Luis Camnitzer
Towards an Aesthetic of Imbalance
Luis Camnitzer:  
*Towards an Aesthetic of Imbalance*  
January 9 – February 15, 2020
Alexander Gray Associates presents its sixth exhibition of Luis Camnitzer’s work, highlighting two key installations, *El Mirador* [The Observatory] (1996), and *Territorio Libre* [Free Territory] (2018). For over five decades, Camnitzer’s interdisciplinary practice has influenced discourses around Conceptualism, pedagogy, and politics.

In 1988, Camnitzer represented Uruguay in the 43rd Venice Biennale, where he produced a series of works that combined physical objects, printed images, and text. In the context of the end of Uruguay’s military dictatorship (1973–1984), these works addressed themes of torture, abuse of power, and repression, combining seemingly disparate elements to elicit poetic interpretations. Despite political instability during the transition to democracy, Camnitzer agreed to participate in the Biennale, realizing that “keeping one’s purity could be in the way of more important things like the cementing of a regained democracy.” Throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, Camnitzer built upon the political themes in his work, developing new series and projects, including *The Agent Orange Series* (1985) and *Los San Patricios* (1992). Conceptually building on the work he debuted eight years prior at the Venice Biennale, Camnitzer presented *El Mirador* in 1996 at São Paulo Biennial. Consisting of an enclosed room that is only visible to the viewer through a narrow slit in the wall, *El Mirador* evokes multiple spaces of confinement: a prison cell, a psychiatric hospital, and a torture chamber. Various objects are placed throughout the white-walled room, which is starkly lit with glaring light, lending the installation a surreal quality. In this tableau, uncanny elements are gathered—an iron bed frame with a single glass sheet as a mattress, a shattered wall mirror, a house of playing cards, and a window with panes made of Astroturf grass—resulting in a hallucinatory aura, meant to destabilize the viewer’s initial interpretations.

In addition to alluding to an observatory, the work’s title also implicates the one who is looking—the viewer—in the act of surveillance. In our contemporary moment, *El Mirador* takes on additional meaning: suggesting that our data-driven society functions as a self-sustaining surveillance system, supporting hegemonic structures of power and the status quo. *El Mirador* can elicit various metaphoric interpretations ranging from political imprisonment to censorship, and ultimately, the instability of one’s own perception.
Similarly, *Territorio Libre* (2018), represents Camnitzer’s ongoing engagement with borders and ideas of freedom. This recent installation consists of projected text on the floor that is encircled by razor wire in a darkened room. Labeled as “free territory,” the inaccessible space is guarded by the razor wire—as a result, the viewer experiences the work in the dark, from the “outside.” Inviting associations with current disputes about borderlands, the refugee crisis, and international powers, Camnitzer’s *Territorio Libre* is a timely interrogation of fictitious boundaries. In a metaphysical sense, Camnitzer explains: “In the end everything is a prison: the body, the limits of intelligence and imagination, the limits of society. The real prison is an example of an infinite number of prisons. We are always carrying around a prison, wearing it like a suit.”

**Contemporary Colonial Art**

[...] the aesthetics of imbalance, the one that affects structures, that demands full participation or full rejection, does not allow for the comfort of alienation. It leads to the confrontation which will bring about change. It leads to the integration of aesthetic creativity with all the systems of reference used in everyday life. It leads the individual to be a permanent creator, to be in a state of constant perception. It leads him to determine his environment according to his needs and to fight in order to achieve the changes.

—Luis Camnitzer

This text is extracted from the transcript for a paper presented to the Latin American Studies Association conference, Washington, D.C., 1969. The paper was subsequently translated into Spanish, and published in the Montevideo-based journal Marcha in mid-1970.
["To read is to resurrect ideas buried in paper. Each word is an epitaph." — Simón Rodríguez]
Leer es resucitar ideas sepultadas en el papel. Cada palabra es un epitafio. 1992, detalle
Objects Covered by Their Own Image; Watergate Widening Waves of Scandal, 1973

Objects Covered by Their Own Image; Ripping Open an Incredible Scandal, 1973
Twin Towers, 2002, alternative views
El Mirador

El Mirador is one of a series of installations that began with the Venice Project (1986–1988). I was invited to represent Uruguay in the 1988 Venice Biennial in what was the first Uruguayan participation after the end of the military dictatorship. I was ambivalent because I had never previously participated in events sponsored by the government, and didn’t approve of the new president, a neo-liberal supported by the army in what was in fact a transition government. Yet, after many discussions, I was persuaded by friends that it was more important to cement the return to democracy than to maintain individual purity. The premise of the Venice installation—which continued through subsequent installation projects, culminating in one made for Documenta 11—was to play with the ambiguous parallels between an artist and a political prisoner. The prisoner hallucinates freedom and gets caught by the physicality of the cell. The artist believes in being a free creator seeking originality, but gets trapped in a prison of stereotypes and aesthetic cliches. The public could read the situation either way. That comparison of prisons and art preoccupies me still. Ultimately we live imprisoned in our bodies and within the rules that determine the acquisition of our knowledge. Life is lived within a jail of both visible and invisible confines. In that sense, physical jails are painful illustrations of a congenital problem.

El Mirador may be translated as “a place from which one looks,” but also as “the looker.” The installation depicts an inaccessible space reminiscent of a hospital operating room, overly brightly lit, clean and sterile. The guest viewer is prevented from entering and has no possibility of interaction with what is within. In fact, there is no access point, so no one can enter. One is only allowed to look in, inspect, make sure that everything is clean and orderly. The viewer is, in a sense, a good guard, preventing any disruption from spilling out of the chamber and impacting on those who gave the order of confinement. Anything unexpected within can be attributed to insanity, and is of no concern as long as the status quo and cleanliness are maintained. It can be observed, though, that a new order is present in the chamber that touches the borders of the familiar enough to suggest that division between “inside” and “outside” is not as clear as we want to believe.

—Luis Camnitzer
El Mirador, 1996, detail views
El Mirador, 1996, detail views
El Mirador, 1996, detail views
Being locked in or locked out is determined by one’s relationship to a physical barrier, as with a locked wall. But being “inside” or “outside” can also be defined by perception and interpretation. Territorio Libre plays with this ambiguity, using the razor wire to define an “inside” space free from xenophobia, hate, and fear. These are locked in making a free territory by default, or locked out from a protected space. From their relative safety, those in the free area can observe “outside” the razor wire inhabited by the prisoners of hate and fear. They, in turn would, if they could, reduce the space of the free territory until all that’s left is the mind that lies within the borderlines of our own skin.

—Luis Camnitzer
Territorio Libre, 2018, installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2020
Aqui yace una obra de arte [Here lies a work of art]. 1973
Aqui yace una obra de arte [Here lies a work of art], 1973, Installation view, Galería Parra & Romero, Madrid (2018)
Documenta Projekt, 2002, installation view,
Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid (2018)
The custom established years ago by the better class of Panama families of sending their children to the best colleges, either in the United States or England, still prevails, with the result that there is an interesting society of the aristocratic class, who speak perfect English and which, combined with the diplomatic corps, the Army and Navy and the Canal Zone residents, insures a social life in Panama both interesting and cosmopolitan. The beauty of Panaman women
Luis Camnitzer looking into El Mirador, 2020
Luis Camnitzer

Luis Camnitzer (b.1937) is a German-born Uruguayan artist and writer who moved to New York in 1964. He was at the vanguard of 1960s Conceptualism, working primarily in printmaking, sculpture, and installations. Camnitzer's artwork explores subjects such as repression under systems of power, pedagogical norms, and the deconstruction of familiar frameworks. His humorous, biting, and often politically charged use of language as art medium has distinguished his practice for over four decades.

In 1964, he co-founded The New York Graphic Workshop, along with fellow artists Liliana Porter and José Guillermo Castillo (1941–1999). For six years until the end of the workshop in 1970, they examined the conceptual meaning behind printmaking, and sought to test and expand the definition of the medium. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, Camnitzer developed a body of work that explored language as a primary medium, printing text on paper or walls, such as in his Dictionary etchings and room-size installation, Living Room (both 1969). As his interest in language unfolded, so did his aim to identify socio-political problems through his art. Camnitzer responded to the growing wave of Latin American military regimes taking root in the late 1960s, but his work also points to the dynamic political landscape of his adopted country, the United States.

During the 1970s, Camnitzer created a key body of work that blended both language and humor—producing a series of Object Boxes that placed ordinary items within wood-framed glass boxes with text printed on brass plaques. In many ways, these boxes anticipate one of Camnitzer's most important works, the Uruguayan Torture Series (1983–84). This photo-etching series epitomizes Camnitzer's ability to question the social and political roles of an individual in society, while also examining a dimension of human psychology by pairing images and text to create new meaning.

Though Camnitzer never left New York, his practice remains intrinsically connected to his homeland and the whole of Latin America. This consistent dedication cements his place as a key figure in shaping debates around ideas of post-colonialism, Conceptualism, and pedagogy.

A retrospective of Camnitzer’s work, Luis Camnitzer: Hospice of Failed Utopias, was on view in 2018 at El Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid. Camnitzer's work has been shown at important institutions since the 1960s, including solo exhibitions at El Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos, Santiago, Chile (2013); Kemper Art Museum, St. Louis, MO (2011); El Museo del Barrio, New York (1995); Museo Carrillo Gil, Mexico City (1993); and List Visual Arts Center at M.I.T., Cambridge, MA (1991). Retrospectives of his work have been presented at Lehman College Art Gallery in the Bronx, New York (1991); Kunsthalle Kiel, Germany (2003); Daros Museum in Zurich, Switzerland, El Museo del Barrio, New York; and Museo de Arte Moderno de Medellín, Bogotá, Colombia (2010–13). His work has appeared in numerous group exhibitions, including HOME – So Different, So Appealing, Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), CA, which traveled to Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX (2017); I am you, you are too, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN (2017); Take Me (I'm Yours), The Jewish Museum, New York, NY (2016); Under the Same Sun: Art from Latin America Today, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY (2014); and Information, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY (1970). He has been featured in several international biennials, including the Bienal de la Habana, Cuba (1984, 1986, 1991, 2009); Pavilion of Uruguay, 43 Biennale di Venezia, Italy (1988); Whitney Biennial (2000); and Documenta 11 (2002). Camnitzer’s work is in the permanent collections of countless institutions, including The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX; Tate, London; Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires, Argentina; and Daros Latinamerica Collection, Zurich. He was the recipient of the Guggenheim Fellowships on two occasions, 1961 and 1982. A highly regarded critic and curator, Camnitzer is a frequent contributor to contemporary art magazines. He has authored the publications New Art of Cuba (University of Texas Press: 1994, 2003), Conceptualism in Latin American Art: Didactics of Liberation (University of Texas Press: 2007), and Didáctica de la liberación: Arte conceptualista latinoamericano (Fundación Gilberto Álzate Avedaío, IDARTES: 2012). Since 1969, he has taught at the State University of New York, College at Old Westbury, where he continues to serve as professor emeritus.
### Exhibition Checklist

**Leer es resucitar ideas sepultadas en el papel.**
*Cada palabra es un epitafio., 1992*
Mixed media
13h x 10.5w x 2.38d in
(33.02h x 26.67w x 6.03d cm)

**Objects Covered by Their Own Image; Ripping Open an Incredible Scandal, 1973**
Ink and whiteout on paper
11h x 8.3w in (27.94h x 21.08w cm)

**Objects Covered by Their Own Image; Watergate Widening Waves of Scandal, 1973**
Ink and whiteout on paper
11h x 8w in (27.94h x 20.32w cm)

**Twin Towers, 2002**
Playing cards
3.50h x 2.6w in (8.89h x 6.6w cm)
Edition of 3 + 1 AP

**El Mirador, 1996**
Mixed media
78.74h x 157.48w x 157.48d in
(200h x 400w x 400d cm)

**Territorio Libre, 2018**
Razor wire and projection
Dimensions variable

### Other Illustrated Works

**Arbitrary Objects and Their Titles, 1979/81**
Found objects and pencil on paper on wall
Dimensions variable

**Aquí yace una obra de arte, 1972**
Ink on paper
22h x 30w in
55.88h x 76.2w cm

**Documenta Projekt, 2002**
Mixed media installation
Dimensions variable

**Portrait of the Artist, 1991**
Fan, thread, and pencil
Edition of 3 + 1 AP

**Los San Patricios, 1992/2018**
Mixed media installation
Dimensions variable

**Fosa Comun, 1969**
Stencil on painted surface
Edition of 3 + 1 AP

**Amanaplanacanalpanama, 1995**
Mixed media installation
Dimensions variable
Published by Alexander Gray Associates on the occasion of the exhibition

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Through exhibitions, research, and artist representation, Alexander Gray Associates spotlights artistic movements and artists who emerged in the mid- to late-Twentieth Century. Influential in cultural, social, and political spheres, these artists are notable for creating work that crosses geographic borders, generational contexts and artistic disciplines. Alexander Gray Associates is a member of the Art Dealers Association of America.

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