Luis Camnitzer at Alexander Gray

This succinct, text-driven and quietly powerful exhibition included just two works, one old and one new, evidencing the not dueling aspects of a pioneering Conceptualist's practice. Since the late 1960s, Luis Camnitzer's work has been driven by a desire to reveal widespread social atrophy toward cruelty inflicted on individuals by various ruling classes. And in this spirit, but by indirect means, Last Words (2008) comprises six large works on paper (around 5" by 4 feet apiece) that host a procession of desperate-sounding declarations, one after another: "Don't forget me"; "I love you all"; "May my love touch each one of you all's souls as I leave this body," etc., in a simple, sepia-toned serif font. The whole registers as simultaneously heartrending and redundant. Following one frame to the next, viewers are likely to be sucked into a riddle: Whose words are these? One person or many? Soldiers in Iraq or Afghanistan anticipating their imminent deaths? Text messages from people stuck in the Twin Towers just before their collapse? Or could they be detainees at Guantánamo fearing for their survival? For me, it wasn't until the third panel that the correct and comparably repugnant possibility came to mind: death row.

Camnitzer appropriated the text for Last Words from the Texas Department of Criminal Justice website, selecting only last statements of inmates slated to die that include mention of "love." And indeed, there are not only desperate expressions of tenderness toward wives, mothers, sisters, fathers and brothers, but, more specifically, love for characters as diverse as "brother Farook," "Vicente Hernandez" and "Wildflower." Faith in myriad and possibly conflicting forces like "Our father Allah," "Jesus Christ," "the flag of Mexico"; as well as the phrase "the way you have protested and kept this nation together" eventually indicate that we're hearing from a geographically diverse mix. Certain of the ill-fated prisoners arrived at metaphysically profound assessments, like "When you're dealing with reality, real is not always what you want it to be," and, moreover, "Ironic, isn't it?"

By putting the Last Words on display, Camnitzer solemnly foregrounds the perversity of the government that not only condones capital punishment but makes an online, public spectacle of the final, tortured sentiments of those it plans to put to death. (During the run of this exhibition, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that Kentucky's method of execution, lethal injection, does not constitute cruel and unusual punishment, making the show especially timely.) The minimal if macabre work brought to mind the eleganza of Maya Lin's Vietnam veterans memorial, which encourages meditative consideration of our shared humanity rather than showcasing the artist's special skills or worldview.

And indeed, the second piece on view here, Sifter (The Mechanism for Killing a Spectator), 1978, deals drollly with the oft-vaunted (and, by some, frequently disparaged) notion of artistic genius. Resembling a crude execution device, a small, carpeted platform on the floor connects by silver electrical conduit to a wall-mounted gold plaque engraved with text explaining that the "most simple and direct" way for an artist to ensure bona-fide genius status is to simply eliminate anybody who does not concur. And, without prodding the viewer to agree or disagree with his own perspective (which is never quite revealed), Camnitzer provides space for an inevitable voice of dissent—even if at the risk of being eliminated.

—Sarah Valdez