

Art Review:

[El Museo del Barrio](#), New York

2 February – 29 May

By Joshua Mack

As a practitioner, curator and teacher, the German-born Uruguayan artist Luis Camnitzer (he's resided in the US since the 1960s for political and personal reasons) has been essential in expanding the parameters of conceptual art beyond the narrow, New York-based understanding of 'the idea' as the ultimate and historically ineluctable dematerialisation of the art object. He was, for instance, a co-organiser of *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origins, 1950s–1980s* at the Queens Museum of Art in 1999, a show which defined conceptual practice through its far-flung actualisations. The current survey of his own work at El Museo, organised by and drawn from the Zurich-based Daros Latinamerica Collection, indicates that he understands art as at once an intellectual, poetic and political act, reflecting, in part, the importance of perception and viewer participation in much innovative postwar Latin American art.

Even the earliest works on view, for example a 1966–8 vacuum-formed plastic panel reading 'This is a mirror. You are a written sentence', not only present idea as art and text as medium, but also create a tension between the literal, the logical and the poetically imaginable. It's the slippage of meaning at the juncture where the viewer engages with the work which is Camnitzer's focus. A parallel concern with economic disjunctions underlies the biting critique of pieces like *Signature by the Slice* (1971/2007), in which shaped slips of paper form a loaf, suggesting that the market's demand for originality and uniqueness cannibalises artists.

While issues of value and exchange are deeply embedded in much of the work, what underlies it is a realisation that ideas have significant, even concrete consequences, such as the effect of the market on artists' lives, or the violence practised by rightwing regimes during the 1970s in Latin America – another subject critical to the artist's oeuvre. Thus a tension of ethical import exists between the immateriality of a concept and how it is interpreted. Its crux is the point at which viewer engages work, a place at which meaning becomes ambiguous and the consumer a partner in its interpretation.

The subtlety of this understanding, and the artist's belief that one should question received wisdom, is mirrored by his deft exposure of the cant behind popular myths. *Twin Towers* (2002), composed of two cards, a nine and a jack standing upright, suggests with stunning brevity and effectiveness that the imperial presumption of calling a building the World Trade Center, and the political order built upon its destruction, are part of a single cycle of hubris and nemesis. Too much of the work on view, however, hews to a comfortable progressive obviousness. *Compass* (2003), in which 'West' is altered to read 'Best', or *El Viaje (The Journey)* (1991), in which three blades, each sporting two round Christmas ornaments, are inscribed with the names of Columbus's ships, superficially revisit old tropes and suggest that Camnitzer has not always questioned his own assumptions as deeply as his art suggests viewers interrogate theirs.