

ARTNEWS

'ARTISTS, AFTER ALL, INTERVENE IN THE MINDS OF THE AUDIENCE': LUIS CAMNITZER ON THE PROBLEMS OF ART EDUCATION

BY *Alex Greenberger* POSTED 06/17/15 12:00 PM



Luis Camnitzer, *Landscape as an Attitude*, 1979, silver gelatin print.
COURTESY ALEXANDER GRAY ASSOCIATES AND THE ARTIST

Most writing about Luis Camnitzer's work is authored by none other than Camnitzer himself. There's no question about it—the Germany-born, Uruguay-raised, and New York-based Conceptualist doesn't keep quiet when it comes to himself. His visual art often involves text (critics have compared it to concrete poetry, but Camnitzer doesn't agree), and it deals with the exchange of ideas between artist and viewer. Sometimes, it is political, but many times it is about the nature of art itself. His writing on teaching, beauty, and expanding the art-historical canon is really nothing more than an extension of that practice.

Last night, at SVA, Camnitzer lectured on what he called “art thinking,” which, as he explained, is “not quite a discipline, but a meta-discipline.” (What he really meant by this was a new kind of art education, but more on this later.) This lecture, sure enough, was mostly spent reading a long essay that Camnitzer had written ahead of time. He sat down in the front of the room at a spare white table, wearing a long-sleeved white button-up and blue jeans. He looked and talked like a Conceptual artist—nothing but the bare essentials, with much more in his head than what met the eye.

And so began his complex argument for art thinking. “When we talk about art, we generally lump a great many things together, to the point where we are knowing not exactly what we are talking about,” Camnitzer said, in his distinctly German-Uruguayan-American accent. “When I ask anybody, the response would be that there’s art-making and there’s art appreciation.” But he wanted to add a third group—art thinking.



Luis Camnitzer.
COURTESY ARTNET

So how did we get here, with all this “institutional laziness,” as Camnitzer put it? How did we get to a point where art students only learn about the same artists over and over again? Camnitzer’s answer was that prospective art students seek schools with prestige that are not interested in churning out better students. (Worth noting is that Camnitzer’s art from the ’60s has been considered an inspiration for institutional critique, which looks at museums and power structures.)

Camnitzer began to outline two dialogues—Dialogue 1 and Dialogue 2. (He broke away from reading his essay, took a sip of water, and, in a rare humorous moment, added, “That’s not very original.”) Dialogue 1 was Salon-style thinking, in which mastering craft was the main point of art education. “This is the part that selected people out from art and led to the phrase, ‘I can’t even draw a straight line,’” Camnitzer said, pausing briefly for dramatic emphasis. Somewhere around

Romanticism, in the early 19th-century, “Dialogue 1 was redirected from the material to the art object.”

“We still don’t know exactly what art is,” Camnitzer added, regarding the attitude of Dialogue 1 artists. “The questions were about the references needed to make works of art.” These attitudes produced a series of –isms—Impressionism, Expressionism, Suprematism, etc.—and a linear art-historical narrative, which Camnitzer finds to be too universalizing. “The notion of progress is nothing more than a carryover from the Enlightenment and our way of thinking conditioned by science and capitalism,” he concluded. It was also too focused on individual achievements and the artist’s genius.

Dialogue 2, however, was something Camnitzer could get behind. “The dialogue shifted and took place between the art object and the viewer,” he said. “Art became aware of itself as both information and communication.” Think Duchamp and the Dada artists—the “what” and the “why” of art became more important than how it was done. Camnitzer is, more or less, a Dialogue 2 artist.

Camnitzer also acknowledged some of Dialogue 2’s dangers. “Viewers were both activated and deactivated,” and art became spectacular. On a more positive note, Camnitzer also noted that the artist is “not defined by ego,” but by the audience. “Art,” he said, “is now a fully context-driven activity.”

“With Dialogue 2, the need to approach other areas of knowledge becomes even more important,” Camnitzer said. “It’s not anymore defined by the ego, but by the relevance and effect it will have once it reaches an intended audience. Here, art assumes the role of shaping culture rather than shaping a market or being shaped by it. It then doesn’t matter if it’s individual or collective work.”

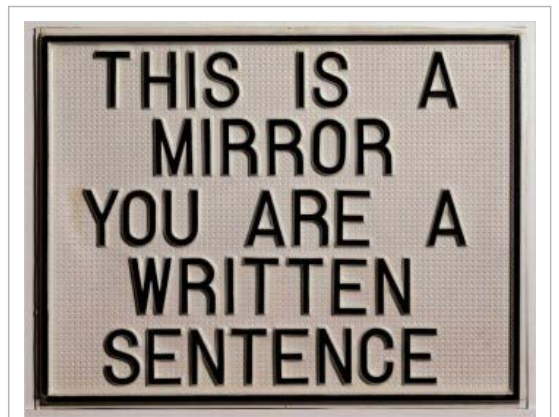
Both dialogues are about trying to learn something new, and that’s where art education and art thinking come in. “You could say that this addressing the unknown should be a central point in any art school, yet it rarely is,” Camnitzer said. “You say that ultimately

addressing the unknown is not only the basis of all art activities, but any sound dimension. That is what makes learning the real task, not teaching.”

Students, he said, need to be studying the contexts of objects rather than the objects themselves because art is such an “ambiguous word.” This is art thinking—stripping away the genius and craft and focusing on what art does for the world. “Artists, after all, intervene in the minds of the audience,” Camnitzer said.

Perhaps feeling like their jobs were invalidated, many professors in the room were unhappy with what Camnitzer said. The MFA students seemed equally frustrated and curious. Maybe this was exactly what Camnitzer wanted. As he said at one point in his talk, “We have either to reconsider the teaching of art or we have to declare that it’s not just art can be taught.”

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Luis Camnitzer, *This Is a Mirror, You Are a Written Sentence*, 1966–68, vacuum-formed polystyrene mounted on synthetic board.

PETER SCHÄLCHLI, ZÜRICH