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Luis Camnitzer, *Objetos arbitrarios y sus títulos* (Arbitrary Objects and Their Titles), 1979/2010, found objects, paper. Installation view, El Museo del Barrio, New York, 2011. Photo: Jason Mandella.

the door

the doubt

the message

the hole

the mirror

the adulation

the trap

the ladder



the view

the idea

the name

the hunt

the duty

and

the hope

the escape

the origin

the motive

the construction

the insult

the cloud

Luis Camnitzer

MUSEO DEL BARRIO, NEW YORK
Rachel Haidu

PROGRESSIVE INSTITUTIONS such as New York's Museo del Barrio can epitomize the crisis of confidence in contemporary art. Their programming, often extremely well conceived and executed, tends to delineate such a radically democratizing role for art and its institutions that the art on display can sometimes appear merely illustrative or even redundant. Such a threat hangs over the Museo's current retrospective of the work of Luis Camnitzer, which is simultaneously excellent and frustrating. If the complexity of Camnitzer's work guards against art's instrumentalization (by radical politics or any other framework), that same complexity also points to the ways in which we think of modernism and politics together these days—without acknowledging the unresolved issues that plague our definitions of both terms. Indeed, these repressions haunt work that, like Camnitzer's, operates as if a politicized visual modernism were still viable.

Curated by Hans-Michael Herzog and Katrin Steffen, the exhibition argues convincingly for Camnitzer's inclusion in a global community of Conceptual artists—a community that the artist himself, as curator of the extremely influential 1999 Queens Museum of Art exhibition "Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s," has persuasively broadened. In doing so, however, the curators elide the activist dimension of his practice—tied to his work as critic, curator, and pedagogue. Except for

an initial wall text alerting us to his "pivotal roles" in the New York Graphic Workshop (which he founded with José Guillermo Castillo and Liliana Porter) and the Museo Latinoamericano and Movimiento por la Independencia Cultural de América, the retrospective—through its selection and lack of annotation—fails to situate Camnitzer's witty, literate, thoughtful work in relation to his critique of colonialism's legacy and role within the activist wing of New York's Latin American artistic diaspora. The Museo's mandate to serve a particular community and preserve its history is not the only issue at stake: Also tied up in this elided history is the ever-fraught relation between the contemporary moment and earlier activist moments, especially that of the late 1960s in which the Museo was born. The retrospective instead unfolds as an echt modernist installation of objects that, as much as they complicate Conceptualism's most utopian claims, stubbornly reiterate the limits of its politics. It is as if the Museo were unwittingly illustrating the artist's own gimlet-eyed view of artistic retrospectives: "Nobel Prizes and retrospectives are more indicative of a kind of triumphal competitiveness than of good education."

With this notion of *good education*, Camnitzer had in mind something that sounds straightforward at first: "Good education," he wrote in the 2008 treatise "Art and Literacy," "exists to develop the ability to express and communicate." But this definition is more or less done away with over the course of Camnitzer's essay, in favor of more radical ideas about illiteracy, art, and equality, which are in turn used to reinvent his initial premises. He moves away from the idea of education as didactic communication, instead asserting that the teacher-student relationship can model equality, rather than authority, for the rest of society. Indeed, his proposal to "activate translation processes as a primary tool for entering new codes" might sound suspiciously like the words of art-world favorite Jacques Rancière circa 1991. But it is also a way of thinking through radical models of pedagogy previously posed by the likes of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire in his seminal *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, thus linking education to global politics, postcolonial identity, and the potential for an ethics within art. All the same, for

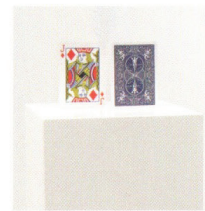
Camnitzer to declare that he was able to "reintroduce politics into [his] work . . . by means of a controlled ambiguity" is for this very lucid proponent of political art to return to a seemingly obsolete set of modernist principles. Indeed, his art sometimes settles into simply iterating the ambiguity and materiality of language, rather than enabling viewers to assume a position of agency as his dedication to radical pedagogy might suggest. If his work as teacher, critic, and curator better fulfill such ambitions (as in the groundbreaking "Global Conceptualism"), the Museo's failure to illuminate such achievements robs his art of a truly critical frame.

Steffen and Herzog's installation progresses from didactics (with works that review the relation between price, measurement, and signature, for example) through

Piercing his works' linguistic statements, seeping out from its emphatic reflexivity about exhibition design, Camnitzer's *wit* runs throughout the show.

the analysis of language (with the Magrittean works *Quemadura de primer, segundo y tercer grado* [First-, Second-, and Third-Degree Burn], 1970; *Diccionario 1 and 3* [Dictionary 1 and 3], 1969–70; and *Horizonte* [Horizon], 1968) to the seeming split between a handful of works with an explicitly political focus (such as *El viaje* [The Journey], 1991) and the crucial *Objetos arbitrarios y sus títulos* (Arbitrary Objects and Their Titles), 1979, in which the artist assigns "random" names to tiny pieces of debris pinned to the wall. A relatively recent work plays a pivotal role near the entrance, as viewers walk around it in order to continue into the exhibition: *Selbstbedienung*, 1996/2010, whose title is translated here as "Autoservicio" or "Self-Service," consists of six white plinths supporting stacks of paper with statements in Spanish such as *ADQUISICIÓN ES CULTURA* (acquisition is culture) and *UNA FIRMA ES ACCIÓN, DOS FIRMAS SON TRANSACCIÓN* (one signature is action, two signatures are transaction). On top of a seventh plinth is a rubber stamp bearing

This page, from left: Luis Camnitzer, *Quemadura de primer, segundo y tercer grado* (First-, Second-, and Third-Degree Burn), 1970, stenciled burn on paper, three sheets, each 30 3/4 x 27 3/4". Luis Camnitzer, *Pintura bajo hipnosis* (Painting Under Hypnosis), 1980, photographs, text, approx. 44 1/2 x 42 1/2". Luis Camnitzer, *Torres gemelas* (Twin Towers), 2002, playing cards, each 3 1/2 x 2 1/2". Opposite page, from left: Luis Camnitzer, *Firma por tajadas* (Signature by the Slice), 1971/2007, laser-cut paper, approx. 3 x 23 3/4 x 5 1/2". Luis Camnitzer, *La forma generando el contenido* (The Form Generating the Content), 1973–77, broken glass, engraved brass plaque, glass, wood, 7 1/4 x 10 x 2". Luis Camnitzer, *Selbstbedienung* (Self-Service), 1996/2010, photocopies, rubber stamp, ink pad, wooden bases, dimensions variable.



Camnitzer's signature, along with a stamp pad and a slot for dropping in quarters—an invitation to pay that reminds us of art's market value while depleting it of its aesthetic value, revisiting two of Anglo-American Conceptualism's most exhausted tenets. It is difficult not to think of many similar moments in which Conceptual art was either invented or critiqued: the plinths of Mel Bochner's 1966 *Working Drawings and Other Visible Things on Paper Not Necessarily Meant to Be Viewed as Art*; Bruce Nauman's 1967 *My Last Name Exaggerated 14 Times Vertically*; the stacks of a black-and-white photograph of an ocean on giveaway paper in Felix Gonzalez-Torres's 1991 *Untitled*.

But Camnitzer's approach undercuts such simplistic surface analogies: It carries with it a subtle kind of threat. Piercing his works' straightforward linguistic statements, seeping out from its emphatically bare-knuckled reflexivity about exhibition design, and undercutting the mechanism of the giveaway in *Selbstbedienung*, Camnitzer's wit runs throughout the show, giving the work a sense of weightlessness and airiness that frees it from its own didacticism. With bons mots like "acquisition is culture," for example, we sense that we are lucky to be in the presence of such a graceful, droll intelligence; we accept, almost without alternative, the sense of good fortune that wit spreads to its audiences. Here, however, wit suggests an elevated position for its speaker—garlanded by the graceful nature of his rhetoric—and a rather lesser one for the audience. Wit is in that sense the most elitist gesture or structure within what Camnitzer generalizes as "communication." That it should be everywhere in his work makes the work's politics all the more obscure.

Take, for example, *Firma por tajadas* (Signature by the Slice), 1971/2007, in which ink on laser-cut paper creates a loaf of infinitely thin bread slices, each bearing the artist's signature, constituting an opaque one-liner. Or the subtle, funny text in *Pintura bajo hipnosis* (Painting Under Hypnosis), 1980, a script for the hypnotist who tries to extract a painting from the artist (who in turn must imagine himself as canvas, pigment, brush, etc.), which is perfectly literary, recalling both John Barth and the dated combination of "metafiction" with hallucinatory or out-of-body sequences that has mostly aged out of fiction altogether. In a series of works from the 1970s, aphoristic statements are

etched into brass plates at the bottom of wall-mounted wooden boxes, within each of which is a small two- or three-dimensional "illustration" or "enactment" of the phrase. Rehearsing a Magrittean fascination with the interplay between word and image and a Cornelian reliance on the box form, these works uncover a Surrealist tendency underpinning some (especially language-based) Conceptual art. That tendency—playing on ways in which language becomes "plastic," per Freud, and thereby undercuts its communicative dimension—further complicates the claims to "communication" that Camnitzer seems eager to promote. It also highlights Conceptualism's often repressed prehistory: those earlier moments when language was positioned as a resolutely visual material, and when the image—especially as schema, diagram, or figure—was freed to enter a "conceptual," ideational realm. In the work of avant-garde artists such as Magritte and John Heartfield, the interplay between pictures and words gave rise to certain critical possibilities for wit, but whether progressive political capital remains to be spent in this way is highly unclear: The few overtly political works exhibited here (for example, *Torres gemelas* [Twin Towers], 2002, in which a nine of diamonds and a jack, or "eleven," of diamonds stand bravely vertical atop a white plinth) rely on a fully symbolic register. Like the buildings they represent, Camnitzer's playing cards invite notions of chance, luck, and the scoundrel, only to leave us with the suggestive, sentimentalizing properties of metaphor. Here, the preciousness and fragility of the sculpture disguises the towers' role as a pinnacle of capital's architectural expression.

Given his Magrittean tendencies, it is not surprising to learn that foremost among Camnitzer's model pedagogical theorists is one Simón Rodríguez, the nineteenth-century Venezuelan writer famous for having tutored Simón Bolívar. For Camnitzer, Rodríguez's legacy lies in the relation between his pedagogical ambitions and the visual system he invented for books, in which he altered the spacing between words as well as their fonts. To set up typographic parallels between the first and second phrases of an aphorism, as Rodríguez did (as in one example, which loosely translates as: TO DEAL WITH THINGS *is the first part of education* and TO DEAL WITH THOSE WHO HAVE THEM *is the second*), is

indeed to set up the stakes of communication as if it could be "clear." By contrast, Camnitzer's use of similarly witty phrases and image-text "puns"—from *Selbstbedienung*'s "acquisition is culture" to the literally burned-in letters of *First-, Second-, and Third-Degree Burn*—introduces the communicative dimension of language while undercutting, counteracting, and ruining it at the same time. In such works, Camnitzer begs us to consider what it means to communicate at all. Indeed, what does it mean when Camnitzer uses the figural qualities available to the page—in works that pay stunning homage to the qualities of paper, of cut edges, of printed and penciled blacks—in order to give a force to words other than what they can marshal, rather weakly, on their own? What does it mean to enforce authority by underlining the singularity not only of a voice but of a wit? Finally, and perhaps most disturbingly, what does it mean to convert into political capital that authoritative wit, that controlled ambiguity of meaning that is so at odds with the emphasis on egalitarianism found in Camnitzer's rhetoric about pedagogy? The exhibition's failure to truly exert that rhetorical framework (in favor of confirming a victorious visual modernism) perhaps denies the artwork its most closely held ambitions.

Conceptual art's major critics—Marcel Broodthaers, Gonzalez-Torres, and Nauman among them—wrestled with the banality and romanticism that Conceptualism could lapse into. They made works that are about being perpetually consigned to an abyss, to the failures of modernism. The show at the Museo instead dangles us over that abyss, and we are left struggling on our own to make meaning of the aporias that result. Which is too bad, since Camnitzer's critical and curatorial practice—including exhibitions that problematize the very structures that underpin the artistic retrospective—goes a long way toward mitigating such confusion and its ideological or political effects. □

"Luis Camnitzer" travels to the Museo de Arte Zapopan, Mexico, June 27–Sept. 4; Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, Vancouver, Canada, Sept. 30–Dec. 4; Museo de Arte Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Bogotá, Feb.–May 2012; Museo de Arte Moderno de Medellín, Colombia, June–Aug. 2012.

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