

Radical/Basic/Actual. 1970s Experiments in Print Media: Felipe Ehrenberg, Latin American Artists and the Beau Geste Press (Devon, 1970-1976). Exhibition. 10th October - 14th November 2016. Alison Richard Building, West Road, Cambridge.
Centre of Latin American Studies in Association with Cambridge University Library and Trinity College.
Curator: Erica Segre.

Curator's Introduction.

The Mexican mixed media, conceptual and performance artist Felipe Ehrenberg and Martha Hellion co-founded the *Beau Geste Press* collective in Devon (1970-1976) with English artist and art historian David Mayor. It became one of the most influential avant-garde independent presses of the post-war period and is regarded by art historians and contemporary artists as one of the most significant transnational collaborative projects of the 1970s. This unconventional workshop/taller and community of printers became influential by producing and publishing print objects of a new, heterogeneous, radical aesthetic that was often engaged in the counterculture and in the blurring of disciplinary boundaries across creative media, gender and politics. In collaboration with international and national artists many of whom were associated with the Fluxus movement, the BGP produced diverse limited edition works, concept booklets, pamphlets, magazines, flyers and postcards using experimental techniques of graphic design including inserts, folded pages, stencil signage, applied materials, photographs, stamps and collage while also revisiting the artisanal in printing styles of production. Through this vital creative centre, Ehrenberg, a self-confessed 'neologist' created a multidimensional web of collaborations (often eclectic and intermedial) predicated on experimental and alternative processes of image and textual interplay centred on the UK. In 1972 it launched the legendary *Schmuck* – a periodical of ideas and anti-authoritarian art practice organised around a specific culture or region (*French Schmuck*, *Teutonic Schmuck* etc). Key artists, poets, musicians and theorists such as Cecilia Vicuña, Ulises Carrión, Helen Chadwick, Carolee Schneemann, Claudio Bertoni, Michael Nyman, Opal L. Nations and Ben Vautier created pioneering print artefacts that have become landmarks of the international dimension of a dissident art practice exemplified by the Beau Geste Press. The exhibition showcases a collection of these provocative and original limited editions often made using unconventional materials and 'arte povera' techniques of production and distribution in an unusual variety of small-scale formats. It explores the legacy of indiscipline of the BGP's uniquely communal and discrepant artefacts. As the 1973-74 catalogue of BGP publications declared self-sufficiency and international synergies underpinned the experimental artists' press:

“Beau Geste Press is not a business. It's a way of life. We exist because you exist. Our activities serve as a link-up, stressing contact between Britain and Latin America as well as East European countries. We are political though not politicized. Our editions are limited because we print, bind and distribute ourselves.”

Individual artists were encouraged to take an active role in every stage of printing and financing the production of their work. The range of unorthodox collaborations produced books, pamphlets and ephemera by concrete poets, conceptual and performance artists, neo-dadaists, experimental composers, fiction writers and members of the group Fluxus (which

Ehrenberg had joined in 1968). The aim was to function independently of conventional art circuits, to challenge the authoritarian grip of art institutions and to promote irreverent or disturbing acts of expression that questioned the consumerist and political mainstream. Chance, play and serendipitous collisions of the personal and the found, the documentary and the poetic, of drawn doodle and photograph, collage and cut-out, typographical sign and accidental trace, characterized the unsettling diversity of imprints. The text and the book were treated as bodies, as vehicles, as performances, as architectures, as spatial apertures, as precarious materiality, as mock bureaucracy, as testimonies and as environments for transgressive or perplexing encounters. Another key gesture of plurality and displacement at the BGP is evidenced by the playful and inconsistent bilingualism of its textuality and typography alongside the pastiche of Victorian printed ephemera and other imperial branding. Adopting the pseudonym 'Kyosan Bajin', Ehrenberg designed and provided the prologue of the catalogue *Fluxshoe* (1972) which accompanied a year-long exhibition of performances and documentation by Fluxus artists which includes poetry, photographs, satirical questionnaires and administrative forms by countercultural figures such as feminist artist Carolee Schneemann. A notable feature of the production of the BGP, was the collective's early involvement in opposing the military coup against the government of socialist president Salvador Allende in Chile on 11 September 1973. Chilean conceptual artist, poet, performer and eco-activist Cecilia Vicuña's multipart book *Sabor a mi* (1973) was produced at the BGP during the unfolding crisis. Ehrenberg's *Pussywillow: A Diary of Conditions* (1974), despite its random diaristic appearance, contained explicit allusions of protest against the Pinochet regime and its US backers. Vicuña co-founded with art critic and curator Guy Brett and US artist John Dugger Artists for Democracy. She spearheaded acts of protest in London to which David Mayor, Felipe Ehrenberg and others at the BGP contributed.