

Luis Camnitzer

Kunsthalle Zu Kiel

What is striking about the work of Luis Camnitzer is its ever-shifting exploration of new directions. This retrospective gave a lively overview of the broad range of techniques the artist has adopted throughout his career. Camnitzer grew up in Uruguay after his parents fled Germany in 1939, and his early works were an idiomatic response to the issues raised by the Conceptual art he encountered when he moved from Montevideo to New York in 1964. Most of his pieces from the 1960s and '70s are text-based and eschew the allure of representational images in favour of the sobriety of words and graphics. Then, in the 1980s Camnitzer began to create complex sculptural environments, and the Surrealist sensibility that was implicit as an undercurrent in his earlier pieces became explicit as he reinvented the technique - pioneered by artists such as Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray and Meret Oppenheim - of charging everyday objects with subliminal symbolic meanings. But rather than pursuing the esoteric fancies of Surrealism, he embraced subject matter with an unequivocally ethical content, tackling such themes as the fate of political prisoners.

As post-Surrealist aesthetics have come to be recognized as Camnitzer's signature style, the earlier Conceptual pieces might easily be mistaken as preparatory experiments. Yet it is precisely their experimental character and methodological boldness that make them fascinating: Camnitzer goes from one extreme to another, alternately exploring contrasting strategies of semantic openness and closure. *Dictionary 1 & 2* (1969), for instance, plays on the inherent ambiguity of pictograms. The printed posters show variations on a basic icon: an empty square, a square with an X, a square divided by a horizontal line and so on. Each image is accompanied by a short legend. An image of a square divided by a zigzag line is accompanied by the words 'Biombo, Frontera, Hendidura, Pendiente, Segmento' (Screen, Frontier, Rupture, Slope, Segment). Meaning is deliberately set adrift. By contrast, however, in a work such as *Leftover* (1970), it is rigidly fixed. In a wall of stacked boxes each box is stencilled with the

About this review

Published on 04/04/04

By *Jan Verwoert*



[Back to the main site](#)

word 'Leftover' plus a roman numeral, and wrapped in what look like blood-stained bandages. The piece is an utterly unambiguous monument to the cruel factuality of body count logistics.

On the wall behind the original version of Leftover was an inventory of all the weapons sold to the Third World by Western countries in their attempt to incite and profit from, local conflicts. This element, however, is missing from the retrospective, and the work's explicitly polemical content can be grasped only by studying the exhibition catalogue. Similarly, it is only from the catalogue you learn that Camnitzer collaborated with Liliana Porter and José Guillermo Castillo in the New York Graphic Workshop during the 1960s and '70s, experimenting with alternative forms of art production and distribution. The show itself includes no works from this phase of collective engagement. These omissions seem strange, given that most of the supposedly informative wall panels that accompany the show anxiously emphasize that Camnitzer's art is 'political', as if the mere invocation of the term served as a badge of honour. Yet it is precisely the fact that Camnitzer does not treat 'the political' as an established category that makes his art interesting. With every new artistic approach he takes, he dismantles the notion of a general definition of politics in art as he exemplifies one of many specific ways in which art could become political: as a form of semiotic analysis, collective practice, Agit-prop or, finally, subliminal symbolism.

One example of this last approach - Camnitzer's ongoing exploration of post-Surrealist sculpture - is El Mirador (The Belvedere, 1996), an installation comprising a sealed room built within the exhibition space. This booth practically fills the room and leaves only a narrow unlit corridor with black walls for the viewer to walk round it. The only way to gain a view of the interior of the booth is through a slim horizontal slit inserted at eye-level in its walls: on the inside it turns out to be a white-walled and brightly lit cell furnished with a series of symbolic objects.

These include: a bedstead made from gas pipes and a sheet of glass; a series of newspapers pasted on the wall; a half-empty wine bottle sunk into the floor; small rolls of a grey fuzzy material on the floor; a house of cards; and a stuffed mouse on a shelf. These artefacts seem like chimeras, games invented by a prisoner in a desperate attempt to organize life and keep sane in an environment designed to break the will and shatter the psyche. But it is impossible to focus your

attention exclusively on them. The moment you gaze through the slit, you are caught up in the act of surveillance, taking sides and making a form of emotional investment.

In fact, Camnitzer's approach can be seen as an attempt to investigate the meaning of empathy, and even actively to promote it. The viewer is asked to consciously put themselves in the place of the imaginary inhabitant of the cell. By exploring the nature of empathy in this way Camnitzer is perhaps suggesting another means by which art can contribute to the foundation of a political ethics: by invoking existential states of enforced pain, fear and insanity.

Jan Verwoert

Frieze

3-4 Hardwick Street, London EC1R 4RB, 020 7833 7270