

## Q&A: Luis Camnitzer's oeuvre, violence, Chile and the art market

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**The Santiago Times speaks to the German-Uruguayan artist whose unofficial retrospective is currently hanging in two major galleries in the Chilean capital.**

Chile may have had one of the most profound influences of any country on the renowned German-born, Uruguay-raised and New York-based artist Luis Camnitzer: as a young teen, he found God then lost faith in the space of one hydroplane flight to the country.



*'Landscape as an Attitude,' by Luis Camnitzer.*

Now Camnitzer is back in Santiago with retrospectives of his prolific career at MAC Quinta Normal and the Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos hanging until Aug. 25.

Camnitzer's subversive and complex works range between surreal photography to print making and conceptual art.

In [his oeuvre](#) we constantly find the philosophical and the political converging, though his works are far from the tedious hectoring of an ideologue. Instead, it is often characterized just as much by humor as it is by an alluring sense of ambiguity.

In the following interview, Camnitzer discusses his relationship with Chile and Latin American art in general. He was born in Germany but came to South America when his family fled World War II. He was raised in Uruguay and now lives and works in New York, though he returns to the subject of Latin America and its troubled history constantly in his art and writing. Camnitzer has also worked as a teacher and has written widely on the importance of arts education in the cultivation of critical thinking.

**What is your relationship to Chile? When did you first come here and how has the country changed?**

Well, the first time I came to Chile I was 13 or 14 years old. It was the first time my parents could afford a trip and my father decided to take me to Chile.

It is a remarkable memory because we went all the way south to the Elephants Strait and Puyehue. But it marked me for other reasons. It was the first time I was on a plane, a hydroplane from Montevideo to Buenos Aires. I was scared shitless and thought this was a good moment to believe in God. Then I thought that believing in God out of fear was not a good thing. The next thought was that if I ever believed in God it probably would be out of some kind of fear as well and that wouldn't be a good thing either. So, I concluded, I better leave that God stuff away from my circle of interests. In other words, the trip to Chile marked me for life.

Chile probably changed a lot since then, but so did I and it is difficult to make a judgment on this. I was back in

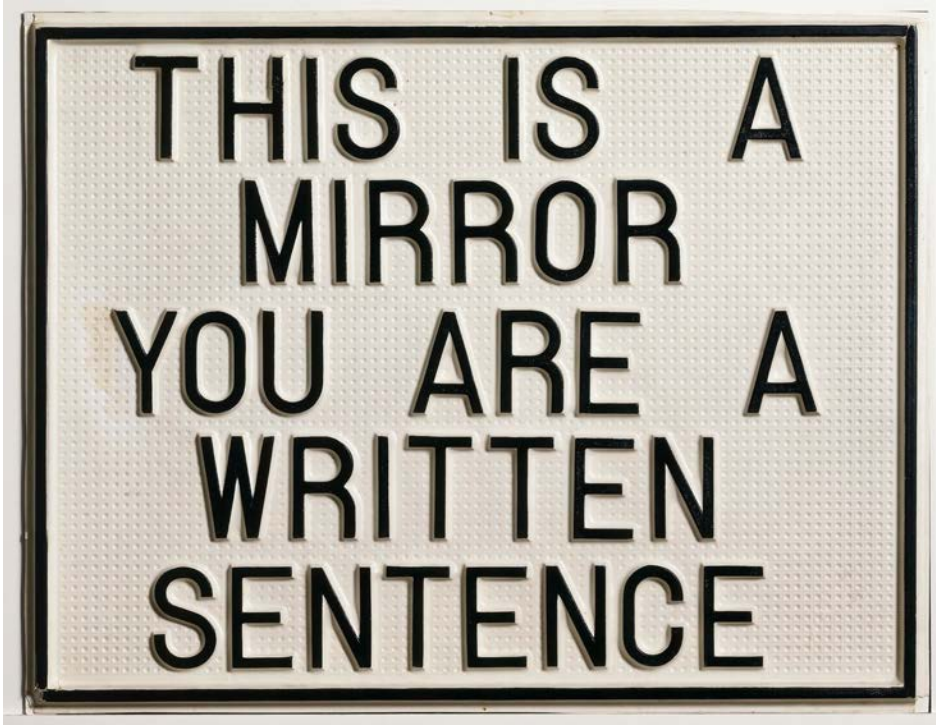
1969 for an installation in the Museo de Bellas Artes to which Nemesio Antúnez had invited me. The show was pretty much a flop and thirty-seven-years later Cecilia Brunson decided to reconstruct it in the Galería Metropolitana. It fared better then. And now this, but each time I'm busy and focused on work, don't have a tourist mind and can only say that I like it. This time, actually, I like it more.

**You are an artist, writer and teacher — how do these professions inform your approach to the practicing of your art?**

I consider all these activities as one and the same, just taking different formats. There are things better communicated through talking, others through writing and finally some by creating some visual (or other kind of) stimulus. I don't like the concept of me wearing many hats, having multiple personalities, or operating in many different and distinct disciplines. I'm one person living in one universe, and communicating with one humanity respecting localities. The challenge is how to keep all those things together, not how to separate them.

**What can the experiencing of art as a form of education offer us in a culture that puts more and more emphasis on art being a commodity?**

It can help us to filter data and make boundless connections, something much more important than accumulating data that is destined to be obsolete shortly after we acquired it. Art is not about producing objects for commerce. Art is about speculating, imagining and communication. In that sense it is one of the foundation blocks of good education processes.



*'This is a Mirror You Are a Sentence,' by Luis Camnitzer.*

Unfortunately the prevalent concept of education being a training tool put art into the disciplinary ghetto of production. It is now a quasi synonym of craft, a way of presenting and finishing things for sale. One forgets that while science is limited by logic and the notions of cause and effect, art not only encompasses science but also includes illogical connections and the subversion of conventional knowledge. It's the ultimate tool for critical thinking.

**In a recent interview you made a distinction between a North American form of conceptualism as one that is a 'formal process of refinement' and a Latin American one that is more immediate socially and politically, could you elaborate on this?**

Yes. In the hegemonic process, the development of dematerialization was used to come closer to an elusive essence of art. It was (in most cases) a spiritual or philosophical search defined within the parameters that seemed to belong to art. In Latin America and other cultures on the periphery, this use of less material based art was informed by the urgency and expediency of communication within a political crisis.

The results sometimes seemed to overlap, but the needs that were satisfied were quite different. In order to fully understand a work of art it is important to include the context in which the piece was created and consider what problems it attempted to solve. Just looking at the skin of the object with the purpose of fitting everything into a formalist and central history of art distorts or negates the understanding of cultures.

**What do you see as the artist's responsibility to and relationship with violence?**

The question is like asking me about what's the responsibility in relation to crime, or to cheating, or whatever. My last lecture during my stay in Santiago, in the Museo de la Memoria, was on art and dishonor. The reason was that I believe that violence is a punctual affair that is perceived as a product where somebody is the perpetrator or producer and somebody else is the receiver or consumer. Put in terms of power it is the relation of somebody who abuses the power he or she (or they) have, and somebody who doesn't have it and therefore is abused.

The whole process is one of reification, of making both participants things, and of dishonoring them both. So, answering your question, I see the function of the artist as helping to equalize the distribution of power by empowering people. Dishonoring should be fought, and violence as one of its tools and forms should be fought as well.

**How do you think immigration and exile has shaped Latin American artists' relationship to the US-based art market?**

There probably was a change that took place independently from immigration and exile and the reasons are more complex, at least in my personal view. There is a lucky confluence of factors. The economic situation in Latin America improved for the richer classes and they started to pay more attention to local art. Since there always is this notion that local art is only worth it if it is validated in the power centers, these collectors preferred to buy art in international auctions. That in turn whetted the taste of the international market and helped create a self-nourishing circle that in turn called for the attention of non-Latin American collectors. Coupled with a decline of artistic innovation and leadership in other countries, the room for Latin American art increased a lot.

To that one should add that Bush the Second distracted the U.S. from Latin America by concentrating his attention on Iraq and Afghanistan, this gave Latin America a previously unheard of space for economic development and independence. And finally, big collections with an explicit policy of giving big exposure to Latin American art, like Daros and the Patty Cisneros collections, helped a lot to put us on the map.

**How did this exhibition in Santiago come into being? What is the significance of involving both MAC and the Museum of Memory and Human Rights?**

For several years there were initiatives for shows of my work in Chile and somehow they always failed for different reasons. When MAC approached me again it coincided with the circulation of the show organized by Daros with the works they have in their collection.

Therefore it seemed an obvious step to put MAC in the itinerary. Once that was in the works, the Museo de la Memoria y Derechos Humanos became interested in making an exhibit, so I suggested to coordinate both shows. It was serendipitous because, for whatever it may matter, both exhibits together give a much better perspective on my work than either one does separately.

For a while these shows in Santiago have become the ending stop of a long tour of the Daros exhibition and I feel like we are exiting the trip with a big bang, one much bigger than I would ever have imagined or even desired.

*Luis Camnitzer's work is on show at MAC Quinta Normal and The Museum of Memory and Human Rights until August 25.*

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