





Roundtable: New York Graphic Workshop

Lyle Rexer in conversation with
Luis Camnitzer and Liliana Porter

The New York Graphic Workshop (1965–70) was founded in Greenwich Village by three Latin American artists—Luis Camnitzer, from Uruguay; José Guillermo Castillo, from Venezuela; and Liliana Porter, from Argentina. Their intention was to develop an alternative vision of printmaking, based on ideas of seriality and reproducibility rather than on the traditions of fine-art printing. “The concept of making an edition takes priority over working on the plate,” they wrote in their originating manifesto. The Workshop developed approaches that were conceptually innovative; they held exhibitions by mail and printed on the side of a ream of paper. They also sought to develop alternatives to the conventional marketplace mechanism of sale and distribution.

After the trio disbanded, Castillo went on to a career as a cultural administrator and gallerist. He died in 1999. Camnitzer and Porter became two of the most important artists of their generation to emerge from Latin America; their work continues to be influenced by the ideas developed in the Workshop. On the occasion of a major exhibition about the Workshop at the Blanton Museum of Art in Austin, Texas (September 28, 2008 to January 18, 2009), *artonpaper* invited Camnitzer and Porter to visit the magazine’s office for a discussion with contributing editor Lyle Rexer.

Lyle Rexer: Tell me about the first days of the Workshop, about how it came together.

Liliana Porter: It started in 1964 in a loft on West 3rd Street in the Village. I had had an opening at Van Bovenkamp Gallery and met Julian Firestone, a dentist. He said, "I love your work, I love printmaking, I just got divorced, and I have an electric press in my apartment. I am away all day and no one uses it. I want to give you the key." Well, Luis and I were about to get married, and he was a little worried about my staying there alone during the day while he was teaching in New Jersey, so we invited José Castillo, an artist from Caracas whom we knew through the Argentine artist Felipe Noé, to come and work with us. We'd work all day and when Julian showed up after work, we'd help him with his prints. After a while, we all found this a bit awkward, and Julian offered to rent us the space.

Luis Camnitzer: Over a fire station.

Opening spread: The New York Graphic Workshop [l-r: José Guillermo Castillo, Liliana Porter, Luis Camnitzer], 1965. Photo by Basil Langton. Courtesy Liliana Porter

Right: Lyle Rexer, Luis Camnitzer, and Liliana Porter at *art on paper's* office in May 2008

Below: The New York Graphic Workshop studio, circa 1965. Photo by Basil Langton. Courtesy Liliana Porter





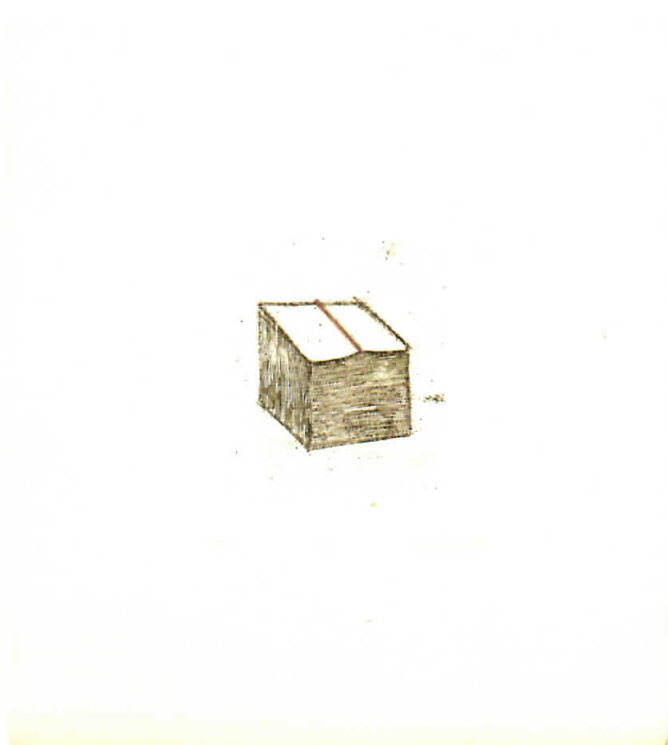
Below right: Liliana Porter, *Box*—*Serie Boludo*, etching and string (15 1/2 x 14 in.), 1970. From Liliana Porter Collection. Image courtesy Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, Texas

Liliana: It had been the studio of a printmaker, Letterio Calapai. It was all set up, and Luis, being a moralist, said, “We can’t possibly accept your paying for this.” So we worked out that we would teach students, print for other people, and whatever was missing we would make up for by giving Firestone our work.

Lyle: Right from the start, then, you set up a very ambitious program for yourself. What was the idea you three were trying to further in your work?

Liliana: It was a special moment in New York. 1965 was really when a lot of artists were coming to the city, and the center was shifting from Europe to the United States. Warhol was doing his soup cans and other works that we felt were very close to printmaking. Meanwhile we were trying to analyze why printmaking was seen as so reactionary. The imagery for art was always developed in painting and sculpture or some other place—but never in printmaking.

Luis: We met at Pratt Graphic Art Center and we were both committed to printmaking, but we had fights with some of the faculty about the mediocrity of printing. My point to them was that I was an artist using printmaking, not someone continuing the tradition of Rembrandt and the techniques of printmaking. When I used an electric saber saw to shape one of the plates, people gasped. I was supposed to use acid and etch the shape



through. Eventually I was asked to leave Pratt because I made prints that were too big.

Liliana: We said, “We are artists, not printmakers. The important thing is not the technique but whether that technique is consistent with what we want to say.”

Lyle: The manifesto you wrote in 1965 was very interesting because it is about printmaking as a medium. You wanted to be “printmakers conditioned but not destroyed by our techniques.” It’s not about politics at all, though most accounts make the Workshop seem very political.

Luis: It depends on how you define politics. We shifted the definition of printmaking from contact of a plate with pieces of paper or media to the act of making an edition. At some point I said that sending a rocket to the moon was a manifestation of edition-making, where each time you set up the conditions and let the serial process take over to get a repeatable result. That was opposed to the idea of the original, the one of a kind, and that was a political statement. It’s not the narrative content of politics we were interested in but a changed society.

Lyle: Yet as I look at the work, I detect very different currents going on in this group.

Luis: We had contradictory aims. One was to make it in the market, and the other was to create a utopian society. A symptom of that was our mail exhibits. We were not aware of Ray Johnson, although we later became neighbors and friends. We were Latin Americans, we were printmakers. We were aware of being segregated from the mainstream. One way of breaking that was making our own venue. And the cheapest, easiest venue was the mail. So we created our envelope gallery and mailed it to our audience. We were making a market and at the same time disputing ownership, disputing preciousness. Some pieces were mailed to names from telephone books, some pieces were to friends, whom we hoped would pass them on, some pieces were stuck in bathrooms and elevators. It was very chaotic.

Opposite: Luis Camnitzer and Liliana Porter, poster, offset print (21 x 15 in.), 1966. From the Liliana Porter Collection. Courtesy Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, Texas

Above right: Jorge de la Vega, from the triptych *Try, Try Again*, aquatint and etching (11 1/2 x 12 3/4 in.), 1967. From the Liliana Porter Collection. Courtesy Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, Texas

Lyle: It also disputed the notion of a gallery that has walls and that controls an audience. Is that what was behind the FANDSO [Free Assemblage Nonfunctional Disposable Serial Object]?

Luis: No, we talked amongst ourselves. What were the conditions we wanted to accomplish? We wanted to create an object that fulfills such and such needs. So we worked with words and reshuffled some things to get the idea of the FANDSO. Above all, it had to be serial, and serial for us meant both making a formal series as well as an editioned series so that neither form nor object were unique.



Lyle: Who were you printing for during that period?

Luis: Friends like Leon Polk Smith, José Luis Cuevas, and the op artist Francis Celentano. With Celentano, we used masking tape as an etching resist to achieve hard edges. More professionally, artists of the Bonino Gallery, like Marcelo Bonevardi and Ronald Mallory. And then Dalí. His whole thing of signing empty sheets of paper started with us.

Liliana: Luis had met Dalí when we were at Pratt, and at one point Dalí wanted help for a project, but nobody in the shop understood him. So they called Luis in to translate.

Luis: We became sort of friends. Mostly he wanted me to translate scientific material for him, but one day he called and asked me to make four plates and editions for a publisher. So we did the plates and proofs, but there was a problem. Dalí was leaving in a

couple of days for Europe and there was no time to print and sign the editions, so they would have to be printed by someone else in Europe.

Liliana: It was a shock. It represented a lot of money for us. We were thinking of using it to buy our own press.

Luis: Out of desperation, Liliana had a brilliant idea: Why doesn't he sign the paper first? Of course the publisher said, "Are you nuts? It's like signing blank checks." So I called Dalí and he said, "Sure."

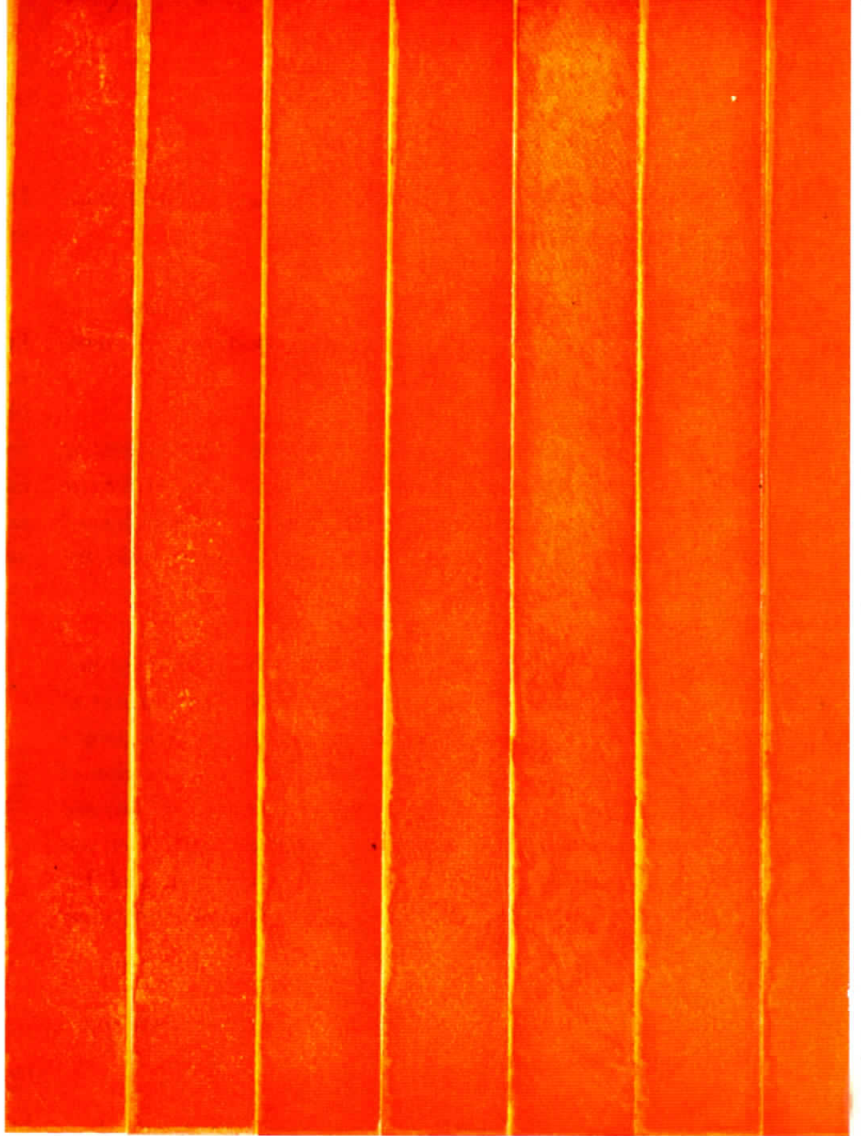
Liliana: We made a template for placing the signature, but very soon Dalí threw it away and signed freely. Some of the etchings ended with the signature over the image. This idea of signing blank papers was then picked up by his secretary and generated a huge scandal later on.

Luis: That is how we, as peripheral artists, entered mainstream art.

Lyle: Very Borgesian and a great joke, but it leads me back to the question of how you reconcile the mainstream demand for a commercial product with the ideals of the FANDSO.

Luis: I don't think you really can except by providing food for analysis and trying for subversion. But the trap is always there. If you, for whatever reason, do a yellow painting and you don't know exactly why you are doing it, and you happen to sell it, when you make the next yellow painting you don't really know whether you are continuing your research or doing it for mercenary reasons. It's that "not knowing" that is corruptive. Speculating on this, we decided to create a printmaker who would be completely mercenary. His name was Trepadori, which means a climber, an opportunist. He was Latin American and we invented a full bio: he originally had been a concert pianist, he had a car accident in which his parents died, had lost the use of his legs, and couldn't play anymore. After the accident, he studied printmaking by mail with the Atelier of Johnny Friedlander, and his wheelchair had a special brake so that he could turn the handles of the press without losing his balance.

Liliana: We wanted Trepadori to be very successful, to win prizes, and then we would write a book. The last chapter would be about the mediocrity that printmaking generates and to denounce prizes by having him get one. To prove it we did this banal print, submitted it to the Society of American Graphic Artists, and got accepted.



Luis: No, he did not.

Liliana: Oh, no? I really thought he got accepted. Anyway, when we went to a publisher with Trepadori's prints, he wanted to meet him. [Laughing] We said, "Sorry, he lives in Portugal now." The publisher said, "I am going to Portugal, you have to give me his address." Now what do we do? The guy who was actually making the prints, named Gaston, jumped right in: "No, no, no, he has no legs!" and he was going like that [makes a chopping gesture]. He didn't speak English very well, so he had to make gestures. That was enough to deter the publisher. In any case, Trepadori did well enough in the market to become a source of support for several artist friends.

Lyle: Tell me about the different strengths the three of you brought to the Workshop.

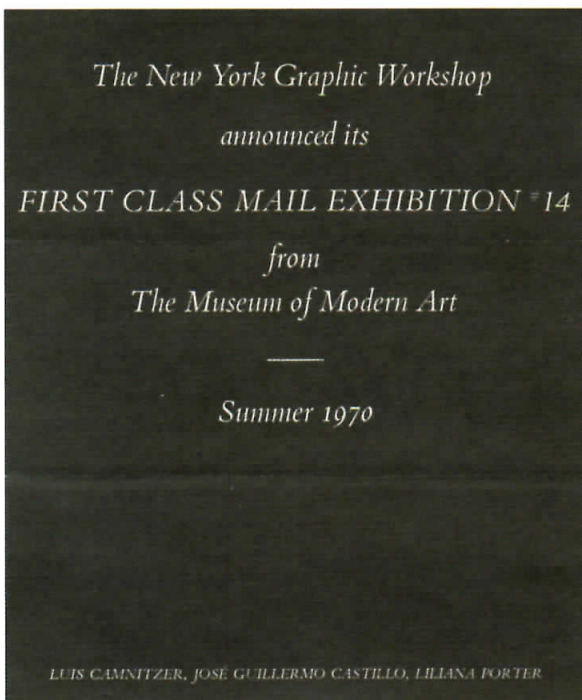
Luis: José would call me "Monsignor." That tells you his opinion of me as the preacher in the group. He was the strategist. He was very cynical, in a good sense. He had a foot in both worlds: the artist and the buying class.

Left: Max Neuhaus, *Untitled*, aquatint and etching (23 3/4 x 22 in.), 1968. From the Luis Camnitzer Collection. Courtesy Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, Texas

Right: A museum visitor participates in the New York Graphic Workshop's *First Class Mail Exhibition #14*, which they created as part of the Museum of Modern Art's 1970 "Information" show

Below: Luis Camnitzer, José Guillermo Castillo, and Liliana Porter, exhibition announcement, "First Class Mail" (8 1/2 x 11 in.), 1970. From the Luis Camnitzer Collection. Courtesy Blanton Museum of Art, Austin

Page 58: Juan Trepadori, *Untitled*, aquatint and photo-etching (24 x 17 in.), undated. Luis Camnitzer Collection



Liliana: He went on to become a gallery director in Caracas.

Luis: He had contacts. He was head of the literature program at the Center for Inter-American Relations [now the Americas Society].

Liliana: He's the one who started the boom of Latin American literature in the U.S. by promoting García Márquez and Vargas Llosa. He had all of these ideas and would always say about every situation, "Don't worry. No te preocupes."

Luis: Liliana was the only one interested in poetry. That ingredient was really important so that our work didn't end up being a dry illustration of a program.

Liliana: For instance, José had one work that was a piece of paper with dotted lines that needed to be folded in a certain way, more like a formal solution, no? Meanwhile, I was doing shadows without objects, say the shadow of two olives. I like the idea of this very basic art. I was attracted to the concept of reversing

time: first the shadow and then the object. I was creating absences.

Luis: I was interested in creating situations in the mind of the viewer. They were not declarations of politics, but they tried to elicit a discovery of politics. For a mail exhibit I had in Argentina during the dictatorship of Onganía, I had cards sent out asking to have them cut out in the shape of a swastika and then chromed. It wasn't saying, hey, you are living in a totalitarian state that is screwing you, but in a playful way it had the viewer activate that idea himself. And that's something I still do today.

Anyway, one thing Liliana and I have in common is this seeking of dumbness in our art, except we use the word *boludo*. It's a non-translatable word.

Liliana: Argentinean and Uruguayan. Nobody else uses it.

Luis: The closest translation is "dumbass." It's making art that acts like a black hole. Instead of emitting information, it just sits there and absorbs information from the viewer, and therefore reverses roles. The viewer is put in a creative spot instead of a consuming spot. That's a political reversal.

Lyle: Did you ever feel in those years that there was creative or political tension among you?

Luis and Liliana: No.

Luis: If anything, it was a moment when we saw that we could work as a team. I think we cross-pollinated.

Liliana: Not only that, but we used to invent works for one another. I would say, "Hey Luis, I have a great idea for you." You could think in the other person's terms.

Luis: I think Liliana was into politics more with her heart than with her head. And I probably was more radical in the literal sense. We both saw minimalism as a kind of corporatist art, and Pop as a vernacular aesthetic expression. Neither were for us. My kind of conceptualism was reactive, a reaction to what I called logotype sculptures. We were always trying to be modest in our presentations and not flashy. So a wrinkled paper, debris, was one subject. How much more peripheral can you get than wrinkled paper meant to be thrown away?

Luis: We were closer to arte povera. And we engaged in savage criticism of our own work.

Liliana: You could really be truthful because you knew it was not mean. José was very intelligent in criticizing. He was also very pragmatic, he would say things like, "The paper should be two centimeters larger here, because if you do this. . . ." Very logical.

Lyle: Outside dates for the Workshop are 1965 and 1970. Only five years. How did it come apart?

Luis: Several things happened. The main thing was, José began working at the Center for Inter-American Relations, and we were very active in a group that organized a boycott of the center for its role in the political repression of Latin America. I am still boycotting it, in fact. Although he was totally on our side in terms of his thinking and we stayed friends, it became awkward. The other event was that Paula Cooper invited me to join her gallery and in a half-assed way invited Liliana, too, but did not invite José. I wanted the group to be a unit, but José said, "No, that's silly. It's time that we do it another way." He stopped making art, but he was still very useful in his criticism of what we were doing.

Lyle: Do you see a thread leading from the work you are making now back to the Workshop?

Liliana: Only later did I take up photography, although I had done photo silkscreen, which allowed me to print on the wall. So almost everything I did, works on canvas, on paper, wall installations, included a form of printmaking. Over time I began to be more aware of what I was doing, especially with regard to issues of representation.

Luis: During those years I established a kind of repertoire from which I can draw. But it's not the commitment to print that's the repertoire. I totally switched to the idea of defining the problem I was going to solve and solving it the best way I could in whatever form. Now I do prints only when the problem requires it and not for the sake of doing prints or to discover, "What does a print mean?" which was what we did before. If you see a consistency in my work, it may be a sign of my limitations as an artist and not of my strengths.