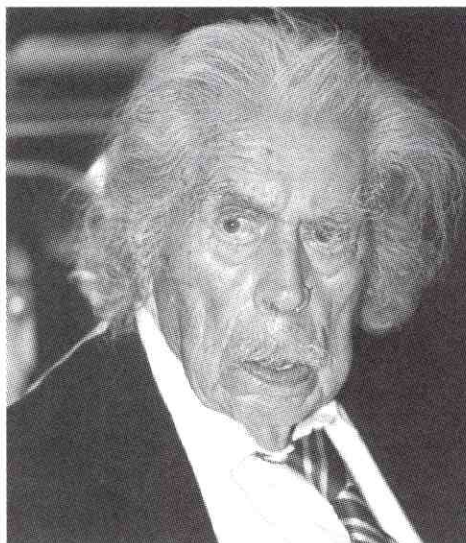


# In Memoriam



Bernardo Moncada/AVE

## **Germán List Arzubide** **A Time-naut** **(1898-1998)**

**I**n the early years of the century, amidst the sensation of abandonment and explosion caused by the threat of war and the mechanization of postrevolutionary daily life, in which human beings continued to be an important part—but in the end, only a part, like a crank or the engine of the great modern machine—language, and particularly the language of some poets, could not stay on the sidelines.

Day-to-day language was invaded by that onslaught of new perspectives, sensations, terms and concepts. Structures and intentions were also stood on their heads by a group of artists, among them musicians like Manuel M. Ponce and Silvestre Revueltas, painters like Raúl Anguiano and Diego Rivera and poets like Arqueles Vela and Germán List Arzubide. They gathered at a call from poet Manuel Maples Arce in the first “stridentist” manifesto, printed as a leaflet called *Actual ním. 1* (Current, No. 1) distributed in late December 1922, to form a diversified, multicolor, poliphonous basis for transforming the

world in “a rapid strike of total subversion,” with a provocative, daring, impertinent, irreverent, good-humored gesture.

Perhaps the only way of wringing the neck of traditionalism in the 1920s was to impose—not propose—a new aesthetic as the sole truth that would reflect contemporary humanity: its concerns and persecutory dreams. That is how this aesthetic provocation called stridentism was born, abominating Rubén Darío’s modernism and fed by European trends like Marinetti’s futurism; the unanimism conceived by Jules Romains, from which it took its multitudinous nature and the rhythm of modern cities; dadaism, represented by Tristan Tzara, from which it incorporated play and the desacralizing thrust; and the creationism of Vicente Huidobro, which situates the poet-as-creator on a level with God.

“The stridentists changed the panorama of the forms of artistic creation and by doing so became part of postrevolutionary Mexico and its great cultural transformations. The

avant garde in Mexico, stridentism, was inevitable; it had to happen because artistic activity is not static, but changing,” said Germán List Arzubide, poet, narrator, editor and playwright, emblematic figure and sole survivor of the movement, at a 1989 ceremony in his honor in Tlaxcala.

List Arzubide was born in Puebla, Mexico, May 31, 1898. Very early he learned the link between artistic vocation (in his case, for literature) and political commitment.

In 1913, he joined the Peace and Work Battalion, formed by workers and peasants under the command of Colonel Gabriel Riojano, and was arrested while making a speech to his fellow junior high school students about why Francisco I. Madero had opposed the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz. He wrote his first poem on the wall of his cell as a provocative response to mistreatment by a guard.

In 1920 he was a soldier in President Carranza's forces and from then on his work closely followed the causes of both the underprivileged members of society and of art.

After his discharge from the army, in Puebla, List founded first the literary magazine *Vincit*, dedicated to disseminating the works of the masters of modernism. A little later, he founded the magazine *Ser* (Being), dedicated to the masters of symbolism. In 1923, after joining the stridentist movement, which embodied his ideal of rebellious, subversive art, he began to be an activist, jointly writing its second manifesto with Maples Arce. He began publishing in this vein: in 1924, his first collection of poems was *Esquina* (Corner). Thirty more works followed, including manifestos, like *El movimiento estridentista* (The Stridentist Movement) (1926); epic poems like *¡Mueran los gachupines!* (Death to the Filthy Spaniards!) (1926) and *Emiliano Zapata. Exaltación* (Emiliano Zapata. Exaltation) (1927); plays like *Tres comedias revolucionarias* (Three Revolutionary Comedies) (1931); collections of poems like *Cantos del hombre errante* (Songs of a Wanderer) (1972); and books of short stories like *El robo de la mujer de Rubens. Cuentos de viaje* (The Kidnapping of Rubens' Wife. Travel Stories) (1976).

His revolutionary ideas and opposition to all established norms that violated his sense of justice made him a hunted man, sought by police, and led him to seek asylum in the Soviet Union, only returning to Mexico at the end of the 1930s during President Lázaro Cárdenas' administration. From 1941 to

1953 he was a staff writer at *Tiempo* (Time) magazine, also giving history classes to workers and literature classes to teachers at the Federal Training Institute. From the heyday of stridentism to the present, List Arzubide, in addition to writing books and teaching, lectured about literature or history and published newspaper articles, which led him to travel throughout Mexico.

The linguistic revolution proposed and fomented by stridentism had an impact abroad (some of List Arzubide's stories were translated into English, Catalanian and French). It spurred real feedback, given the influences that nurtured stridentism, even though in Mexico the movement lasted only from 1922 to 1927. This was due to the precariousness of its publishing, the stridentists exclusion by the media—their marginalization was so extreme that they were denied entrance to the Fine Arts Institute—and the general

incomprehension of their tenets. However, stridentism was a touchstone for later generations of poets such as that of Efraín Huerta and Octavio Paz, for whom they opened up the road to a broader play in the possibilities of language. In 1983, List Arzubide was given the National Prize for Cultural Journalism.

List Arzubide died October 17, 1998, cutting short his intention of writing an autobiography and preventing him, a “time-naut,” from completing his journey through three centuries: born at the end of the nineteenth century, he lived through the entire twentieth century and contemplated the possibility of landing and “staying awhile” in the twenty-first.

A year before his death President Zedillo gave him the National Prize for Art in the fields of linguistics and literature. At the ceremony, List Arzubide said, “Being an activist in the real opposition is a very bitter experience....You are an oppositionist because of hunger or out of a sense of dignity, when you can no longer stand the abuse and oppression....There are those who show themselves up leaving inheritances of millions of dollars; the only thing I'll leave behind are my four suits.” This words would become his testament, to which the paraphrase of another idea of his could be added: the only legacy a man can leave behind to other men is his work. ■■■

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