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ART; At the Lehman, Works of War and Torture, Politics and Wit

By VIVIEN RAYNOR

THE question of why Luis Camnitzer is not as well known in this country as he should be is both raised and answered by his retrospective at the Lehman College Art Gallery here. Mr. Camnitzer is a Conceptualist who expresses his intelligence and insight largely through wit, and that is no way to act in the great art jungle. There humor must defer to solemnity, much as steam-powered ships once gave way to sails on the high seas.

Like most wits, Mr. Camnitzer is deeply serious and he believes that to be an artist is also to be political, although for him the term seems to mean moral. Clearly, the gallery took the wiser course when it declined a grant with a restrictive pledge that the National Endowment for the Arts had awarded the show, which was organized by the Lehman gallery's director, Jane Farver.

Born in Germany in 1937, the artist was taken as an infant to Uruguay and raised in the Jewish community there. He studied at the University of Uruguay's School of Fine Arts and graduated as a sculptor who also had studied architecture. There followed a period of print making at the Munich Art Academy, courtesy of a fellowship from the German Government. After that, Mr. Camnitzer returned to his Uruguayan alma mater as a teacher.

Four years later, in 1960, the artist moved to the United States, where he has remained, producing art and teaching it -- now as a professor at the State University of New York, College at Old Westbury. He has had numerous exhibitions, some in Manhattan, but most of them in South America and Europe. This, too, may explain why the artist is more known about than known.

As a teacher and the recipient of many fellowships, including two from the Guggenheim Foundation, Mr. Camnitzer cannot be counted a martyr to the art establishment, but it is not from want of his trying. Here is a random sampling of observations taken from essays and transcriptions in the catalogue: "Art is whatever fits into the market"; ". . . as university art educators, in fact forming more university art educators than future artists, we were never trained in teaching nor do we prepare our students for it."

Commenting on the "mainstream" and how to get into it, Mr. Camnitzer notes that the wish to join it and the wish to destroy it "often arise simultaneously in the individuals who are or feel marginal to it."

Third world artists trying to make it in the "big" world could not ask for a better spokesman. Yet Mr. Camnitzer's pithiest comments are his objects, which range from assemblages and readymades to prints and photographs, together with statements penciled on the gallery walls.

Many of the works deal with war and torture and some are pretty gruesome, like the silk screen of a news photograph entitled "Three Heads" (1971). One of the heads is that of a grinning Asian soldier, but it is separated from the body and the gap filled with red paint. The other two dangle by the hair from his -- or her, the sex is indeterminate -- hands.

Equally macabre but more artistically rendered are the color photo-etchings from the series called "From the Uruguayan Torture" (1983 to 1984). The caption for the hand tethered by nails driven through the fingers is, "He practiced every day"; that for the feet seemingly x-rayed through shoes is "He couldn't see what he felt nor feel what he saw."

Mr. Camnitzer's appreciation of evil is made all the more Goyaesque for being expressed in the manner of Oscar Wilde -- and to being mixed in with material that is almost frivolous. Notable in this category is a photograph of three squares of paper labeled "The Drawing," "The Painting" and "The Sculpture," respectively. The first square is half-tinted gray and creased; the second is all pale gray and flat, and the third is white and crumpled.

Also worth a second look is "Landscape as an Attitude," a black and white photograph of the artist's face, supine and with toy sheep grazing over his features between a church and a tree, to scale.

Although he is obviously a direct descendant of Duchamp, Mr. Camnitzer is more humane than the master was and much more concerned with reaching his audience. There is little in this exhibition that a reader of newspapers or even a watcher of television won't get. And when explanations are needed he is the one to provide them in his writings.

Mari Carmen Ramirez's catalogue exegesis provides the facts and places the artist in the context of the conceptual movement. But by ignoring the humor, gallows and otherwise, that sets Mr. Camnitzer apart from other Conceptualists she makes him virtually unrecognizable.

An example is her summation of his work as "The result of a slow but consistent buildup process where every element is thought out and fleshed out for its capacity to evoke and construct meaning in a way that will effect an intervention in some level of practice or 'the real.' "

Presumably, Mr. Camnitzer did not have Dr. Ramirez in mind when making "Sifter," a device for eliminating viewers who don't like his art. It consists of a brass wall plate on which is engraved a statement that outlines the methods he rejected -- for instance, poisoning by a "slow-acting traceless substance" -- but omits the one he settled on. This is the small carpeted platform that invites the viewer to get a closer look at the text -- and the electric cable that connects it to the plate. There is clearly no juice in the cable, but still . .

Mr. Camnitzer, an artist who has earned his right to irony, remains on view through March 16.