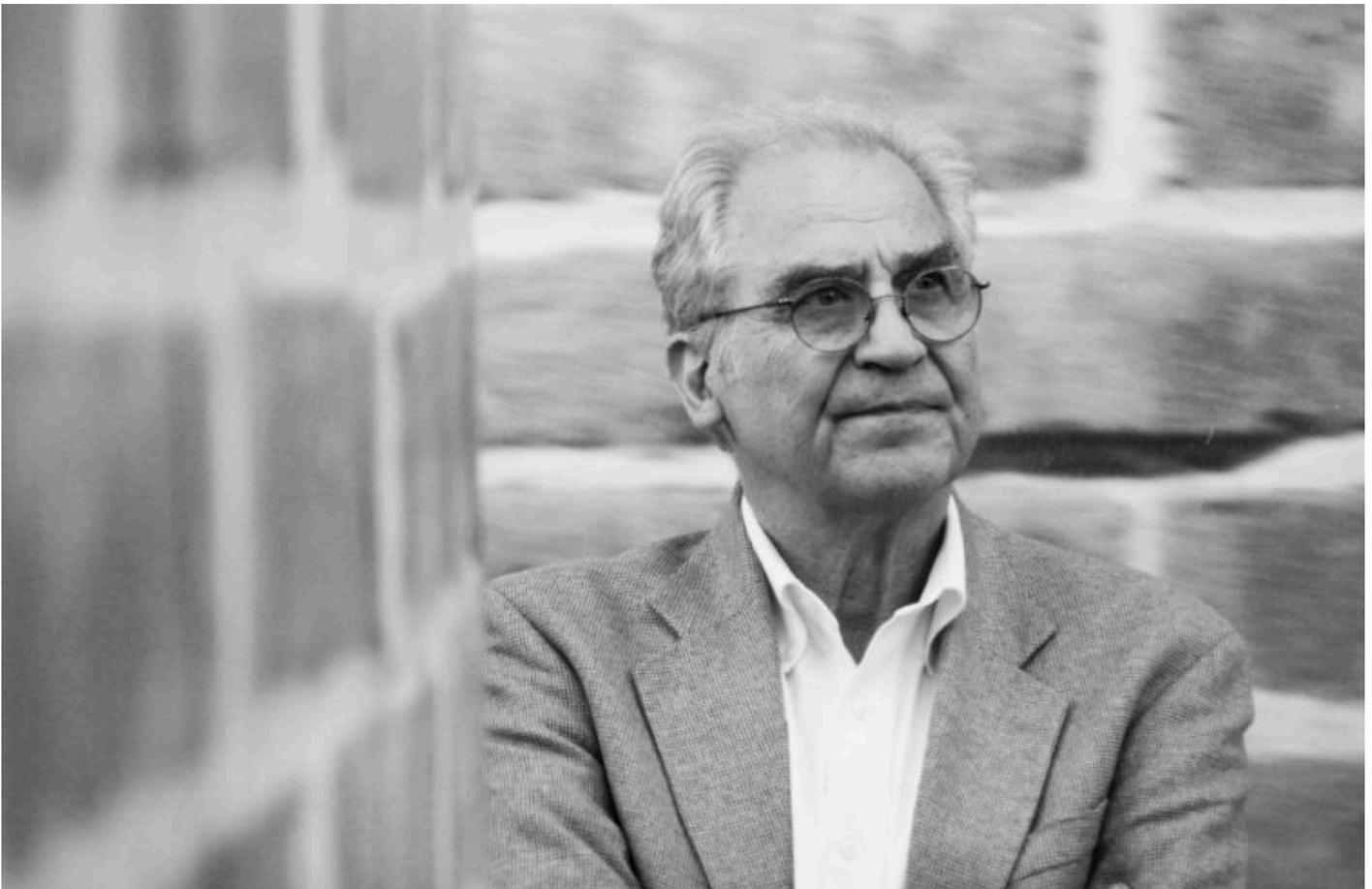


Educating is more important than collecting

Speaker of the 3rd seLecT Seminar on Art and Education, Luis Camnitzer talks about the urgency of rethinking the role of museums

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PUBLISHED ON: 11/09/2020



The artist Luis Camnitzer in portrait of 2012 (Photo: Disclosure).

Using art to establish connections based on collective action has always been among the main approaches of the artist, critic and pedagogue Luis Camnitzer. His phrase-installation “The Museum is a School: the artist learns to communicate, the public learns to establish connections” summarizes some of the fundamental aspects in his trajectory of more than five decades. Created in 2009 and exhibited since 2011 on the façades of more than 20 institutions, among them the Museum of Modern Art of São Paulo, in 2016, the installation is one of the best known works of the artist born in Germany (1937), created in Uruguay and living in New York since 1964. It was there that he started his production as a member of the collective The New York Graphic Workshop (1964-1970),

Since then, Camnitzer has built a multiple work and on several fronts, but which often lead to the same conclusion: “What I say is almost always the same: that art and education, when well understood, are more or less the same thing”, **Tells seLecT** . In this interview, he comments on the dismantling of community structures, reinforced by the current context, and the role of art as a utopian tool for survival.

The artist is the inaugural speaker at the seLecT Seminar on Art and Education, which will be broadcast live on the seLecT platform on Youtube: youtube.com/c/selectartbr. In the lecture *The New Man* , on Tuesday 15, at 4pm, he will recontextualize Che Guevara’s ideas about art and society today.

The seminar is the third stage of the seLecT Art and Education Award, an initiative organized by the seLecT magazine since 2017, created to value and encourage schools, art institutions, teaching spaces, collaborative artistic projects and innovative and experimental initiatives that favor dialogues and the links between art and education. The third edition is co-organized by Itaú Cultural, supported by gallery Almeida and Dale, in partnership with gallery A Gentil Carioca and Arapura London Dry Gin.

seLecT: I begin with a general question, but inevitable in this context: how has it been in recent months and what impact do you think this pandemic will have both on the production of current art and on new forms of artistic perception?

Luis Camnitzer: Among the artistic works that I have seen, I notice very much a production made collectively as a puzzle, especially in music and dance, created with several participants in individual fragments, from their homes, and then edited to form a coherent whole. It is something very ingenious, a bit like the tales and poems in the style of surrealistic “corpses”. But in the long run, this is also a bit of a tiring formalism. In general, I think there is a tendency, including a danger, to prioritize introspection. There is a possibility of losing sight of our social commitment to a community with which we should only have mediated contact. I am, for example, doing many things for Zoom and I notice that it is like talking to the void. There’s no way to understand the audience’s body language, not even a laugh when someone makes a joke. All of this gives the impression that the universe is limited to the four walls of the house and that personal anxieties are more important than the common good. In a few years’ time, we will know whether this will have a lasting effect or not and what the effects will be on art.



Version of The Museum is a School in Matadero, Madrid, on display in 2015 (Photo: Disclosure).

In your essay *The Museum is a School*, you state that the function of a work of art is to present us not only something we do not know, but also what is not knowable. Do you think that role is even more important today, when the world, as we knew it, disappeared?

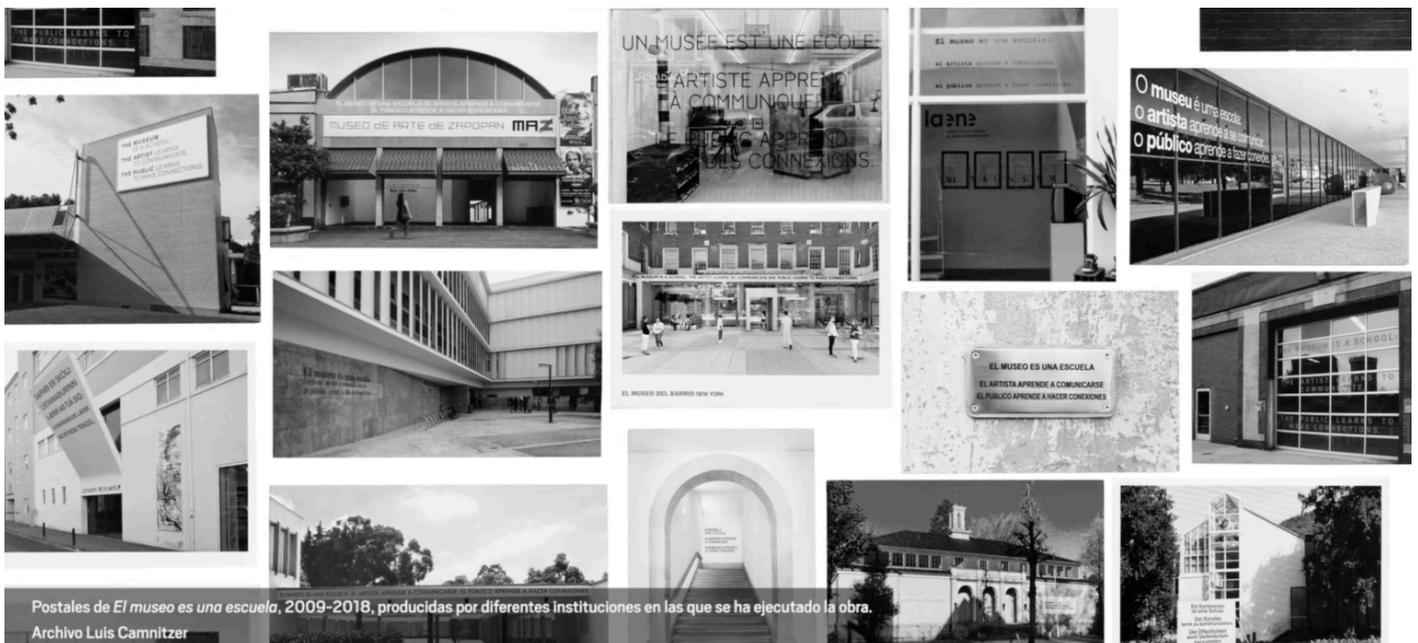
Art is useful for speculating and exploring everything without limits. Society and its educational systems make us believe that what matters is to know how to memorize what is already known and, later, to see what can be deduced from that knowledge. With art, on the other hand, we can jump into the void and travel through that field that is generally dismissed as something negative and that we call "ignorance". However, this field, well understood, is exactly where there are things that still have no name and, therefore, are free. It is what we call "mystery", a word ruined by religion because it tries to keep the mystery enclosed in its dogmas. In art, mystery is something that has nothing to do with obscurantism; it is the stimulus that makes us continuously imagine to unveil it.

Much was said, at the beginning of the pandemic, that MoMA-NY and other major museums fired their teams from the education sector, rather than training them to migrate activities to online. What is your opinion about these episodes? How would you adapt some of your ideas about the educational role of museums to the digital world?

This is the time to reconceptualize the role of museums and to assume the responsibility that educating is more important than collecting. What most museums are trying to do is to preserve the past in a reduced format and with the least possible losses, instead of facing the challenge of an unprecedented situation in our memory, which offers us the opportunity to look at this new reality as a ground zero. What MoMA did is reactionary, stupid and blind, if we try to look to the future. It is time to re-educate the curatorial team to assume pedagogical responsibilities and expand its pedagogical team, and not to erase it. It's time to redesign communication with the public and stop being the only traditional centripetal organization to be equally centrifugal, with creative two-way dialogues.

Among the initiatives taken by museums during this period are collaborative campaigns on social networks, such as requests for people to re-enact versions of known works of art in their homes. Many are gathered in the hashtag #betweenartandquarantine, created by the Rijkmuseum, from the Netherlands, and copied by other institutions. How do you see these initiatives? Do you believe that they are valid as forms of dialogue and an attempt to make art democratic and collective?

The performative recreation of works of art produces amusing results, but conceptually this is nothing more than a refinement in the consumption of works of art, similar to the act of copying a famous painting. It is something that will probably be useful for the public relations of the institutions, but I doubt that it will have any impact on the democratization of art. You can have fun as a show, but I don't think it generates new knowledge.



The Mercosul Biennial was one of the events that needed to cancel the exhibitions, taking its activities to the digital space. The presentation of the works does not seem to have worked well on the platform created, but there was a great effort to create an online educational program. How do you see these changes after having carried out pedagogical curation in the 6th edition of this biennial, in 2007?

Unfortunately, I didn't have the opportunity to follow this Mercosul Biennial. I have been friends with Andrea Giunta for many decades and I have complete confidence in his work. With this edition, in particular, the situation was difficult because the pandemic started when the biennial was already planned. But I would say that in general the biennials are facing problems similar to museums, with the temptation to rescue the formats of the past and transfer them to the screens of computers, instead of looking for a new beginning from the crisis. When I worked at the 6th Biennial (2006-7) with Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro, we were aware that the traditional format of the biennials was obsolete and we tried, albeit timidly, to create a situation related to knowledge instead of consumption. The formulation and problem solving was emphasized, school participation in this process and public education by the public. When I accepted the position of pedagogical curator, it was on the condition that the team functioned permanently and not linked to each biennial. The board accepted the conditions, but unfortunately did not fulfill them, and the biennial was again dependent on the good will of the chief curator in each of its editions. Some biennials, therefore, were concerned with the pedagogical part and others with the curatorial stardom. Pedagogical continuity and the possibility of adapting constructively to circumstances and thus minimizing the impact of crises have been lost. but unfortunately it did not comply with them, and the biennial again depended on the good will of the chief curator in each of its editions. Some biennials, therefore, were concerned with the pedagogical part and others with the curatorial stardom. Pedagogical continuity and the possibility of adapting constructively to circumstances and thus minimizing the impact of crises have been lost. but unfortunately it did not comply with them, and the biennial again depended on the good will of the chief curator in each of its editions. Some biennials, therefore, were concerned with the pedagogical part and others with the curatorial stardom. Pedagogical continuity and the possibility of adapting constructively to circumstances and thus minimizing the impact of crises have been lost.

I would like you to comment a little on the theme of the lecture *The New Man* , which deals with the recontextualization of Che Guevara's comments on art and society.

Perhaps because of the quarantine I started to review my own training in an introspective way and found this text from 'Che,' which was a letter written to the director of a newspaper for which I was working at the time, the Uruguayan weekly *Marcha* . [The text gave rise to the book *Socialist and Man in Cuba*, 1965]. This coincided with my concern about the individualistic isolation produced by the quarantine. Six months have passed. With few and careful interruptions, I live confined. It is a kind of house arrest. This made me revise my concept of "experience" and oppose what I call "in-periencia", which is a way of using the internal to process the external in the form of social activism. In all of this there are convergences and divergences with what Che mentioned about art and it seemed an interesting topic for people more capable than me to elaborate better later. I would love to be able to read more material on this.

In a text for the catalog of the VI Havana Biennial (1977), you mention something similar, about the dismantling of community structures and the destruction of the notion of us. How to talk about it in the current context?

Rereading this text, 23 years later, it seems that the situation is much worse. Gradually, what I call "clownocracy" is installing in governments - but with mediocre people even like clowns, because they can't make anyone laugh. They are people who live in a narcissistic capsule and do not understand that there is a "us", and that whoever is working in a government is hired to feed and support it. In the current context, this has become more acute. Being in a quarantine situation, breaking it (or at least not wearing a mask), acting physically on the "us", is a way of contaminating and destroying the community. By respecting it, we are isolated and the "we" becomes virtual, there is a risk of becoming a nostalgic memory. The resistance, as I wrote at that time, is to maintain the utopian consciousness of survival,