



Luis Camnitzer: *Towards an Aesthetic of Imbalance*

Alexander Gray Associates

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January 9 – February 15, 2020

Alexander Gray Associates

El Mirador, 1996, installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2020



Luis Camnitzer: *Towards an Aesthetic of Imbalance*

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 tableaux, 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.

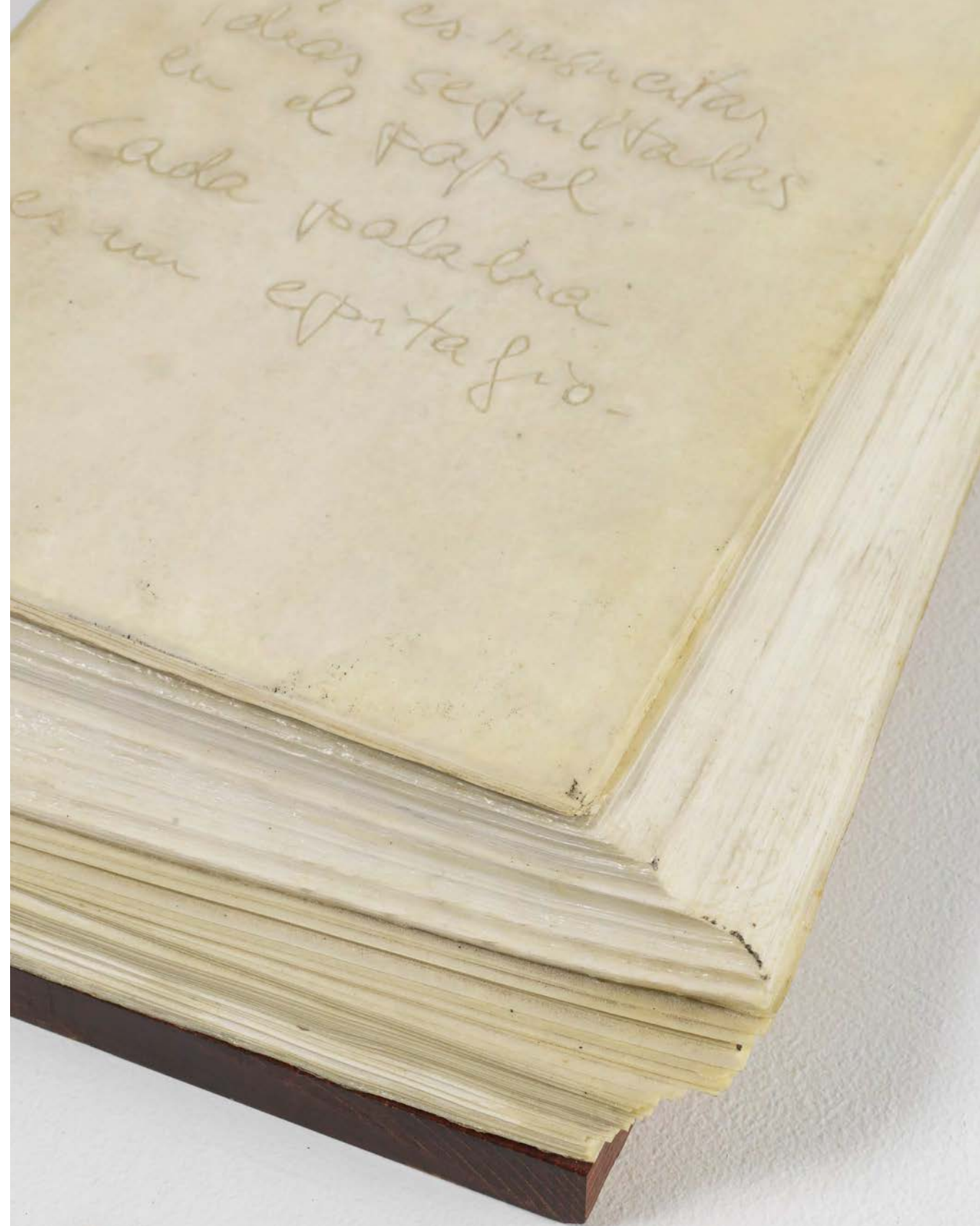
Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2020



Luis Camnitzer
Towards an Aesthetic of Imbalance



Leer es resucitar ideas sepultados en el papel. Cada palabra es un epitafio., 1992
["To read is to resuscitate ideas buried in paper. Each word is an epitaph." —Simón Rodríguez]



Leer es resucitar ideas sepultados en el papel. Cada palabra es un epitafio., 1992, detail

Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2020



Watergate's Widening Waves of Scandal

FROM the start the Nixon Administration's handling of the political espionage scandal in Washington's Watergate complex last June has been anything but straight. If Watergate had been a child's prank by a forgetful schoolboy, a presidential aide might have been called in to scold and punish the offender. If it had been a schoolyard fight, a principal would have ordered the combatants to separate and the victors to be congratulated. If it had been a serious crime, the implicated should have been exposed and tried. At least, Nixon's associates might have been held to account. But the Watergate operation, its basic purpose and the source of the secret funds that financed it, agreed to meet with Mc-



Conrad. McCord had agreed to see the judge privately to detail the ground charges made in his letter, insisting that he did not "feel confident in talking with an FBI agent in his office or even a grand jury unless the attorney word for the Department of Justice, or with other Government representatives." Nixon noted that any testimony by McCord would be recorded in the closed hearing. Nixon would then decide whether to release the information to a grand jury for possible further prosecution, to the press or to a select committee headed by North Carolina's Sen. Ervin that's conducting a Watergate investigation of its own. One way or another, McCord's information is thus expected to emerge publicly.

Let's determine Nixon's stance. He agreed not to contact McCord until after he has heard everything that McCord has to say this week—a clear hint that full cooperation could lead to a more lenient sentence. That was McCord's main reason in writing. Conrad, in turn, gave one of the other defendants access to his notes about the Watergate affair by temporarily suspending their maximum sentences but promising to restore those sentences after three months. He even held out the possibility of suspended sentences. The maximum sentences, up to 30 years in prison and \$50,000 fines, were thus proportionately to E. Howard Hunt Jr., former White House aide, and four others: Bernard L. Barker, Eugene S. McCarthy, Frank A. Stoen and Virginia S. Gonzalez.

That's hardly promising for January from the judge. "Due to my impression of this case," he said, "I have kept everything in the dark. I don't wish my job or reputation damaged by my actions." Hunt's wife was retained as a witness while the two were carrying cases \$10,000 in cash to Chicago, where they had planned to meet in the city. They both he and his wife had lost their jobs because of the Watergate affair and had to find new sources of money.

Judge Nixon further underscored just how serious a crime he considered the Watergate espionage to be by sentencing the seventh conspirator, G. Gordon Liddy, who, like McCord, had pleaded innocent, to serve up to 30 years in prison and to pay a \$50,000 fine. Liddy, who had worked with Hunt in the White House in trying to develop government secrets, looking especially for the still secret—and not permitted for its release—because by law not shown any sign that he could be persuaded to dis-

cover the truth. The judge's decision was a surprise. It is not clear why the judge decided to do this. It is not clear why the judge decided to do this. It is not clear why the judge decided to do this.

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11

Objects Covered by Their Own Image; Watergate Widening Waves of Scandal, 1973

Ripping Open an Incredible Scandal

THE decision, the evidence, the circumstances and, yes, the law—all had failed. The Watergate case was being ripped open. A ten-month campaign by some of the highest paid and most powerful officials of the Nixon Administration, nearly every one of them involved in the scandal, slipped out of its protective shield, the scandal was being exposed as probably the most pervasive episode of top-level misdeeds in the nation's history.

Incredibly, a former Attorney General was cited repeatedly by White House and Justice Department sources as almost certain to be indicted by a grand jury. He, too, was Nixon's chief legal counsel, as well as the second-highest official in his presidential election campaign and senior former White House aide. A former former cabinet member and campaign fund officer named only a month ago likely to be indicted. There was a very real possibility that some of these and other officials might be indicted at once and sent to jail for months, if not the charges may well include conspiracy in spying, bribery, obstructing justice and financial misdeeds.

The nation's capital was thrown into an apprehensive mood of confusion and suspense. The greatest officials listed attempts to defend them, had broken connections with federal prosecutors and fled the city and out of a Washington grand jury room, dodging questions in the White House, handsome young presidential aides, selected for their loyalty and their reputed proficiency in public relations, turned helpfully on each other, contradicting reports in order to keep their employers' secret. The nation's capital was thrown into an apprehensive mood of confusion and suspense.

As the episode unfolded, a number of other officials, including Richard Nixon, chief of his present camp. Fanned by events to concede that his earlier blanket denial of White House involvement had been wrong, he finally dropped the pretense of being untouched by it all. Either he had been innocently misled in not pressing an earlier, deeper investigation of the matter, or he had been surreptitiously kept in the dark after his professed confidence in his own research and evidence in case reports to the contrary—or he had been a willing party to their deception. Either way, he could not escape heavy responsibility. Despite his plea for restoring "peace to the people," a major thrust of his Administration has been to weaken the constitutional responsibilities of the Executive Branch to an unprecedented degree, in the hands of a relatively small circle of those overly trusted White House aides.

The spreading scandal created for

the nation a crisis of confidence in its Government. An overwhelming majority of Americans re-elected Nixon in large part because he spoke so often of the need to again respect the law, strictly administered and applied with equal severity to all. He exhorted our judges and Supreme Court decisions that enable citizens to go free on political conviction. Now his closest aides, associates and confidants are being indicted and held in custody. The high Administration official who moved in an exaggerated manner: "I don't know why any citizen should ever again believe anything a Government official says."

The overall picture of collusion and cover-up in 1972. The burglary and wiretapping of Democratic National Committee headquarters in Washington's Watergate complex last June was a serious crime in itself. Beyond it has been revealed as clearly part of a deliberate campaign of political espionage designed to give Nixon an unfair, illegal—and unnecessary—advantage in his re-election drive. It was financed with secret campaign funds, contributed in cash by anonymous donors and never fully accounted for, in violation of the law. Then, after the event, dozens more in the White House, the same funds were used to persuade most of them to stand guilty and keep quiet about any further involvement.

With initially the Justice Department and the FBI were influenced by either White House officials or their own leaders who had an exaggerated sense of political loyalty to the President, to limit their investigations. They avoided any definitive findings on who had ordered the espionage, who had approved it, who had paid for it and who had conveyed information about the high money. That extraordinary attempt at concealment might have succeeded, but persistent questions kept probing on their own, asking questions and pointing out answers from lower-level Government officials who were assigned to the case about them.

A courageous Washington federal judge, John J. Sirica, applied intense pressure on the wiretappers after their conviction in January, urging them to break their silence. A determined federal grand jury in Washington, which had indicted the original Watergate defendants last summer, then got stronger leadership from several prosecutors at Langley. And a select Senate committee headed by North Carolina's Sen. J. Ervin Jr. moved rapidly to expose the White House Watergate scandal in televised public hearings.

As the pressure built up, Nixon's cabinet members looked at his aides' test-

imony before Senate committees became vulnerable. Nearly a legal scholar could be found to support this upheaval of chaos of unqualified Executive officials, Republican Congress began preparing just as vigorously as liberal Democratic critics. The President's brief and blunt denials of White House involvement no longer sufficed anyone. Finally, last week, Nixon spoke up. He called a White House press conference, publicly read a prepared statement that took just three minutes, and refused to answer questions. White top politicians in both parties expressed relief that the President finally accepted some of the ramifications of Watergate, Mc-



Objects Covered by Their Own Image; Ripping Open an Incredible Scandal, 1973

Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2020





Twin Towers, 2002, alternative views





El Mirador, 1996, installation view, *Universalis*, 23rd Bienal Internacional de São Paulo, Brazil (1996)

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 clichés. 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, installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2020

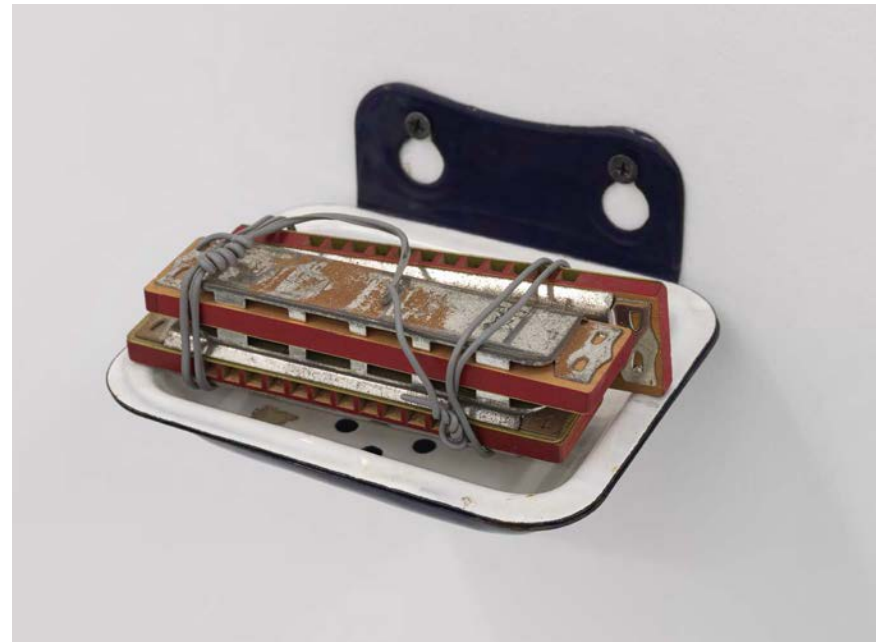


El Mirador, 1996, detail views





El Mirador, 1996, installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2020



El Mirador, 1996, detail views



El Mirador, 1996, installation view,
Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2020



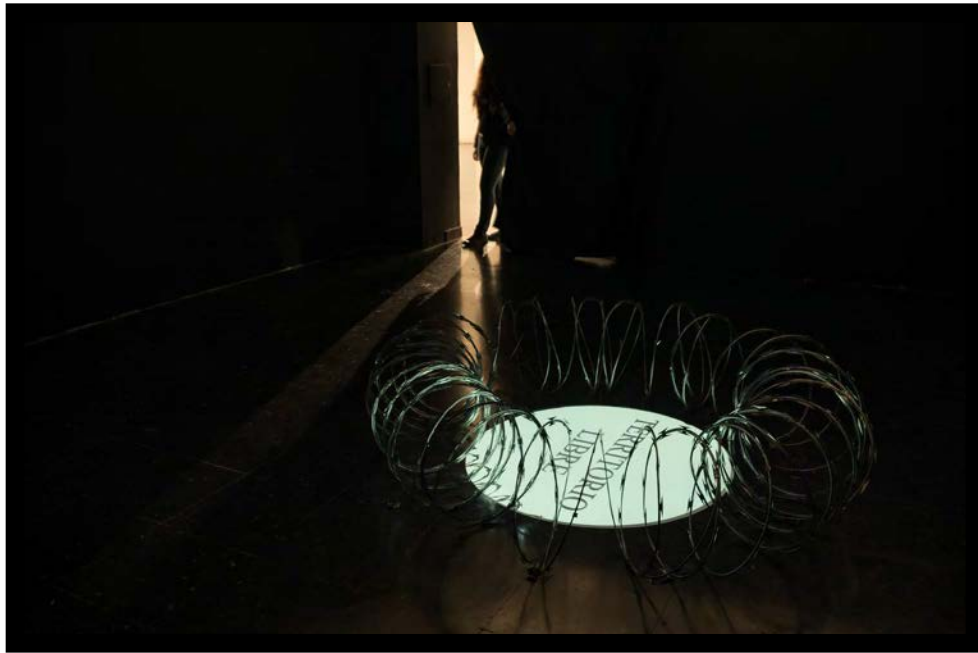
El Mirador, 1996, detail views



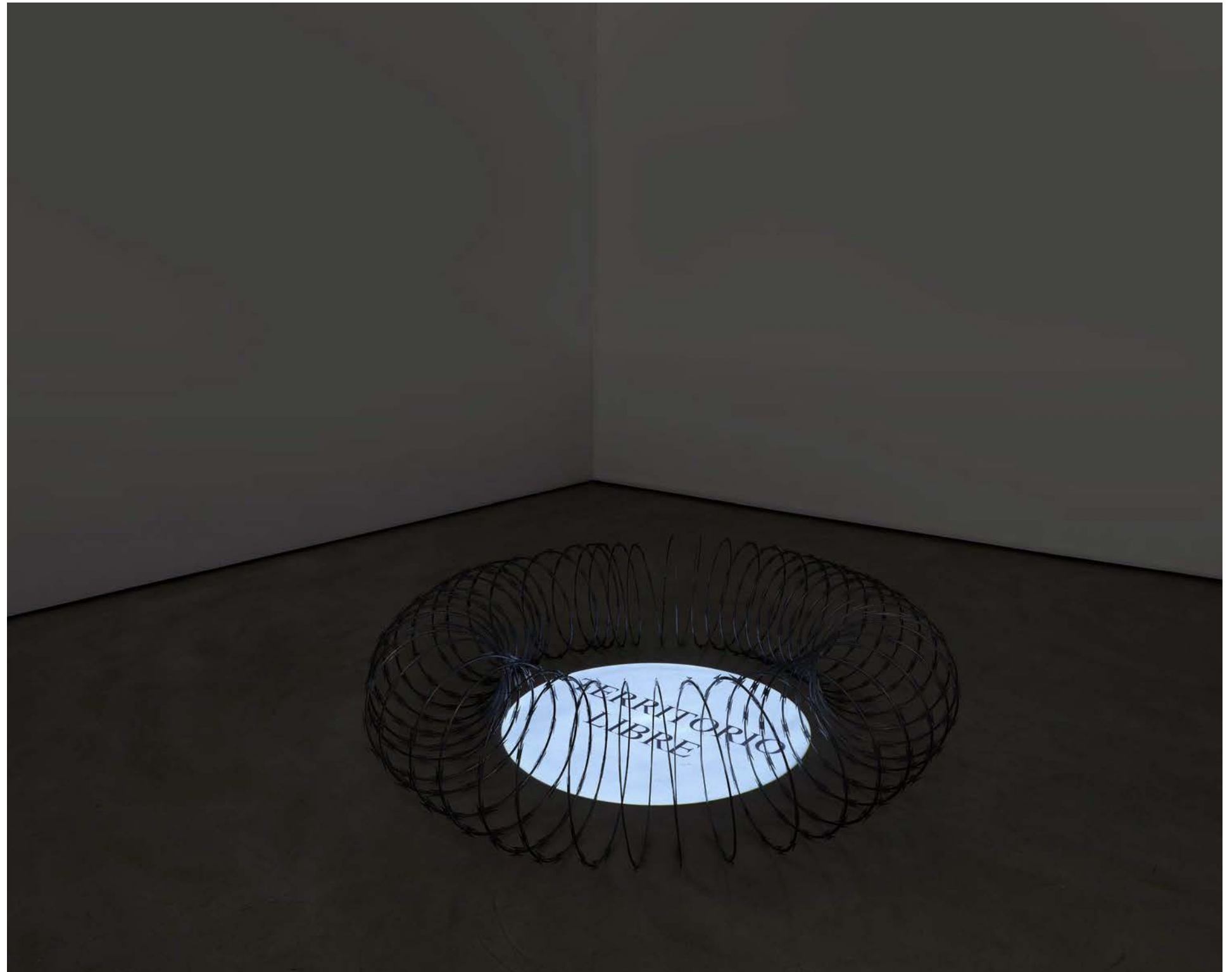
Territorio Libre

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, *Intervention*, Centro de Exposiciones Subte, Montevideo, Uruguay (2018)



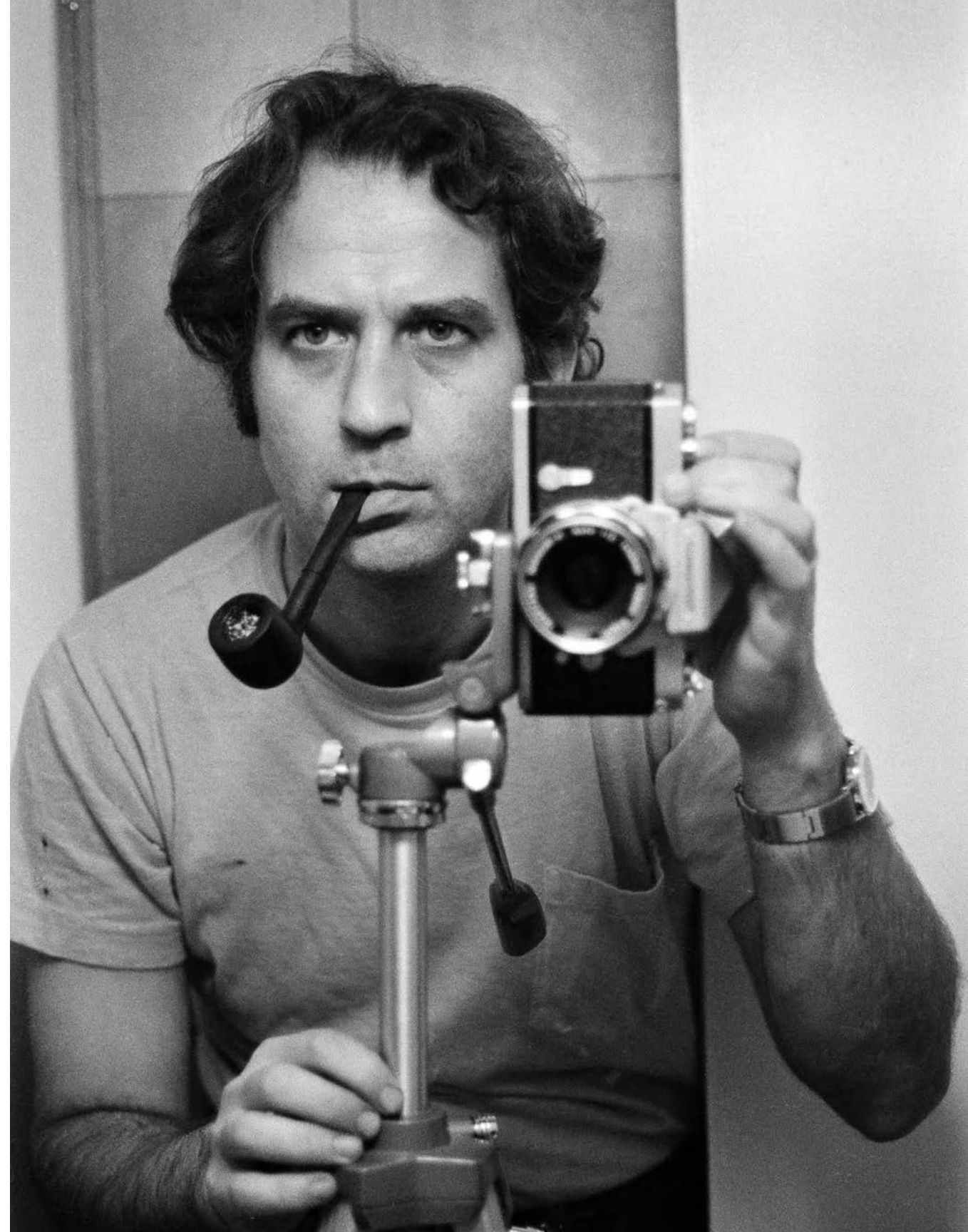
Territorio Libre, 2018, installation view,
Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2020



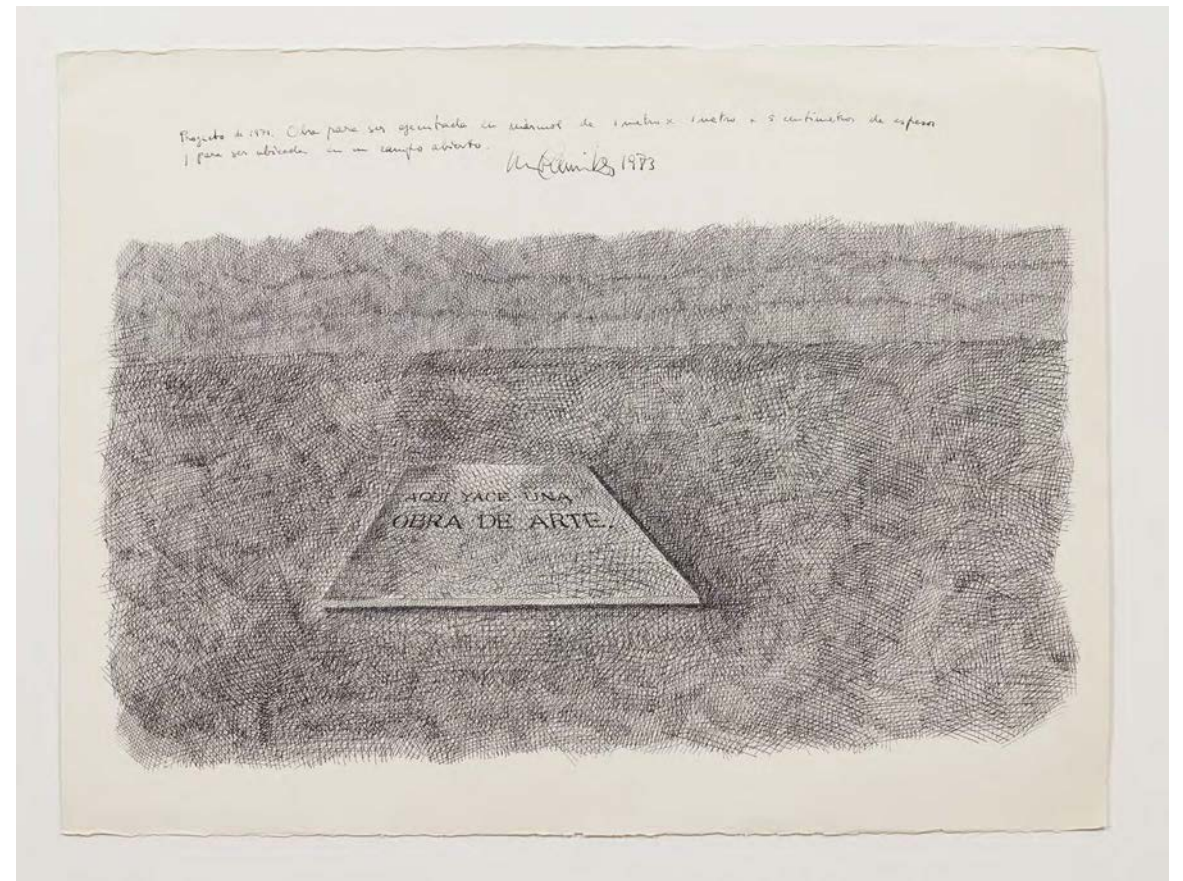
*TERRITORIO
LIBRE*



Territorio Libre, 2018, installation view,
Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2020



Luis Camtizer, c.1971



Aqui yace una obra de arte [Here lies a work of art], 1973



Aquí yace una obra de arte [Here lies a work of art], 1973,
installation view, Galería Parra & Romero, Madrid (2018)

Aquí yace una obra de arte, 1973, installation view, Galería Parra & Romero, Madrid (2018)





Documenta Projekt, 2002, installation view, Documenta 11, Kassel, Germany (2002)



Documenta Projekt, 2002, installation view, Documenta 11, Kassel, Germany (2002)



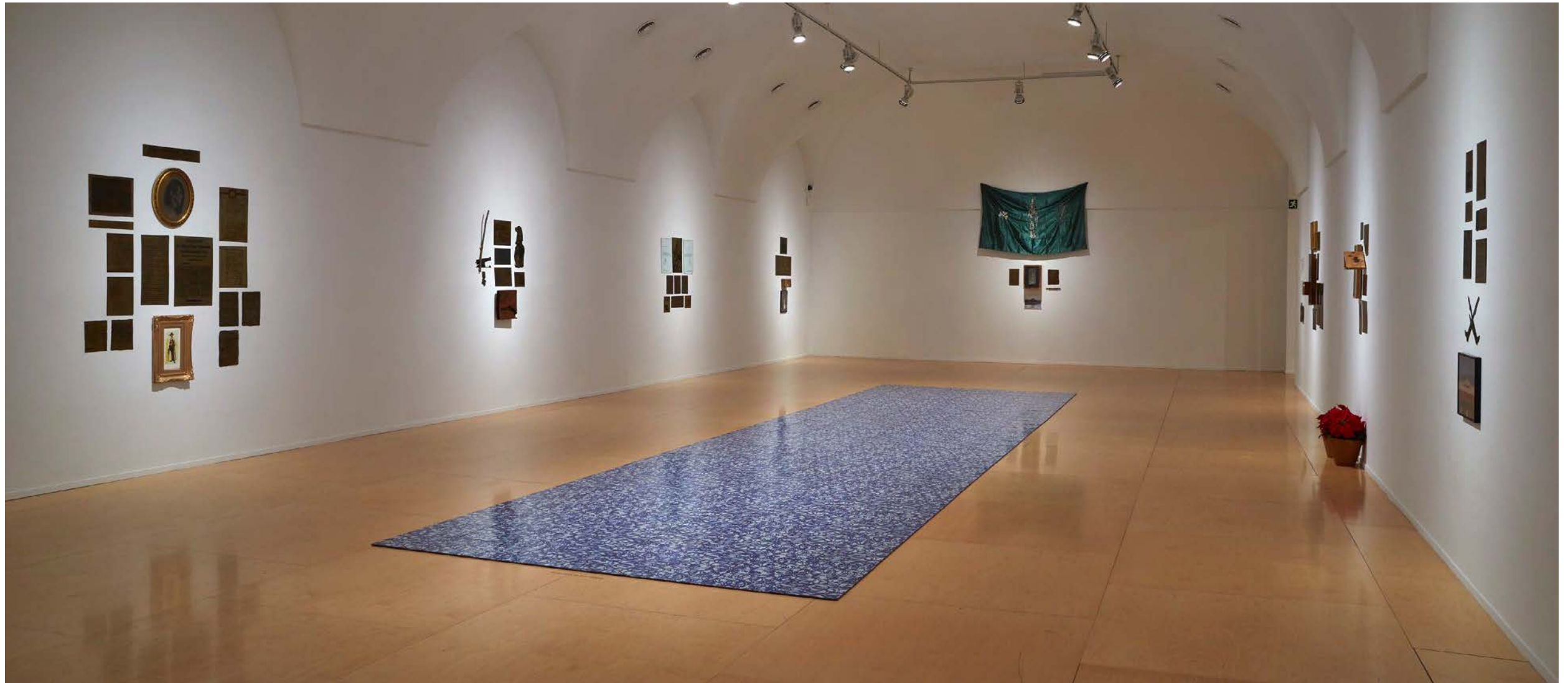
Documenta Projekt, 2002, installation view,
Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid (2018)

Documenta Projekt, 2002, installation view,
Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid (2018)





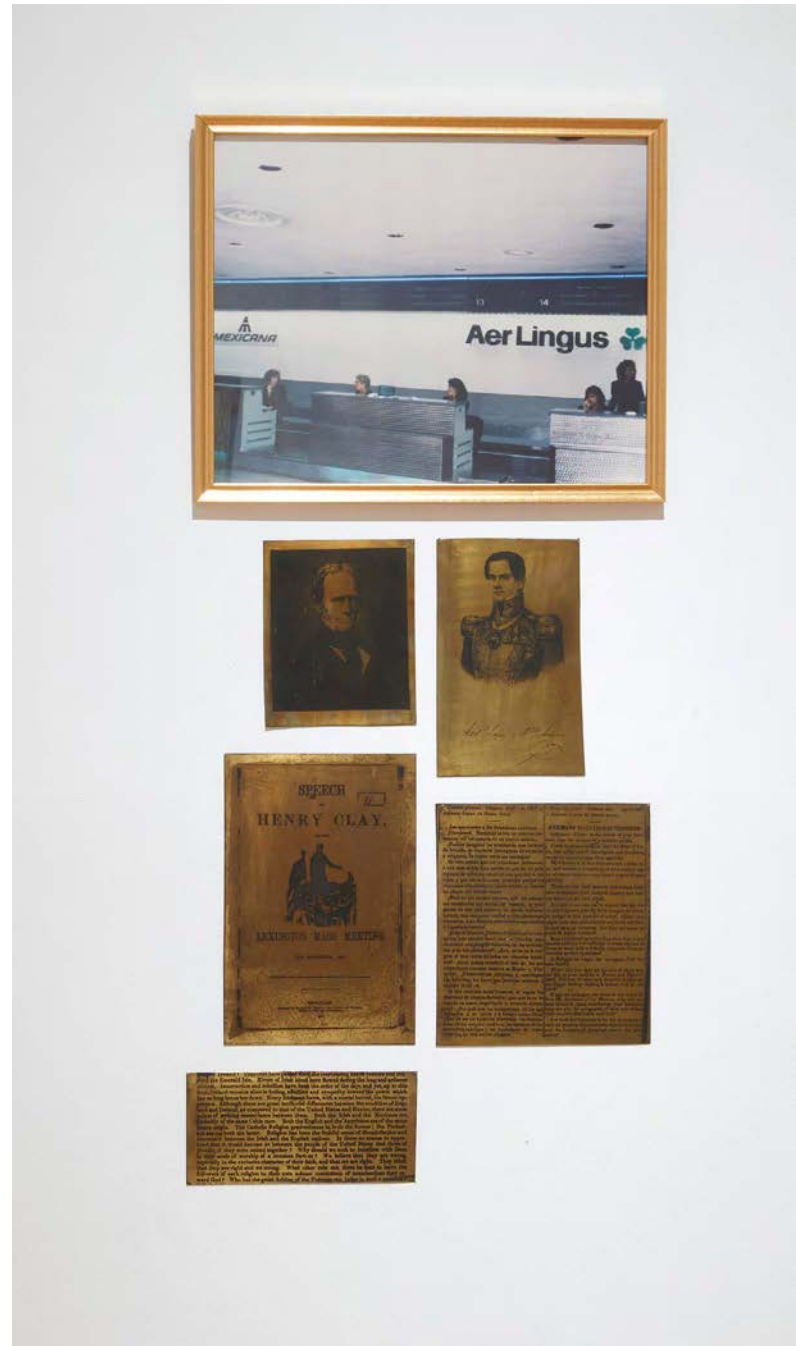
Portrait of the Artist, 1991, installation view,
Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, Detroit, MI (1991)



Los San Patricios, 1992/2018, installation view, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid (2018)



Los San Patricios, 1992/2018, detail views





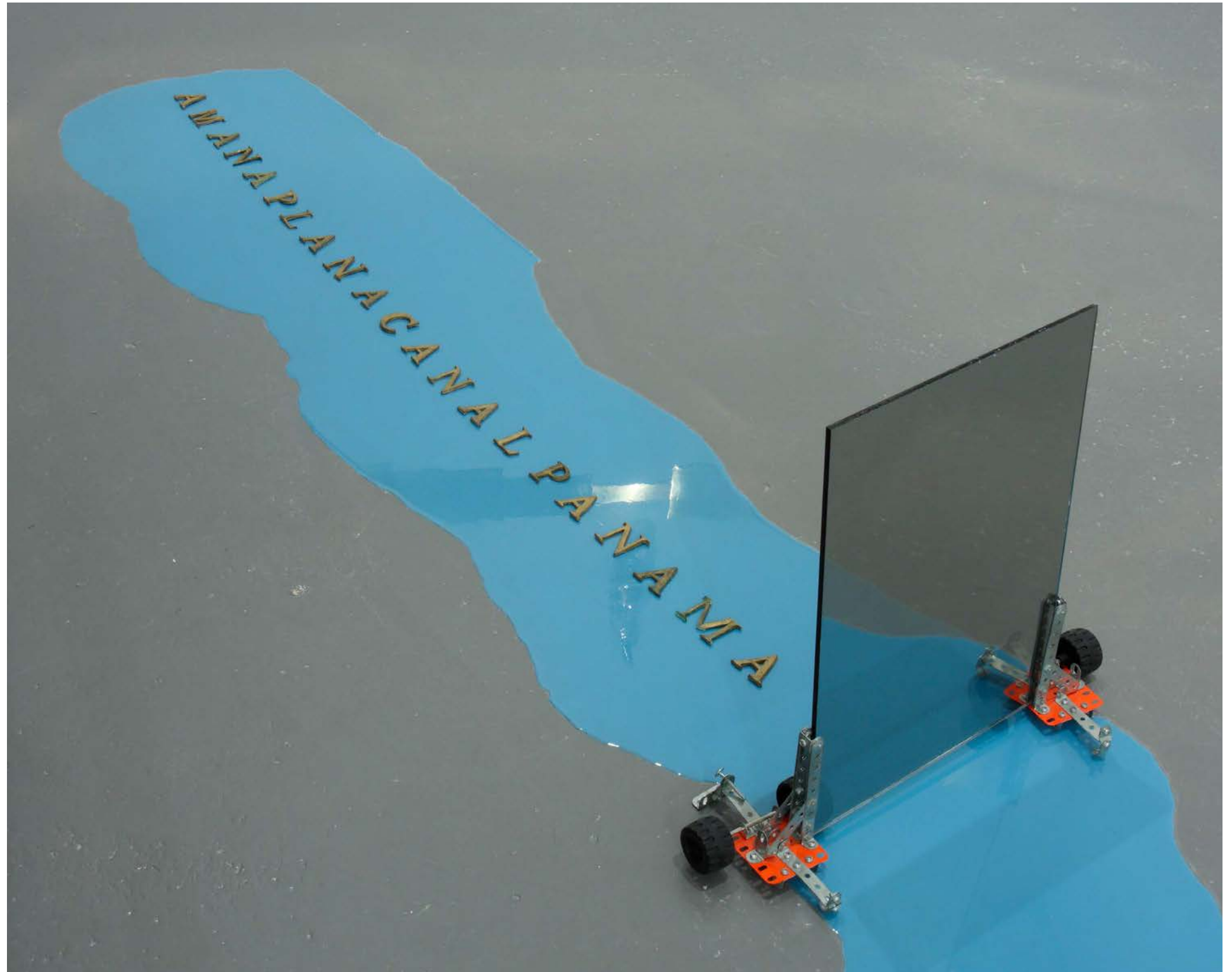
Los San Patricios, 1992/2018, installation view,
Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid (2018)



Fosa Común, 1969/, installation view, *Arte Correo*, Instituto Torcuato Di Tella, Buenos Aires, Argentina (1969)



Amanaplanacanalpanama, 1995, installation view, Gasworks, London, United Kingdom (2009)



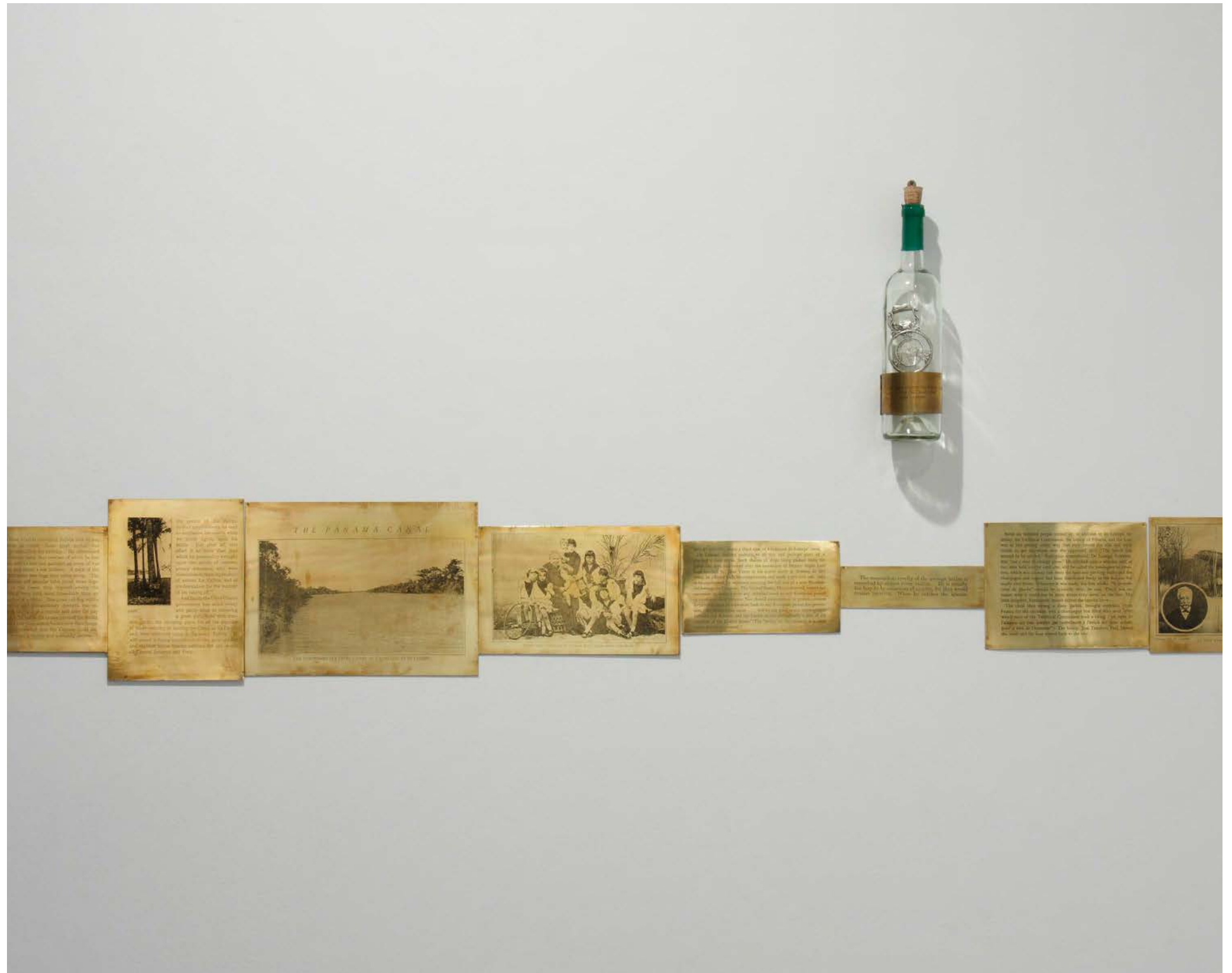
Amanaplanacanalpanama, 1995, installation
view, Gasworks, London, United Kingdom (2009)



WASHINGTON HOTEL AND STATUE OF CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS.

Amanaplanacanalpanama, 1995, details





Amanaplanacanalpanama, 1995, installation
view, Gasworks, London, United Kingdom (2009)



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 Lilita 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 Sofía, 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 Avedaño, 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 sepultados 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/
Found objects and pencil on paper on wall
Dimensions variable

Aquí yace una obra de arte, 1973
Ink on paper
22h x 30w in
55.88h x 76.2w cm

Aquí yace una obra de arte, 1972
Brass plaque and soil
Dimensions variable
Edition of 1 + 1 AP

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



El Mirador, 1996, installation view, Alexander Gray Associates (2020)

Published by Alexander Gray Associates on the occasion of the exhibition

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January 9 – February 15, 2020

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Contributors: Luis Camnitzer, Alex Santana

Editor: Alejandro Jassan

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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.

Alexander Gray Associates

510 West 26 Street

New York NY 10001

United States

Tel: +1 212 399 2636

www.alexandergray.com