

February 16, 2011

In the Beginning Was the Word

By HOLLAND COTTER

Some stars take longer than others to come into telescopic range. Such is the case with Luis Camnitzer, who, in his early 70s and with a half-century career behind him, is just now having his first New York museum survey.

The show, at [El Museo del Barrio](#), is terse, almost to the vanishing point in places, as might be expected from one of the pioneers of 1960s Conceptualism. Much of what's here is based on printed language: cryptic propositions, random lists of words and descriptive phrases — unmoored from, or very loosely tethered to, other spare-to-barely-there visual matter.

As elusive as the work looks, there's a truth-in-advertising directness to it. From an early point, Mr. Camnitzer made clear that for him art was not about claiming mastery of a medium or refining an identifiable style. He wanted to use very basic, unglamorous visual and linguistic tools to clear a zone for thinking, without interference from the market or pressure to be predictable.

He has remained steadfast in that quixotic resolve, supporting himself primarily as a teacher and critic. Only fairly recently has the mainstream art world begun to show some serious interest in meeting him on his own terms.

Mr. Camnitzer was born in Germany in 1937. Two years later his family emigrated to Uruguay, and he grew up in Montevideo. He went to art school there, then briefly studied sculpture in Munich, before coming to New York City in the early 1960s, at which point he was making prints and topical cartoons, Expressionist in style.

With its potential for cheap production and wide distribution, printmaking has had a long history in Latin America, particularly as a political vehicle. And its utopian dimension made it a popular medium in the United States in the context of the civil rights and antiwar movements of the 1960s. But Mr. Camnitzer began to find his skill with Expressionism to be a problem. It gained him attention, but it was too easy, demanded minimal thought. He felt he had to throw a wrench into the works.

With two émigré South American artists — [Liliana Porter, whom he married](#), and [José Guillermo Castillo](#) — he founded the [New York Graphics Workshop](#) in a borrowed

studio apartment in Manhattan, and began to push his printmaking in experimental directions, using unorthodox formats (printing on the side of a ream of paper, on cookies), and taking words as his primary visual elements.

In 1966 he made what he considers his first Conceptual piece, which was closer to a relief sculpture than to a print. It consisted of two unpunctuated phrases run together — “This is a Mirror You Are a Written Sentence” — spelled out in raised black plastic lettering against the light ground of what looked like an ordinary pegboard.

What did the words mean? That our reaction, positive or negative, to art is entirely scripted by habit and context? Or is there some other meaning relating to psychoanalytic theories of perception of a kind that fascinated many Latin American artists at that time? One thing was certain: the piece was intended to provoke thought and questions.

Other such works followed immediately, all making unorthodox uses of workaday media. From 1966 came a series of adhesive labels rubber-stamped and offset-printed with absurdist architectural proposals: “Ten story building with Styrofoam flowing out of the windows,” “A room with the center point of the ceiling touching the floor.” In the spirit of democratic distribution, the labels were suitable for mailing.

In the 1968 installation called “Living Room,” which has been recreated at El Museo, Mr. Camnitzer cooked up a full-scale architectural interior from words. All of the room’s elements — windows, desk, bookcase, carpet — were defined entirely by printed labels stuck to a gallery’s walls and floor. Labels printed with the word “window” outlined a window; labels printed “bookcase” outlined a bookcase. The piece was meant to be satirical: how boring bourgeois homes were, including his own, with everything generically tagged. At the same time, he was gladdened to see that the words could affect physical behavior. He observed that although visitors felt free to walk straight across the area of the floor marked “carpet,” they tended to walk around the area marked “desk.”

It’s worth noting that Mr. Camnitzer began using printed language as a primary art medium slightly before better-known North American Conceptualists like Lawrence Weiner. The catalog reminds us of this, chiefly to emphasize that postwar Latin American vanguard art was not, as it is often taken to have been, a passive recipient of Euro-American influence, but had developed ideas in advance of, in tandem with, or entirely apart from, art going on elsewhere.

For years Mr. Camnitzer made apartness a kind of personal ethic, which didn’t mean that he ignored the art market and its arbitrary values. To the contrary, he has commented on these subjects repeatedly. In a long series of print-based works from the 1960s onward, he offered his signature for sale, either hand-written or in different print

formats — laser-cut, silk-screened, or ink-stamped — and priced according to conventional market hierarchies based on original versus copy, glamour of medium, etc. The hand-written signature was marketed as a master drawing. Ink-stamped signatures, with the purchaser doing the stamping, were low-end products.

With such work, Mr. Camnitzer was a precursor of the strain of recent Conceptual art known as institutional critique, which takes the art industry as its target. At the same time, though, he was directing his attention to more serious political subjects.

Although he didn't leave Uruguay as a refugee, he had a strong reaction to the military dictatorship that eventually took control there. And his photo-and-text-based project called "From the Uruguayan Torture Series," from 1983-84, remains one of the most potent, under-your-skin responses made by any artist to the nightmare phenomenon of the "disappeared" in Latin America.

Although widely exhibited a few years ago at, among other places, El Museo, this piece isn't in the survey, which in general de-emphasizes Mr. Camnitzer's topical and polemical work. This may be because of the source of the material exhibited: everything is from the permanent collection of a single museum, [the Daros Latinamerica in Zurich](#), which opened in 2000.

Whether the Daros curators, Hans-Michael Herzog and Katrin Steffen, were constrained in their choices by what was on hand, or whether they set out to offer a particular view of Mr. Camnitzer's career, I don't know. But a particular, and partial, view is what we get.

There is certainly some polemical work here. The 1991 installation called "[The Journey](#)," consisting of three big carving knives thrusting out of the gallery wall and engraved with the names "Nina," "Pinta" and "Santa Maria," is a blatant anti-colonial statement. It's also a reminder that anti-colonial impulse shaped much Conceptual art from Latin America, distinguishing it from Duchamp-inspired Conceptualism in the United States. (It says much about the distance Mr. Camnitzer kept from international art world trends that his art stays close to a Latin American Conceptual model, even though he created most of it while living in and around New York.)

What the show conveys most decisively, though, is a poetic side of Mr. Camnitzer's art. Various writers have compared his text-driven pieces to concrete poetry — a genre based on how words function visually, rather than verbally, and that takes the instability of language as a given. The artist himself rejects this reading, insisting that he has no interest in poetry, even dislikes what he sees as its artificiality and penchant for ego-centered sentimentality.

But if you don't view poetry as sentimental and ego-fixated by definition, and instead

view it as a form of language that can evoke visual images and infuse them with ideas in peculiarly expansive combinations, then poetic isn't such a bad description of some of what's here.

A constellation of studio-floor scraps floats across a gallery wall, each scrap labeled with a single, random written word — “Error,” “Duty,” “Doubt” — that hints at large histories that we overlook and sweep away. In a photograph, we see a hand — the artist's?, God's? — holding a thin metal outline of a book against the sky, as if to absorb the cosmos. In a 2001-2 installation, stacks of real books fill two rectangular holes in the wall and are cemented into place, as if to protect from an invasion or to prevent escape from a bunker-library at the end of the world.

This piece, called “Window,” identifies a trail of darkness and pessimism that runs through Mr. Camnitzer's art, and different surveys — there will surely be others — will want to track that. But the present sighting of his career is a bright one, and El Museo, which has come up with an immaculate installation in its modestly scaled spaces, is an ideal observatory.

“Luis Camnitzer” remains through May 29

at El Museo del Barrio, 1230 Fifth Avenue, at 104th Street, East Harlem; (212) 831-7272.