

Luis Camnitzer at El Museo del Barrio and Carla Stellweg - New York, New York - Review of Exhibitions - Brief Article

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Amanaplanacanalpanama (a man, a plan, a canal, Panama, it reads backwards or forwards) is the palindrome that named Luis Camnitzer's exhibition at El Museo del Barrio, and it set up the work in several ways. Making semantic symmetry is a game--just the sort of clever play that, when applied to social policy, can be cruelly mad. This kind of thinking, Camnitzer suggested, made possible such colossal engineering projects as the Panama Canal, a hubristic program if ever there was one. But the palindrome, and the canal, were also linked to Camnitzer's own childhood in Uruguay. A text panel told us that as a small boy he enjoyed digging waterways at the beach--and, presumably, imagining the schemes of power and glory that most grown-ups (apart from, say, Teddy Roosevelt) check against reality.

The installation included a sketchy history of the canal, taken from a variety of sources and etched onto brass plaques that circled the room (they were inked, as if meant for printing, though not reversed as actual printing plates would be). We read of Balboa and Count de Lesseps and of Paul Gauguin's unhappy months in Panama, wielding a pickax and running afoul of the law for peeing in public. Indigenous voices were rare, since Camnitzer's tone was not polemical but ironic--he allowed the Europeans to build their illusion of a perfect (palindromic?) symmetry between colonial culture and their own. Bisecting the floor was a watery spill of resin, with Amanaplanacanalpanama written on it in gold letters. A toy canal lock at center, made of a two-sided mirror supported by Erector-set tractors, turned the reversible phrase back on itself twice. Suspended over the ends of this plastic canal were two bottles, one intact and bearing an all-too-familiar phrase: "We bought it. We paid for it. It's ours" The other, covered with tiny bricks, was broken; its anomalous statement, by a Panamanian, told of sacrifice and anger.

This tightly argued, single theme work contrasted with the less-specific allusions in Camnitzer's fall installation at Carla Stellweg. Called "Book of Walls," it was a series of small works mounted knee-high. The works were fragmentary or literally shattered: a broken drinking glass, its gelled red liquid contents standing intact (El Muro de la Incredulidad/Wall of Incredulity); a big glass shard, sandblasted with a text in Spanish about fiction, shadows and memory (El Muro de las Reescrituras/Wall of ReWritings). Other works were arrested gestures of violence or confinement. A knife thrust into the wall, several Uruguayan postage stamps sealed inside simulated ice cubes, a few dozen pencils lined up in groups of five, as if counting--all alluded to political repression and torture, longstanding topics for Camnitzer. If he has sometimes been faulted for relying too heavily on text in his urgency to analyze complicated political problems, "Book of Walls" was a reminder that the real story is always found between the lines.

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