

NEW YORK / NY

Luis Camnitzer

Alexander Gray Associates

Luis Camnitzer exhibited his most recent work, *Last Words* (2008), at Alexander Gray Associates in Chelsea from March 19 to April 26. A series of six archival digital prints of text on paper, each sixty-six inches high and forty-four inches wide, the project seemed at first glance like leaves of a book blown up to a great size and hung on the wall. Individual prints had "page numbers" from 1 to 6, in a black hue that clashed with the brown of the text above them. The work's cumulative effect mounted as one read from left to right.

The text began at a slightly lower position on the first print, as though the viewer was physically situated at the beginning of a book: "Mom have no fear. Mommy I will be home when I get there. I love you all. I just want you to know that. To my family and my mother and my three precious daughters, I love you all. I love you, all of you . . ." These fragments constituted a textual collage of Texas death-row inmates' final statements prior to execution. Using the Texas Department of Criminal Justice's web site, the artist selected and reprinted all fragments of text with the word "love" in them. Camnitzer added sentences that contributed to this lexicon of common reactions to the prospect of one's imminent demise, among them thoughts of family and friends, prayers, and philosophical reflections, i.e., "I just hope everybody has their peace. Today I get mine." References to different cultures (evident in the names of loved ones and instances of Spanish) and religions (both Jesus and Allah were named on print 3) hinted at the broad spectrum of the condemned.

The individual statements' simplicity and similarity yielded a staccato cadence. Taken as a whole, the narrative that Camnitzer pieced together amounted to a kind of collective voice, full of love and regret, for which the original objects were missing. Instead, this utterance was redirected at the viewer. The work itself was also a reference to the investigations of linguistic and representational contradictions that the artist has explored throughout his career of over forty years. On print 2, one found the remark, "When you deal with reality, real is not always what you want it to be," which could be read as a summation of Camnitzer's lasting endeavor: to infuse dry and hermetic conceptual art with



Luis Camnitzer. *Last Words*, 2008. 6 parts, Edition of 3 with 1 AP. Archival digital print on paper. 66 x 44 in. (167, 6 x 111, 7 cm.).

political reality, and vice versa. Vivisected and reassembled into an anonymous stream of language, with their authors textually and literally absent, these statements nonetheless preserved traces of individual and all too real voices. On print 6, almost at the end, one sentence read, "I have no last words." This was a tautological paradox—last words consisting of "no last words"—that recalled the artist's language-based works of the 1960s and 1970s such as *This is a Mirror: You are a Written Sentence* (1966–68). Camnitzer gave visibility and dignity to even the refusal to speak. The text concluded, "I can't think of anything else," figuring the tragedy of the death penalty as the loss of not just the subject, but language as well: the bottom half of the "page" was blank.

Last Words was paired with a work from 1978, *Sifter* (*The Mechanism for Killing a Spectator*). A brass plaque, placed on the wall across from the newer work, bore a text that described a complex mechanism for killing "dissenters," or spectators who did not respond positively to the work. "To kill the spectator," the text read, "is to become a genius," although the option was also posited to "coach rather than kill." This modest proposal for relations between artist and unappreciative viewer anticipated the artist's *Manifesto* text of 1982, in which he began by describing his identity as a "revolutionary artist," and ended with a discussion of how to eliminate one's rivals for artistic success. To read the text in *Sifter*, one had to stand on a mat that

was connected to the plaque via a metal cord that resembled a covered electrical wire, eerily suggesting that the plaque, the mat beneath it, or both were electrified and potentially deadly. Camnitzer's relentless scrutiny of language strives for the limit-situation, where left-wing artist becomes right-wing dictator, and where the words of individuals stripped of all rights are unveiled as familiar speech.

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