" choice of any oppositional artistic movement that must place itself within an established system.[9] Against the exhibition's own unabashed cynicism, Ehrenberg describes the Groups' collective form of work in terms of a model, but for life, in line with the universal concerns and broader efforts at socialized labor beyond the realm of art.

I would suggest, however, that we take pause before assigning the critical value of Ehrenberg's text too quickly to the Groups' purported transcendence of the visual arts and their institutions. The Groups' formal experimentalism and critical attitude toward both the Mexican School of Mural Painting and the individualist interiority of the so-called Generation of Rupture that followed cannot be thought of as "mere" responses to the social rupture of '68. On the contrary, Ehrenberg's text allows us to glimpse a movement that dared to lay bare the ideological and economic grounds of the visual arts in contemporary, neoliberal Mexico: the transmutation of artistic conventions from academicism to experimentalism and the complicity woven between a repressive state and a liberal, intellectual elite through new forms of cultural and educational patronage. The Groups were born not only of

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7 César Espinosa and Araceli Zúñiga, *La perra brava: Arte crisis y políticas culturales* (Mexico City: UNAM, 2002), 47–53.

8 The Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil was founded in 1974 through the donation of Álvaro Carrillo Gil's private collection of modern Mexican art to the federal government. Despite functioning under the auspices of the state, the museum became known as one of Mexico City's independent art spaces in the 1990s.

9 Liquois, *De Los Grupos*, 48.

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the 1968 protests and their repression but also of the new and more tolerant face it adopted under the administration of President Luis Echeverría Álvarez, bolstered by the rapid influx of petroleum profits in the 1970s. If, as TACO's Araceli Zúñiga and César Espinosa have observed, the Front was meant to combat the state's integrationist policies and apparent sympathy for contemporary art, the difficulty of theorizing its relationship to the institution of art arises from these same conditions. Thus in lieu of posing the Groups in relation to theories of the avant-garde and their detractors, a renewed critical approach to the scene of the 1970s should begin by taking Ehrenberg at his word.[10] If the Groups' effort at collectivization was to have transcended the world of the visual arts at the level of its production, then the more detailed analysis of its specific works and exhibitions must begin by inquiring about the unique value, if any, of artistic labor in this context.[11]

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10 Espinosa and Zúñiga, *La perra brava*, 60–61.

11 Many thanks to Cristina Híjar for the generous access she allowed me to her documental archive of Los Grupos at the Centro Nacional de Investigación, Documentación e Información de Artes Plásticas.

DOCUMENT

IN SEARCH OF A MODEL FOR LIFE[1]

FELIPE EHRENBERG

By the beginning of the 1970s, the previously agitated currents of the visual arts had calmed and once again began to flow placidly, interrupted only by this or that polite, lukewarm polemic. Apart from some honorable exceptions, the artists who had once stood out and excelled had been tamed and weakened by circumstances beyond their control. Concentrated in the capital and trapped within an increasingly organized society, these artists decided to isolate themselves from the problems that moved the country as a whole, and they were lulled by the interested caresses of the country's powerful groups.

Suddenly, from within the channels guiding the flow of art, there developed something that surprised even the more progressive thinkers. It was a kind of reef, which forced the currents to swirl around, break up, try and destroy such a hurdle: a number of artists were challenging the established order in an unexpected way. Reinterpreting the order of public art that had been so vehemently rejected by the

1 Originally published in Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil. 1985. *De los grupos los individuos: Artistas plásticos de los grupos metropolitanos : Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil, junio-agosto 1985*. Ciudad de México: Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes. An online Spanish version can be found at http://bibliothequekandinsky.centrepompidou.fr/cataloguedoc/fondsphoto/cgi-bin/image.asp? (slides 96-101).

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previous generation, they sought with an unusual sense of urgency to make direct connections with the man on the street and confront the conflicts imposed on him by our societies.

For these artists, it was evident that the orthodoxy of traditional painting restricted the possibilities for achieving their objective. It was also clear to them that solutions could be found neither in fits of individualism nor in sponsored gigantism. And so, ignoring the rules of the game of High Art, these largely young painters armed themselves with an arsenal of extremely novel material and formal resources to help them develop their ideas.

Beyond these artists' undeniable contributions to the enrichment of the visual arts, what will endure as their greatest achievement are the steps that they were able to take towards *the collectivization of the artistic practice*.

Conceived nearly a decade after the beginnings of the movement, the exhibition "Los Grupos, Los Individuos" (*sic*) acquires a special meaning. It calls not only for a revision of what has happened, but also for comparisons with the current backward-looking panorama of the arts. The high caliber of the collection demonstrates that the act of coming together to create (and to distribute) *does not* annul the freedom of the individual (as critics like to repeat), but rather enriches his work in unforeseen ways. Even more important, the confrontation between collective and individual productions underlines the need to encourage research that will help to explain the processes that led to collectivization. This knowledge is indispensable for locating the complex interrelation of elements that have impeded the development of collectivization and which dominate in all creative manifestations.

The artists, ever since coming together in the first groups, managed to surprise and amaze for many different reasons; among others, for their unusual vigor, for their professional maturity, for the eclectic variety of their proposals, for the consistency of their achievements as a whole, and for their repudiation of the prevailing values and rituals of the world of high art (although, at a later date, circumstances debilitated the positions maintained by some of the artists). They also surprised with a not-insignificant gesture, which highlighted their break even from previous anti-establishment rhetoric: without exception, the recently formed groups refrained from launching the typical manifesto that would announce them as a school or tendency. Without

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the traditional guidance of such declarations, no one seems to have been capable of gathering the information needed to offer a global vision of the movement. It thus tends to be described as a "phenomenon," instead of being recognized as a step forward consistent with the development of our visual arts.[2]

Seen from within, the construction processes of each one of the groups were highly stimulating and, at the same time, distressing. As our discoveries eroded concepts that had been instilled in us since childhood (the power of individual vision, solitary work habits, the cult of alienation, formal restrictions, etc.), possibilities for alternative social landscapes unfolded. In these landscapes, emulation would replace competition, and artistic work—a result of group effort—could coherently form a part of the struggles of the majority, as one more weapon in the fight for the liberation of our people. What the groups sought in the collectivization of art, perhaps without consciously recognizing it, was *a model for life*.

There are things that should be said with clarity and without reserve. What we began a decade ago, as a group of some fifty artists and intellectuals, was not the product of a solitary utopianism. Rather, it was one of the most revolutionary proposals to have ever come out of the global artistic sphere.

In the diversity of proposals made by the different groups during the seventies, we can find numerous, highly valuable contributions to contemporary art. There is, for example, the "turn" that is offered in a natural way to the old ally of postmodernism, or the clear propositions made—this is the *work*—to rearm the aesthetic jigsaw puzzle whose configuration was based upon the institutionalized, transnational commercialization of the artistic product.[3] What is most moving, nevertheless, is that in the accumulated inventory of collectively developed

2 For want of a definition consistent with the occurrences of history, the word "phenomenon" could, in principle, be operative. However, given the meanness of journalists and critics who could not or did not want to carry out their complementary functions, there exists the danger that such an insufficient description could be used to minimize artistic achievements and contributions. This misuse would serve the purpose of isolating such efforts from the development of the culture promoted by the conservative sectors to legitimize their vision of the world.

3 Today, the concept of "ugliness" ("feísmo") grows as an antithesis to previous ideas of exquisiteness ("esquisitismos"), post-conceptualism once again takes up the object, and the art markets, agonizing in their prosperity, return to extol the myth of alienation as the only possibility for the salvation of the West and the Free World. The binomial *art and politics*, however, returns with zeal to international discussion forums.

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concepts, we can find the seeds of larger ideas that transcend the world of the visual arts. These ideas are related to projects that span the *ejido*, the *kibbutz*, the *koljoz*, and the cooperatives of production and distribution, and they underlie universal concerns about education, culture, and social welfare.

Recounting those moments still so near to us should never be considered premature, but rather a part and consequence of the process initiated by the groups as a whole. Although their initial impetus has lost some of its force (for reasons beyond the control of the participants), the groups' achievements should be considered in conjunction with the previous efforts that helped to configure the rich panorama of our visual arts. This recollection should be as impartial as can be permitted by our own conviction that what we have done is valuable in the here and now, and that it can transcend time and borders; it should not be affected by circumstances (which are the same ones that worked to dissociate the groups and their members).

These affirmations may sound pretentious to those who insist on defending the culture of the elite or supporting the *status quo* that in our time has taken root and continues to prosper. It is even possible that some colleagues who participated in the struggle of the groups or sympathized with them will consider my words excessive. Doubters might agree, were there to be "expert" opinions to back my ideas. The problem, I insist, is that there are no opinions to be found whatsoever, and this is our own collective fault, which stems from constant belittlement of ourselves.

While the groups managed to largely monopolize the panorama of the visual arts for more than five years, there is limited information on this period, and the documentation that does exist is invariably deficient. With neither a minimum base of information nor the support of a theoretical corpus, it is easy to understand why the movement is often dismissed as outrageous, why the members of the groups are considered to be "savage" and without importance, and why their enormous artistic efforts are viewed as inconsequential. But the embarrassing incompetence of the critics and journalists by no means reduces the significance of the groups.

As with everything, the appearance and the development of the groups, in both their initial strength and their current decline, follow precise, locatable historical determinations. The groups did not begin to form until the moment was ripe, and their current outcome (which includes

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glimpses of the past, like the exhibit that concerns us here) should be seen not as a demise, but rather as a repose prior to a new vitality.

The collective movement was never the product of the imagination of charismatic leaders or visionary teachers, but emerged from a more generalized feeling. National and global events converged to establish the foundations for a new awareness among Mexican visual artists. The profile of collective practice was configured almost simultaneously among the majority, and even among those who considered themselves to be less politicized. In this sense, the movement began to take shape at just the right moment.

The announcement of the Tenth Biennial of Paris was the detonator of the new concept.[4] With the political and very important aesthetic success of the *Proceso Pentágono, Suma, TAI* and *Tetraedro* in that international forum, the groundwork was laid for further development of the collective project in Mexico. Upon their return, the participants of the Biennial, alongside other emerging groups, devoted themselves to the task of putting together the multiple components necessary for collective work; this is first and foremost a technical kind of problem, complicated by considerations of an emotional nature. (In collective creation, anonymity is not synonymous with obscurity, as the first term assumes a vision of man and the universe that is alternative to that which controls us.)[5]

With the foundation of the Mexican Front of Cultural Workers' Groups in 1978, there emerged a new awareness of the key importance of collectivity ("lo colectivo") in forging connections with society. And it was also from within these very groups that the movement was distorted.

Even at the first Mexican Front reunions, I can remember confrontations between two opposing conceptions of artistic practice, both responding to leftist concerns. On the one hand, there were those who insisted on taking up and developing proposals made by politically active artists from past generations; these proposals had been valuable in their day but were questionable in the present context. On the other

4 See "Expediente: Bienal X" (México: Editorial Libro Acción Libre/EGP, 1980).

5 *Grosso modo*: As with any type of work, collective creation requires specific and very concrete systems of organization. Despite some obvious differences, these systems could be compared to jazz or Afro-Caribbean musical groups, where previously accepted structures serve as a framework for improvisation. They are different from systems based on teamwork, with respect to the ways in which tasks are distributed and valued. When there is an objective to fulfill, the first type of system requires coordination, while the second type depends on direction.

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hand, there were those determined to develop techniques and work habits that diverged from processes determined by the pictorial tradition.

The members of the first group had a difficult time thinking of ways in which to distribute their work outside the confines of the gallery, state sponsorship, or involvement with political parties. The second group, aware of the progress made by avant-garde collectives from other countries, proposed the simultaneous development of a new type of production and a corresponding infrastructure for distribution.[6]

The first group was primarily composed of theorists and teachers; they were undoubtedly committed cultural workers, but they were not producers of visual art, as they did not deal with the technical problems faced by painters. In the second group, there were more artists that sought, as visual experimenters, to surround the gallery system, while at the same time developing new plastic languages to serve their ideals.

To complicate the situation, there were defenders of both sides of the conceptual divide who confused the concept of the *guild* ("lo gremial") with that of the *group* ("lo grupal"), viewing their participation in the Mexican Front as an opportunity to present themselves in a public and unified way. This led to a highly complex struggle to reconcile the concepts of the union, which covered the development of infrastructure and ideology, and the group, which sought to replace individual (and associative) production with authentically collective production.

For diverse reasons, the scale was tipped towards the concept of the union, and the Mexican Front opted to discard the word GROUPS. Henceforth, the movement was stricken with the illnesses of exaggerated solidarity ("solidaridiasis"), excessive declarations ("declarationitis"), and severely personal attacks, until it fell into the virtual paralysis that limits it today.

Analyzing the movement's process of disintegration, we discover that the revolutionary artist cannot distribute his product—which is a cultural good—in circuits that are not elitist, if the very production of such goods serves to reinforce the lines drawn by capitalist culture. The artistic object created in accordance with old guidelines can only be efficiently distributed (that is to say, benefiting the customer while

6 The left traditionally repudiates avant-garde movements, arguing that they are decadent and mere manifestations of markets hungry for novelty. In countries like Mexico, where cultural workers are almost always anti-establishment, experimentation and the search for new forms and languages should be accepted as another mode of contributing revolutionarily to transformation.

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rewarding the producer) through channels developed within capitalism: galleries, museums, auctions, or specialized magazines.[7] It is in the incomprehension of this truth that we can detect the visceral reactions of indignation that were a handicap to the association. We can translate the infantilism of the left—with its inexplicable desire to register "firsts," its use of collective prestige for personal ends, its lack of professional respect, its simple-minded rivalry, or its thirst for profit—into a lack of historical perspective, which inevitably leads to fragmentation and division.

Once the Mexican Front was reduced to a mere letterhead, the resulting creative vacuum was opportunely seized by the established system. Without the infrastructural support that had been crucial to their initial development, the groups were forced to gravitate towards other spaces to continue their work. Many groups disappeared, while others were formed; at all times, however, the individual participants increasingly benefited from this enormous experience, as can be seen in their most recent work. Art never stops flowing.

Art, beyond what it represents or signifies in its interior, is a faithful reflection of the everyday occurrences of the societies in which it is produced. While the efforts we made to collectivize its production and distribution have been interrupted, they will be recovered in time as another one of Mexico's contributions to the socialization of the common good and to the creativity that such socialization should favor. It is up to us, the protagonists of such efforts, to ensure that the historical function of Los Grupos is properly valued and considered within our culture as a whole.

FELIPE EHRENBERG

San Jerónimo, Mexico City, 1985

Translation by Elizabeth L. Hochberg

7 The recently celebrated First Biennial of Havana is a good example of the contradictions that the visual arts face as they try to respond to the changes demanded by socialism. In Cuba, literature, music, dance, film, and theater were integrated (in almost this order) into the needs of the revolutionary process long before the visual arts, which would have to wait twenty-five years for its "event," the Biennial. The collected works were judged twice, by the official jury and by the public. The fact that the results of the public survey have not been disseminated attests to the extraordinary confusion that encircles this branch of creation.

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