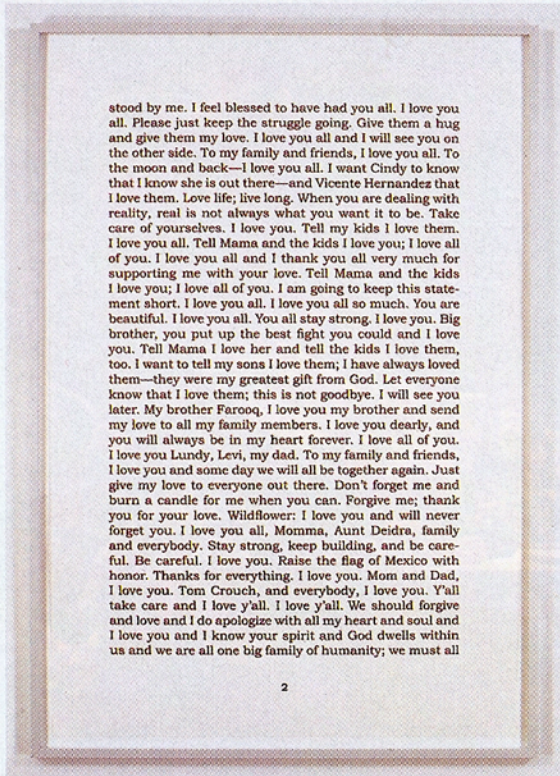


## Luis Camnitzer at Alexander Gray

This succinct, text-driven and quietly powerful exhibition included just two works, one old and one new, evidencing disparate but not dueling aspects of a pioneering Conceptualist's practice. Since the late 1960s, Luis Camnitzer's work has been driven by a desire to reveal widespread social apathy toward cruelty inflicted on individuals by various ruling classes. And in this spirit, but by indirect means, *Last Words* (2008) comprises six large works on paper (around 5½ by 4 feet apiece) that host a procession of desperate-sounding declarations, one after another: "Don't forget me"; "I love you all"; "May my love touch each one of you all's souls as I leave this body," etc., in a simple, sepia-toned serif font. The whole registers as simultaneously heartrending and redundant. Following one frame to the next, viewers are likely to be sucked into a riddle: Whose words are these? One person or many? Soldiers in Iraq or Afghanistan anticipating their imminent deaths? Text messages from people stuck in the Twin Towers just before their collapse? Or could they be detainees at Guantánamo fearing for their survival? For me, it wasn't until the third panel that the correct and comparably repugnant possibility came to mind: death row.

Camnitzer appropriated the text for *Last Words* from the Texas Department of Criminal Justice's website, selecting only last statements of inmates slated to die that include mention of "love." And indeed, there are not only desperate expressions of tenderness toward wives, mothers, sisters, fathers and brothers, but, more specifically, love for characters as diverse as "brother Farook," "Vicente Hernandez" and "Wildflower." Faith in myriad and possibly conflicting forces like "Our father Allah"; "Jesus Christ"; "the flag of Mexico"; as well as the phrase "the way you have protested and kept this nation together" eventually indicate that we're hearing from a demographically diverse mix. Certain of the ill-fated prisoners arrived at metaphysically profound assessments, like "When you're dealing with reality, real is not always what you want it to be," and, moreover, "Ironic, isn't it?"

By putting the *Last Words* on display, Camnitzer solemnly foregrounds the perversity of the government that not only condones



stood by me. I feel blessed to have had you all. I love you all. Please just keep the struggle going. Give them a hug and give them my love. I love you all and I will see you on the other side. To my family and friends, I love you all. To the moon and back—I love you all. I want Cindy to know that I know she is out there—and Vicente Hernandez that I love them. Love life; live long. When you are dealing with reality, real is not always what you want it to be. Take care of yourselves. I love you. Tell my kids I love them. I love you all. Tell Mama and the kids I love you; I love all of you. I love you all and I thank you all very much for supporting me with your love. Tell Mama and the kids I love you; I love all of you. I am going to keep this statement short. I love you all. I love you all so much. You are beautiful. I love you all. You all stay strong. I love you. Big brother, you put up the best fight you could and I love you. Tell Mama I love her and tell the kids I love them, too. I want to tell my sons I love them; I have always loved them—they were my greatest gift from God. Let everyone know that I love them; this is not goodbye. I will see you later. My brother Farooq, I love you my brother and send my love to all my family members. I love you dearly, and you will always be in my heart forever. I love all of you. I love you Lundy, Levi, my dad. To my family and friends, I love you and some day we will all be together again. Just give my love to everyone out there. Don't forget me and burn a candle for me when you can. Forgive me; thank you for your love. Wildflower: I love you and will never forget you. I love you all, Momma, Aunt Deidra, family and everybody. Stay strong, keep building, and be careful. Be careful. I love you. Raise the flag of Mexico with honor. Thanks for everything. I love you. Mom and Dad, I love you. Tom Crouch, and everybody, I love you. Y'all take care and I love y'all. I love y'all. We should forgive and love and I do apologize with all my heart and soul and I love you and I know your spirit and God dwells within us and we are all one big family of humanity; we must all

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Luis Camnitzer: *Last Words*, 2008, digital print, one of six parts, each 66 by 44 inches; at Alexander Gray.

capital punishment but makes an online, public spectacle of the final, tortured sentiments of those it plans to put to death. (During the run of this exhibition, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that Kentucky's method of execution, lethal injection, does not constitute cruel and unusual punishment, making the show especially timely.) The minimal if macabre work brought to mind the elegance of Maya Lin's Vietnam veterans memorial, which encourages meditative consideration of our shared humanity rather than showcasing the artist's special skills or worldview.

And indeed, the second piece on view here, *Sifter (The Mechanism for Killing a Spectator)*, 1978, deals drolly with the oft-vaunted (and, by some, frequently disparaged) notion of artistic genius. Resembling a crude execution device, a small, carpeted platform on the floor connects by silver electrical conduit to a wall-mounted gold plaque engraved with text explaining that the "most simple and direct" way for an artist to ensure bona-fide genius status is to simply eliminate anybody who does not concur. And, without prodding the viewer to agree or disagree with his own perspective (which is never quite revealed), Camnitzer provides space for an inevitable voice of dissent—even if at the risk of being eliminated.

—Sarah Valdez