

HYPERALLERGIC

ART

Luis Camnitzer's Critique of Power Is as Relevant as Ever

Camnitzer's retrospective at the Museo Reina Sofía surveys his ironic, bluntly critical work since the 1960s.

PalomaCheca-Gismero November 11, 2018



Luis Camnitzer, "Leftovers" (1970) (all images courtesy Reina Sofía Museum, Madrid)

MADRID — At the Museo Reina Sofía, the artist Luis Camnitzer has piled up a grid of 80 blocks, approximately 12 by 12 inches each, and wrapped them in brown gauze. Imprinted with the word “LEFTOVER,” followed by a Roman number, each block appears to have been shot, dripping fake, plastic blood on the museum’s floor. The piece, “Leftovers” (1970), is an

homage to those of Camnitzer’s generation who died in the hands of the Uruguayan repressive state.

“Leftovers” launches Camnitzer’s commentary — sometimes ironic, sometimes bluntly transparent — on state violence. For nearly 60 years, Camnitzer has made apparent the ways in which capitalist imperialism asserts control over our bodies, psyches, loves, and deaths.

Hospice of Failed Utopias, the title of Camnitzer's retrospective at the Reina Sofía, features 100 of his works produced since the 1960s. Curated by Octavio Zaya, this effort historicizes Camnitzer's critique of power in the wake of today's rise of authoritarianism across the planet. It is a solid homage to Camnitzer's lifelong practice, especially urgent today as new forms of state violence lobby to become the new normal.

The term 'hospice' alludes to the history of the Reina Sofía museum and its present role in Madrid's urban imagination. For four centuries, the building was a hospice and hospital — urban legend depicts the museum as a haunted space where, at night, security guards run into the ghosts of nuns. Both Camnitzer and Zaya wanted to reference the lingering presence of the imperial past in the museum, whose current curatorial program focuses mostly on bringing Latin American avant-garde art to Madrid.

The allusion to utopias refers to the political origins of Latin American conceptualism: a Cold War materialization of the centuries-long dream of pan-American unity, anti-imperialist resistance, and the right to self-determination. These ideals, although partly realized with the Non-Aligned Movement and the Cuban Revolution, succumbed to the rise of US-sponsored right-wing military regimes in the continent from the 1960s through the '80s. Subversion, for Camnitzer, then meant "to create a perceptual distance from the status quo, one that prompts reevaluation and elicits to make changes." Conceptual art allowed for a form of temporal emancipation.

Uruguayan Torture Series (1983–1984) is a direct reference to military authoritarianism in Latin America. Fifteen color prints on white paper, with handwritten sentences, break the cold abstraction of most conceptual images by evoking the lived experience of torture. The phrase *"They worked through the night"* accompanies the image of a broken light bulb. *"He practiced every day"* subtitles a photo of a person's bloody hand, nailed to the wall through its fingernails. *"The tool pleased him"* shows pliers dirty with human hair. *"He feared thirst"* accompanies a glass full of water.



Luis Camnitzer, "Classroom" (2005)

In our interview, Camnitzer said “the ideal audience for my work are those who lived and fought during the Uruguayan military dictatorship,” which ran from 1973 to 1985. Although many of these people no longer live, they are the only ones who experienced the physical and psychological violence that his work

comments on. But his work also appeals to a broader public and falls under what some art historians label “global conceptualism.” Since the 1990s especially, Camnitzer has been interested in engaging more democratically with audiences through dialogical and pedagogical work.

In his catalogue essay, “The Museum is a School,” Camnitzer describes the museum as a space where encounters with artworks should provoke educational moments. Education for Camnitzer does not mean learning the artistic canon of the dominant culture, but embracing the art institution as a space where conversations about our roles as audiences, wholesome humans, and our relationships to heritage and culture should take place. In this sense, Camnitzer echoes the critical pedagogies of Paulo Freire and Simón Rodríguez. At the exhibition, there is one big gallery hosting the Escuela Perturbable, a program of critical pedagogy led by artists, educators, and others through March 2019.



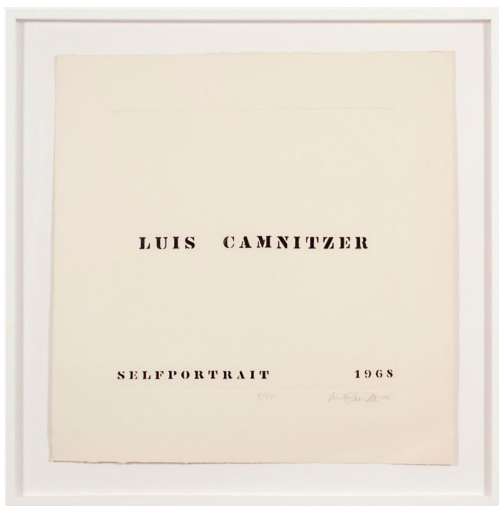
Luis Camnitzer, "Art History Lesson" (2000)

In his series *Cuaderno de ejercicios* (*Assignments Book*, 2011/2017), Camnitzer invites the public to follow prompts by drawing on the galleries' white walls. The instructions read: “Supposedly, matter only exists in three states: as solid, as liquid, and as gas. a) Speculate about the

consequences of a liquid sky, b) Explain the destiny of clouds,” and “There are twelve steps between unhappiness and happiness. How would you describe each of those steps?” I first saw this piece in the 2015 Havana Biennial, where school groups had engaged with it as

part of their art curriculum. Will this same relationship with the art object happen in a large national museum in Madrid? How far will the Reina Sofía go to make itself vulnerable to the processes of questioning, dialogue, and material interventions on its walls?

Near the end of the show, the testimonies of death row convicts are written in large, red letters on white prints. *Last Words* (2008) faces museum-goers with these peoples' messages of love and goodbye: "Stay strong baby. I love you forever. Yes sir, to my family and children, I love you very much. Dianne, Virginia, Toby and Irene I love all of you. I love you guys. I appreciate you all and love all of you. I love you guys. I appreciate you all and love you. You all brought me here to be executed, not to make a speech. I have no last words. I am ready. Tell the guys on Death Row that I am not wearing a diaper. I can't think of anything else."



Luis Camnitzer, "Self-Portrait" (1968-1972)

The comprehensive show also features early conceptual works such as "Sentences" (1966) and "Envelope" (1967). It likewise includes 1970s pieces that recover humorous Duchamp ready-mades, such as "The Expressive Power of a Dot" and "Prototype of a Man" (1971-1974).

Peter Osborne wants to know: Why is Luis Camnitzer absent from the conceptual art canon? In his catalogue essay, Osborne portrays Camnitzer's position of outsider as an "experience of relative exclusion [...]— of being physically located within its center yet viewing it and being viewed by it 'peripherally' — [it is] a privileged standpoint from which to understand and comment upon the system."

If Camnitzer is, as Osborne laments, not part of the conceptual canon, it may be more due to the New York art scene's effort since the 1940s to place itself at the center of the art world, rather than to Camnitzer being Latin American. After all, as with other important artists of the period, the circumstances behind his marginalization

as a peripheral artist are those that led to the myth of New York's cultural exceptionalism: centripetal institutional practices, art world actors, and the scene's love for capital. Fortunately, this myth is now beginning to unravel.



Luis Camnitzer, "About War" (2016-2018)

Closing the show, Camnitzer's newest piece, "About War" (2016–2018), considers the influence of military strategy in contemporary mappings of the world. "About War" juxtaposes quotes from Carl von Clausewitz's military strategy treaty *On War* with Google maps locations of US military bases in Latin America. Zaya cites from

Camnitzer's emails: "We are now returning to the most reactionary kind of nationalist fragmentation, [...] all of this within the context of a kind of neo-feudalism, where the weapon industry is provoking new military clashes."

[Luis Camnitzer: Hospice of Failed Utopias continues at the Museo Reina Sofía \(Calle de Santa Isabel, 52, Madrid\) through March 4, 2019.](#)

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