Luis Camnitzer: *The Mediocrity of Beauty*

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The Mediocrity of Beauty

It is only fair to start with a warning of where I precisely place beauty in art: beauty is the wrapping paper that envelops the gift and makes it desirable and saleable. It brings us close to it, makes us feel happy and drool over it, and yet in spite of everything, it is not the gift. The gift continues to be wrapped until we open the package and we confront what is inside. This does not mean that the paper lacks merit. There are exquisitely designed wrapping papers, those that we regret ripping before we see what is inside. There are even wrapping papers that are more interesting than what they cover. Gifts from aunts who never completely understood us, but who, in a convincing demonstration of their love, spent hours preparing the package in the neatest and most appealing way possible. Then there is the two-year old toddler who plays with the wrapped package believing that everything ended with the shell, and that there is nothing beyond the surface.

I don’t have any authority to seriously discuss the subject of beauty. I don’t have training in philosophy, I am not a scholar. I don’t even have a university degree. The only thing I can point to is my experience as an artist. If I wasn’t a conceptualist artist, I would say that the ideas I express here are a product of my hands-on experience. This essay is therefore the product of art making rather than rigorous intellectual research. For many reasons, discussing beauty seems one of the best ways to destroy it. This doesn’t bother me since, as by now it should be obvious, I have always distrusted anything beautiful. I don’t know exactly why this is the case, and maybe in writing this essay I will find out. It is possible that my rejection of it is a self-defense mechanism generated during my teenage years when none of the girls I admired would give me the time of day. Later in life, at a slightly more sophisticated level, I remember reading a negative comment by Henry Moore in regard to symmetry. This quality is supposedly one of the most important ingredients of beauty, nearly an indispensable condition. Perceptively, Moore declared symmetry a waste of information, since it uses twice the space to say the same thing. The comment did not necessarily lead me to prefer asymmetrical girls, but it made me reflect a great deal. I was eighteen years old at the time and Moore’s work fascinated me. He was considered one of the great sculptors of the twentieth century, and given I was a sculpture student, his work helped liberate me from the yoke of the academy. Today I no longer like his work. I don’t believe that this change is Moore’s fault. His work is probably still good, the volumes continue to exist in their full expression, and they live within a discourse that is both personal and coherent.

La mediocridad de la belleza

No es más que justo que advierta de entrada en dónde precisamente ubico la belleza en el arte. La belleza es el papel que envuelve el regalo y lo hace deseable, si no vendible. Nos acerca, nos seduce, nos hace sentir bien, nos hace agu la boca, pero a pesar de todo eso, no es el regalo. El regalo sigue envuelto hasta que abrimos el paquete y nos enfrentamos a lo que está adentro. Esto no significa que el papel que envuelve no tenga mérito. Hay papeles de envolver exquisitamente diseñados, que dan pena rasgar antes de ver lo que hay adentro. Hay incluso papeles que son más interesantes que aquello que envuelven. Regalos de tías que nunca nos entendieron completamente, pero que como demostración convincente de su amor gastan horas en preparar el paquete en la manera más primorosa posible. Luego está el niño de dos años quien, enfrentado al regalo, juega embelesado con la caja creyendo que el regalo terminó en la cáscara y que del otro lado de la frontera no hay nada.

En realidad, no tengo ninguna autoridad para hablar sesudamente sobre el tema de la belleza. No tengo formación filosófica o escolástica seria, no tengo siquiera un título universitario, y lo único que puedo invocar aquí es mi experiencia como artista. Si no fuera un artista conceptualista, diría que las ideas que trataré de exponer son producto de la experiencia de tener mis manos en la masa. Son, por lo tanto, deducciones del quehacer artístico y no de una investigación intelectual rigurosa. Por varios motivos, tener que hablar sobre la belleza parece una de las mejores maneras de aniquilarla. Esto no es algo que me moleste, pero siempre desconfié de todo lo que fuera bello. No sé bien por qué y a lo mejor lo averiguo en este proceso. Es posible que mi rechazo sea un mecanismo de defensa generado durante mi adolescencia, cuando ninguna de las niñas admiradas se dignaba a siquiera darme la hora. Un poco más tarde, y en un nivel un poco más sofisticado, recuerdo haber leído un comentario negativo de Henry Moore con respecto a la simetría. La simetría es supuestamente uno de los ingredientes importantes de la belleza, casi una de las condiciones imprescindibles. Agudamente, Moore la declaró un derroche de información, ya que lo único que hace es utilizar el doble del espacio para decir lo mismo. Esto no me llevó necesariamente a preferir niñas asimétricas, pero sí me obligó a pensar bastante. En aquella época, yo tenía 18 años, la obra de Moore me fascinaba enormemente. Era considerado uno de los grandes escultores del siglo XX y para mí, siendo un estudiante de escultura, fue uno de los artistas que me ayudó a liberarme del peso de la academia. Hoy su obra ya no me gusta. Creo
Moore had a formidable instinct for volumes. During his time, he created art outside existing conventions without falling into banality, contrary to others like Barbara Hepworth, also famous at the time. Since then, two things happened: one is that sculpture as an independent medium lost its reason for being; and second, and more crucial for what we are discussing, Moore's formal play has been digested by several generations of pseudo-artists who decided that his work was a paradigm for beauty. These generations misused his creative process generated by rounded volumes to create a new imagery with a crude form of stylization. This stylization is used merely to, in a slick and kitschy fashion, simplify reality to re-present it and generate something already known. These people then produced (and are still producing) maternities based on small rounded shapes and, to dispel any doubts about their beauty, they reintroduce symmetry. With this, we can establish two kinds of beauty: one we may define as aspiring to the sublime, and the other that stays within conventionality. The sublime is an important subject that I will address later.

For reasons that may be either obvious or unexplainable, I started writing this text the day after watching the film Avatar. After seeing Titanic and regretting the absence of capital punishment within the Hollywood compound, family pressure forced me into submission. According to North American film critics, the most outstanding aspect of Avatar is its “beautiful” portrayal of nature after digital fabrication. Within this virtual setting there is a fairly idiotic story where, even if the critics don’t underline this, once more an American hero saves a group of vulnerable, underdeveloped and primitive people from succumbing to the evil of an imperialism that also comes from the United States. It’s the theory of vaccination applied to politics. It is taken for granted that film critics of The New York Times and The New Yorker are sophisticated people who would not buy into small-rounded-shaped maternities arranged along an axis of symmetry. Yet, the association of beauty with nature seems to erase the difference that separates social and taste classes, and other class divisions. The little luminous medusas depicted in Avatar, which every so often float in front of our eyes and gently land on the arms of the hero to indicate the important role he is to play in the story, are a symbol of this confluence. This association is the place where animal and botanical species, social classes, the civilized and primitives—all of them—merge in a paradise and in our hearts so that we may be collectively comfortable and happy. All this leads to a problem: whether art exists to make us feel comfortable or to explore new hitherto unknown avenues. Personally, I favor the second and believe that kitsch or corniness is a symptom of the first. Before
arguing my position, however, we would have to explore how beauty is generated. I usually don’t appeal to my own work to illustrate what I argue because I believe it’s not in good taste, but here I will make an exception. The reasons for my infraction will become apparent.

In English speaking countries the name Jane Doe is used to identify women whose real name is unknown or who want to keep their anonymity. It is something like “N.N.,” but more precise because Jane Doe takes the actual place of an original name. Nobody knows when exactly this custom started, but there are registries that include Jane Doe in England from 1659, and it is possible that somebody thought about this name usage earlier. The point is that some time ago I toyed with the idea of writing a biography of this Jane Doe. I used fragments of police reports, legal documents and newspapers taken from Google to weave a fairly lurid narrative where sexual abuse, mutilations and rapes, and accidents causing violent trauma that seriously affected the victims’ symmetry and physical appearance. Then I found the corresponding images: damaged faces and forensic reconstructions in plaster, generally lacking features one might associate with beauty. I used morphing software downloaded for free from the Internet, which allowed me to fuse all those faces—around fifty of them—into one single face. This process yielded a final portrait of Jane Doe. I made sure that each face was given the same percentage in the final face so that none could dominate over the others. It was, in my life, the experience that brought me closest to performing a miracle. I had created the conditions for the birth of a new Madonna, a saint that emerged from a group that, at least partially, was formed by sinners and undesirables. Later, of course, I explained the situation to myself more rationally. There was no miracle. The overlays were confirming the victims’ symmetry and physical appearance. Then I found the corresponding images: damaged faces and forensic reconstructions in plaster, generally lacking features one might associate with beauty. I used morphing software downloaded for free from the Internet, which allowed me to fuse all those faces—around fifty of them—into one single face. This process yielded a final portrait of Jane Doe. I made sure that each face was given the same percentage in the final face so that none could dominate over the others. It was, in my life, the experience that brought me closest to performing a miracle. I had created the conditions for the birth of a new Madonna, a saint that emerged from a group that, at least partially, was formed by sinners and undesirables. Later, of course, I explained the situation to myself more rationally. There was no miracle. The overlays were confirming conventional and shared features, while the particular and accidental ones were slowly being erased. If a candidate had a crooked nose and the other forty-nine had straight ones, in the end the crooked nose would disappear. The final portrait was an average of all the faces, with all the individual characteristics erased.

I believed myself very perceptive with my conclusions, proud but also sad because the miracle hadn’t taken place. My pride disappeared abruptly when, while writing this text, I once more used Wikipedia to read about beauty.¹ I used the English page, where in reference to human beauty it mentions, among other things, Charles Darwin’s cousin Francis Galton. I had previously encountered references to Galton because he was one of las clases sociales, los civilizados y los primitivos, todos se aúnan en el paraíso y en nuestros corazones para que colectivamente estemos cómodos y contentos. Todo esto nos enfrenta a un problema: el decidir si el arte está para hacernos sentir cómodos o si está para explorar nuevas avenidas que hasta el momento son desconocidas. Personalmente creo en lo segundo y pienso que la cursilería o el kitsch es uno de los síntomas de lo primero. Para fundamentar mi posición habría que ver primero cómo se genera la belleza. Tengo como regla general no apelar a obras mías para ilustrar lo que digo porque me parece de mal gusto, pero aquí voy a hacer una excepción; los motivos de esta infracción se harán evidentes.

En los países de habla inglesa se utiliza el nombre Jane Doe para identificar a las mujeres de quien no se sabe el verdadero nombre o para las que se quiere mantener en el anonimato. Es algo como fulana de tal, o N.N., pero más preciso, porque Jane Doe es un nombre que realmente toma el lugar del nombre original. No se sabe cuándo comenzó la costumbre, pero hay registros en Inglaterra que datan de 1659, y probablemente a alguien ya se le había ocurrido la idea bastante antes. El asunto es que hace un tiempo tuve la idea de hacer una especie de biografía y retrato de esta Jane Doe. Para crear este retrato, utilicé fragmentos de informes policiales, legales y periódicos tomados de Google para hilar una narrativa bastante espeluznante en la que predominan los abusos sexuales, las violaciones y los accidentes con traumas violentos que afectan seriamente la simetría física de las víctimas. Luego utilicé las imágenes correspondientes a las historias: caras mutiladas, a veces reconstruidas en yeso por los forenses, y generalmente carentes de esas cualidades que se puedan asociar con la noción tradicional de belleza. Utilicé un programa especial disponible gratuitamente en la Internet, que me permitió fusionar todas esas caras, cerca de cincuenta, en una cara única. Logré el retrato final de Jane Doe. Puse cuidado especial para que cada una de las caras utilizadas tuviera el mismo porcentaje en la suma final y que ninguna pudiera predominar sobre las demás. Fue, en mi vida, la experiencia que más me acercó a la realización de un milagro. Había creado las condiciones para que naciera una nueva Madonna, una especie de santa que emergió de lo que, al menos en parte, seguramente era un grupo pecaminoso y de mala vida. Claro que luego me expliqué el fenómeno más racionalmente. No hubo milagro. Lo que sucedió fue que en las superposiciones se iban confirmando los rasgos regulares y comunes, mientras que los rasgos particulares y accidentales se iban borrando. Si una candidata tenía una nariz torcida y las otras 49 tenían narices derechas, al final la torcida

the initiators of the eugenics movement. During his time, the movement became fashionable in England and in the United States. Eugenics was first used to justify the sterilization of criminals and mentally diseased people. Then it became a platform for racial purification in Nazi Germany. However, I didn’t know that in 1883 that same Galton started to overlay photographs of vegetarians and criminals, searching for common traits that defined typicality. Wikipedia does not specify if “typical” here refers to both categories, considered each one separately, or if Galton believed that vegetarians and criminals shared something in common. What is relevant in terms of beauty is that Galton had discovered that the overlays produced facial features that, as a result of their summation, became increasingly more attractive. My perceptiveness went down the drain and I was left without miracle and without pride.

In spite of his racism, or at least the racist consequences of his thoughts—I do not know much about Galton, but even if he was absent-minded, he was no idiot—his findings led me to interesting conclusions. According to all this research, the average of many is more “beautiful” than the particulars of a single individual. In terms of biological evolution it seems logical and natural that the median is sexually more attractive than each of the isolated examples, since it protects us from certain mutations by avoiding duplication of DNA information. In other words, it seems that there are biological reasons behind why we are more attracted to a certain mediocre aesthetic rather than by outstanding features. Following laws of evolution, this mediocrity confirms successful results, and makes us distrust any experimentation with particular cases that escape the norm. One might speculate that the taboo about incest has the same origin. Incest confirms and underlines deviations of that average because it happens outside the norm and confirms particular cases. That may also explain why aesthetic judgment about relatives is generally suspended. There is a lack of distance from the average because focus is applied to an individual and particularized affective relation that precedes aesthetic judgment.

I believe the condition of beauty in art is not too different, to the contrary, it is consistent with the above. In art we have many formal recipes, the golden section among them, which guarantee pleasant results and eliminate accidents and deviations. They are rules that transcend cultural constraints and have a degree of universality, something that allows us to believe that they have a certain biological grounding. Stanislas Dehaene explains that the reading of written words, no matter what language, always activates a small part of the cortical area in the left hemisphere. His theory is that there are some basic elements of letters, linear graphic
desaparece. O sea que el retrato final era un promedio “limpiado” de todos los ejemplos particulares.

Me consideré sumamente perspicaz con mis conclusiones, orgulloso pero también triste porque el milagro no había ocurrido. Mi orgullo desapareció abruptamente cuando al escribir este texto fui a la ineludible Wikipedia a leer qué me decía sobre la belleza. Utilicé la página en inglés, donde en referencia a la belleza humana dan información (entre otras cosas) sobre Francis Galton, un primo de Charles Darwin. Yo ya había tenido referencias sobre Galton, porque fue uno de los iniciadores del movimiento eugenista. Ya en su época, la ideología eugenista se puso de moda en Inglaterra y en los Estados Unidos. Primero se utilizó para justificar la esterilización de criminales y enfermos mentales, y luego sirvió como plataforma para los intentos de purificación racial de la Alemania Nazi. Lo que no sabía, sin embargo, fue que en 1883 este mismo Galton empezó a superponer fotografías de vegetarianos y de criminales, buscando los elementos comunes más típicos. La página de Wikipedia no aclara si lo típico se refería a cada categoría por separado, o sí esperaba encontrar algo común entre vegetarianos y criminales. Pero lo importante es que, en sus esfuerzos, Galton descubrió que superponiendo las caras la suma iba produciendo rasgos faciales cada vez más atractivos. Fue con esta información que mi tan meritoria perspicacia se fue al diablo, y me quedé sin milagro y sin orgullo.

A pesar del racismo de Galton, o por lo menos de las consecuencias racistas de sus ideas—no sé demasiado sobre Galton, pero el hombre, aunque quizás despistado, no era un idiota—me quedaron conclusiones interesantes. De acuerdo a toda esta investigación, el promedio resulta más “bello” que el caso particular. En términos de evolución biológica parece que es completamente lógico y natural que ese promedio sea físicamente más atractivo que cada uno de los ejemplos aislados, ya que nos protege de ciertas mutaciones al evitar la duplicación de información del ADN. En otras palabras, parece que por razones biológicas nos atrae más una cierta mediocridad estética. En términos de las leyes de evolución, esta mediocridad confirma los resultados que ya tuvieron éxito y nos lleva a desconfiar de la experimentación con los casos particulares que están fuera de la norma. Uno podría especular que el tabú del incesto tiene el mismo origen. El incesto confirma y subraya las desviaciones de ese promedio porque sucede fuera de él y confirma casos particulares. Eso puede explicar también por qué el juicio estético con respecto a

parts that facilitate reading, already wired into the circuits of neurons. Other perceptions like color surfaces, facial features, and locations in space, activate other areas of the brain. There is a study that proves that taxi drivers in London have an area in their brains that is bigger than that of the average citizen, and that this is due to constant visual-spatial relocation. Dehaene cites J.P. Changeux, who says “a work of art is perceived as a masterpiece when it stimulates multiple cerebral processes in a new, synchronic and harmonious fashion.” It would be interesting to study if the cerebral areas involved with the perception of beauty grow with frequent use. Considering the averages generated by Galton and the possibility that beauty has a pre-assigned place in our brains, we could have an answer to the dilemma between the local and universal. This would only include the results of different averages. While there are basic invariants in the brain that are universal, like the predisposition for facial recognition, the local aesthetic would emphasize the averages of the variables of a particular environment. Universal beauty, in contrast, would be the product of a global average. Both beauties are valid, but returning to my earlier metaphor, they are no longer the wrapping paper that separates us from the gift.

I am fully aware that equating beauty, whether biological in origin or not, with wrapping paper is a very personal interpretation. Hence my warning, my position is that of an artist, not of a philosopher who looks for absolute truth. My position is frankly strategic: for me, beauty is one resource among many, to use it—or not—according to my purposes. Other artists, with different purposes, will place beauty’s importance at another level, depending on how they define their artistic positions.

If I had to explain why I have been involved in art for so many years I would list three reasons:

a) It’s the communication tool I’m most comfortable with;

b) It’s a category in which I may speculate about everything and propose alternative orders to conventional and authoritarian ones;

c) It’s a vehicle through which I may stimulate creation in others.

These would be my parameters, and within them beauty is only a tool for seduction and not an important message. As a message, beauty isn’t new either, were this the case, it wouldn’t be understood as beauty but as a different thing. For something to be beautiful, it has to first be understood and conventionalized.

2 See Stanislas Dehaene, Reading in the Brain (New York: Viking, 2009).
3 Ibid., 309–310.

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Herman Broch, one of the definitive authorities on the subject of kitsch, described its essence as “the confusion of the ethical category with the aesthetic category; the aim is a ‘beautiful’ work, not a ‘good’ one, what is important is the effect of beauty.” He then adds: “The means utilized to obtain the effect therefore were always used and previously proved, they cannot be incremented. . . .” Hence one resorts to prefabricated expressions. In this quote, Broch (in 1933) wants to exclude ethics from aesthetics. In a later text (1950) he affirmed that an ethical system cannot function without conventions, and therefore art that wishes to aesthetify activities subsumed to an ethic may only produce works of art that correspond to conventions. As a thinker contemporary to Modernist art, Broch sees ethics—somewhat narrowly—as a system that may be illustrated, and that when it does, cheapens art. Accordingly, ethics contaminates the formal freedom expected from the artist. Although this point of view is perhaps anachronistic, many of Broch’s considerations seem to be on target, which for the purpose of this essay, it means that they help my argument. Broch, for example, states that the “goddess of beauty in art is the goddess of kitsch,” and that “the artist that only seeks new zones of beauty ends up creating sensations, but not art.”

Though the goddess may be the same, I don’t want to suggest (and I believe that neither does Broch) that the results are commensurable. Kitsch has an ethical problem that beauty doesn’t, which is that many forms of kitsch are the consequence of envy. It is the formal result of trying to look like something else, which results in affectation. Generally, it is assumed that envy occurs within the poor in relation to the rich, which is why the taste of the elite deteriorates when it is badly adopted and adapted by the “non-cultured” classes. On the one hand, it’s assumed that the population lacking education cannot understand taste without conventions, which dilutes and transforms the products of the upper classes. On the other hand, upper classes—one thinks—may perceive and appreciate novelty, but at some point they saturate their aesthetic paradigms and discard them, making them available to the transformations as applied by people in general, while the elites find new novelities to again distinguish themselves. This classist construction doesn’t reflect reality, and envy goes in both directions. The “Hameau de la Reine,” the Queen’s Village, a quaint

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5 Ibid.
7 Ibid., 59 and 61.

5 Ibidem.
replica of a farm constructed in 1787, was a gift from Luis XVI to Marie Antoinette. The queen and her servants dressed like peasants and milked cows, with milk dripping into Sèvres porcelain pails painted to resemble the original wooden milk pails. More recently we have blue jeans, which though practical, are also an affectionate. Kitsch climaxed when jeans were sold bleached, ripped, and with patches, to look as if they had been previously used.

In this sense kitsch has components that luckily are not shared by beauty, at least not the authentically beautiful. In kitsch there is a cannibalism of taste often combined with sentimentalism, which is used as a first step or substitute for authentic sentiments. In beauty there is direct access to perceptual comfort, something that translates into good design or harmonic concordance with our ways of seeing. I should note that I like good design. Maybe good design is less hypocritical. It tries to be what it is and no more. However, beauty (at least in art), vainly aspires to a certain divine status. Here, I should introduce two additional terms besides and beyond beauty: elegance and the sublime.

The word “elegance,” in this context, is not what we sue to speak of clothing fashions, but rather, to reference its application in science and mathematics. It refers to maximum simplicity in relation to its effect of maximum complexity. While stimuli leading to beautiful results may saturate, satiate, and pall taste, elegance so defined is stable and immune to the fickleness of taste. While beauty belongs to the field of hedonism, elegance is a conceptual construct, and as such, may help beauty but doesn’t depend on it.

The sublime is different than elegance, and it transcends both elegance and beauty. Returning to Wikipedia, this time both in Spanish and English, I was surprised to find different interpretations of the sublime. Both pages mention Longinus as the possible author of a work titled On the Sublime dating to the I or III century A.C. It’s not clear if Longinus was Greek, Roman, or a Jewish emigrant who lived in Rome. What is interesting is that the Spanish Wikipedia speaks of “an extreme beauty, able to enrapture the spectator in an ecstasy beyond rationality, or even to provoke pain impossible to assimilate.” Yet, the English version mentions: “the sublime is an adjective that describes great, elevated, or lofty thought or language, particularly in the context of rhetoric.”

Aunque la diosa sea la misma, no quiero sugerir (ni tampoco creo que Broch lo pretenda) que los resultados sean commensurables. El kitsch tiene un problema ético que la belleza no tiene, y ese problema es que muchas formas del kitsch en cierto modo son consecuencia de la envidia.

Es el resultado formal de querer parecer algo que no es, lo que tiene como resultado una afectación. Generalmente se supone que esa envidia se produce por parte del pobre respecto al rico, y que por eso los productos del gusto de la élite se deterioran cuando son mal adaptados por las clases “no cultas”. Se supone que la población falta de educación necesita el apoyo de las convenciones para entender las cosas, y por lo tanto diluye y transforma sin comprensión los productos de las clases altas. En cambio, las clases altas—se piensa—, pueden percibir y apreciar las novedades, pero en algún momento se satura de sus paradigmas estéticos y los descartan.

En ese momento la envidia va a ambas direcciones. En 1787 se terminó de construir el “Hameau de la Reine”, el pueblito de la reina, una réplica de una granja campesina encomendada por Luis XVI como regalo a María Antonieta. La reina y sus sirvientas se disfrazaban de campesinas y ordeñaban las vacas dejando caer la leche en unos baldes hechos en porcelana de Sèvres que estaban pintados imitando la madera de los baldes lecheros originales. Más recientemente tenemos los pantalones vaqueros que son en sí mismos una afectación, aunque práctica. El kitsch culminó cuando se les trató especialmente para que, artificialmente deñetidos, roto y con parches, parecieran usados.

En ese sentido, el kitsch tiene ingredientes que, por suerte, la belleza no tiene, por lo menos no durante el período en el cual es auténticamente belleza. En el kitsch hay un proceso de canibalismo de gustos, que frecuentemente va integrado al sentimentalismo, y éste es utilizado como un primer escalón o como sustituto de los sentimientos auténticos. En la belleza hay un acceso directo a una comodidad perceptual, algo que se traduce en el buen diseño o en la concordancia armónica con nuestras formas de observar. Y, aclaro, el buen diseño me gusta. Quizás el buen...
As such, the sublime inspires awe and veneration, with greater persuasive powers. 9

The English version continues with references to three English philosophers who, at different moments during the end of the seventeenth century, crossed the Alps and decided they had more or less sublime experiences that transcended the feeling of beauty or rationality to the point that it might include terror. In the Spanish version, the text continues with Longinus before it arrives to this description. The text cites Umberto Eco who says that “[the sublime] produces a loss of rationality, a total identification with the creative process of the artist and a great aesthetic pleasure. In some cases, the sublime may be so purely beautiful that it produces pain instead of pleasure.” 10 He continues: “For Longinus a beautiful work of art persuades, convinces and addresses reason, although we may disagree; a sublime piece, instead, has grandeur, is not contingent on form, dismisses opinions, is directed to the interior. . . .” 11 In other words, the sublime may use beauty, but it is not confined by it. As with elegance, it is an experience independent from taste. But while elegance is resolved in reason, the sublime is resolved in revelation. Both emerge when connections are made between ideas and sensations, but they do not exist in relation to the sensations as such. I presume, they are experiences that transcend our biology.

In certain ways, I believe that these three categories, beauty, elegance and the sublime, even if not mutually exclusive, serve to categorize the interests and aims of different types of artists. Without hesitation, I would place myself in the category of elegance, but not because I believe it is a merit—it is not. Although I am interested in the sublime, I don’t think I am able to attain it so I don’t even try. Beauty, I can’t emphasize enough, doesn’t interest me, at least not in art. I am happy to have found all this about the sublime, in the past when somebody asked me if beauty is a valid problem in art, I always shot back explaining that it only makes sense if it aims to attain it so I don’t even try. Beauty, I can’t emphasize enough, doesn’t interest me, at least not in art. I am happy to have found all this about the sublime. In the past when somebody asked me if beauty is a valid problem in art, I always shot back explaining that it only makes sense if it aims to attain it so I don’t even try. Beauty, I can’t emphasize enough, doesn’t interest me, at least not in art. I am happy to have found all this about the sublime.

In regard to elegance, it stands closest to conceptualism—vice-versa—where I am most comfortable. I am interested in art as a formulation of and

diseño es menos hipócrita. Pretende ser eso y nada más. En cambio la belleza, al menos en el arte, aspira infructuosamente a cierta divinidad. Aquí, entonces, corresponde introducir dos términos adicionales, además y después de la belleza: la elegancia y lo sublime.

La palabra “elegancia” en este contexto no lo es en el sentido en que se aplica a las modas del vestir, sino en el contexto de las ciencias o las matemáticas. Se refiere a la máxima simplicidad asociada con un efecto que tiene un máximo de complejidad. Mientras los estímulos que conducen a los resultados bellos pueden llevar a la saturación del gusto y al hartazgo hasta el empalago, la elegancia así definida es un valor estable e immune a las veleidades del gusto. Mientras que la belleza pertenece al campo del hedonismo, la elegancia es un artefacto conceptual, y como tal puede ayudar a la belleza, pero no depende de ella.

Lo sublime es algo distinto a la elegancia y está en un escalón más arriba tanto de ella como de la belleza, trascendiendo ambas. Volviendo a Wikipedia, esta vez tanto en español como en inglés, me sorprendió encontrarme con dos anotaciones distintas. Ambas páginas mencionan a Longino como posible autor de una obra titulada Sobre lo sublime. La obra provendría del siglo I D.C., aunque otras fuentes mencionan el siglo III.

Además, tampoco se sabe si Longino fue griego, romano o un inmigrante judío que vivía en Roma. Lo interesante es que la versión española de Wikipedia dice que lo sublime se refiere a “una belleza extrema, capaz de arrebatar al espectador a un éxtasis más allá de su racionalidad, o incluso de provocar dolor por ser imposible de asimilar” 8. La versión inglesa en cambio dice que sublime “es un adjetivo que describe un pensamiento importante y elevado, particularmente en el campo de la retórica. Como tal inspira admiración y veneración, con grandes poderes de persuasión” 9.

La versión inglesa continúa luego con referencias a tres filósofos ingleses que en distintos momentos a fines del siglo XVII cruzaron la cordillera de los Alpes y decidieron que allí tuvieron experiencias más o menos sublimes que trascendían la sensación de belleza y lo racional, a tal punto que podía incluir el terror. La versión española, antes de entrar en esos mismos detalles, en cambio continúa un poco con Longino. Cita a Umberto Eco diciendo “que produce en el que la percibe una pérdida de la racionalidad, una identificación total con el proceso creativo del artista y un gran placer estético. . . .” 10

10 Ibid. “Para Longino, una obra de arte bella persuade, convence, se dirige a la razón, aunque podemos discrepar; en cambio, una obra sublime tiene grandiosidad, no depende de la forma, pone de opone a opiniones, se dirige más al interior. . . .”
11 Ibid. “Para Longino, una obra de arte bella persuade, convence, se dirige a la razón, aunque podemos discrepar; en cambio, una obra sublime tiene grandiosidad, no depende de la forma, pone de opone a opiniones, se dirige más al interior. . . .”
Pintura con títulos, 1973
a solution to problems, and it’s here where elegance is really important. In art there may be many correct solutions, but the best is the most elegant among the correct ones. And elegance is not necessarily simple. Elegance covers the greatest complexity without getting lost in stupidity. At the same time, I must also acknowledge the potential limits of elegance. Elegance may transcend beauty thanks to wit, but too often art based on elegance is no more than an ingenious statement without going any further. Much of conceptual art carries this defect, and reduces itself to underlining the artist’s wit without encouraging the viewer, or even engaging him or her.

Before continuing with what I want to address now, I find the discrepancy of the Wikipedia pages in different languages an interesting issue. It’s another logical thing that I was unable to think of on my own and discovered while writing this text. Wikipedia is a collaborative and democratic project that evolves through the continual contribution of its readers. Accustomed to printed encyclopedias created by erudite committees, I presumed that information is absolute, and that in many cases it would be translated to achieve a unification of meanings and definitions. But I was wrong. Wikipedias are culturally local encyclopedias. There is certain information shared inter-culturally, but there are meanings that grow and finesse in what we may call a “cultural neighborhood,” or a field of poli-cultural dialects—while also keeping their local character. For the sublime, I chose the neighborhood most convenient for my purpose, which coincided with my mental space. However, for beauty, I chose information from an adjacent neighborhood. What is really intriguing is that in this case, the Internet, a tool for supposedly achieving globalization and a unified culture, is instead serving to consolidate local and “partial” cultures. These are cultures generated among communities that share a language and the cultural specificities that grow through common language. Beauty as the result of a global average seems to be something unattainable.

Returning to the discussion at hand, for the three categories of beauty, elegance and the sublime, we are using art as a reference. Since all of this is nothing more than a theoretical construction, it really doesn’t matter if there is a global culture or a multiplicity of local cultures. That point would have more consequence in a discussion about taste and its variations than on the validity of this framework. However, to use art as a starting point forces the discussion of how it relates to the three aforementioned categories.

In the case of beauty, we are limited to the appreciation of the object. The work is beautiful, neutral or ridiculous, it is of no importance. It will remain estético. En ciertos casos, lo sublime puede ser tan puramente bello que produce dolor en vez de placer… “10. Y continúa con: “Para Longino, una obra de arte bella persuade, convence, se dirige a la razón, aunque podemos discrepar; en cambio, una obra sublime tiene grandeza, no depende de la forma, prescinde de opiniones, se dirige más al interior… “11. En otras palabras, lo sublime puede utilizar a la belleza, pero no puede quedarse en ella. Igual que la elegancia, es una experiencia que se independiza del gusto. Pero mientras la elegancia se resuelve en la razón, lo sublime se resuelve en la revelación. Ambas tienen lugar en las conexiones generadas por las ideas y las sensaciones, y no en las sensaciones mismas. Son experiencias que (supongo) trascienden nuestra biología.

En cierto modo estas tres categorías, belleza, elegancia y lo sublime, aun si no son mutuamente excluyentes, creo que sirven para categorizar los intereses y metas de distintos tipos de artistas. Muchos son conscientes de que la belleza se resuelve en la persuasión, la elegancia en la razón independizada del gusto, y lo sublime se resuelve en la revelación. Ambas tienen lugar en las conexiones generadas por las ideas y las sensaciones, y no en las sensaciones mismas. Son experiencias que (supongo) trascienden nuestra biología.

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11 Ibídem.
Aquí yace una obra de arte. 1973
in our memory or not. In the case of elegance, the situation is different. Art serves as a solution to a problem. It may help the viewer understand the problem, and admire the precision with which it might have been solved. Additionally, and this is important, it helps us learn how to confront other problems that may be encountered later. In this sense, the understanding of elegance makes us co-participants in the creative process. Beauty keeps us in the role of consumers. We appreciate and enjoy it, but nothing else. To appreciate elegance in art, we have to understand the process that generated it, or attribute a process that allows us to understand it. Art that is elegant activates our mind, and therefore includes a pedagogical function.

In the case of the sublime, the work is nothing more than a vehicle to transport the viewer to another level, the plane of overwhelming revelation. The sublime is not in the work itself, but is what happens after viewing it. This, of course, generates great respect for the piece that achieved this feat, and therefore, the work cannot be dismissed. One might compare the effect of the sublime with that of gossip in relation to a person. The person doesn’t change, what changes is our perception of the person because a certain gossip revealed something about them. Either object or person, it doesn’t really matter if they are beautiful or not.

It would seem then that the relations established by the artist-work-viewer are more important than the physical appearance of the object. I would even say that if we limit ourselves to considering the object instead of this relationship, we would not be able to understand the work of art. It is the importance of the artist-work-viewer cycle that forces us to consider ethics in this equation; and not only ethics, but also politics. Broch’s distrust towards ethics in art is explained by the fact that he only focused on the object, and that he was immersed in formalism while being confronted with the possibly negative role of content in art. It was a reflection of a broader distrust of literary narratives, which when present in art might destroy art’s purity. This rather narrow understanding of art as a product of formal objectives didn’t allow for an interpretation of the artwork as a manifestation of power. But if we propose the artist-work-viewer relation instead of the appreciation of the object, the “power” ingredient will be visible. Once we talk about power and its distribution, we have to consider ethics as a fundamental ingredient.

Outside the confines of the object, things change radically; appearance doesn’t matter anymore. What matters is what art provokes in us, and what we do in the presence of art. In this situation, one could say that “beauty is the opiate of the masses,” since it condemns us to passivity. In a society
where art is mostly a form of production, the ways it is packaged and presented acquire particular importance, and should confront the artist with many ethical decisions. It is often said that necessity is the mother of invention. In our capitalist society I would like to invert the phrase, stating that invention is the mother of necessity. Markets are based on the fabrication of artificial needs. The artist generally starts with creating art and then seeks ways of marketing it. That is, he or she seeks to create a necessity for the work, what we would call a demand for the offer. It’s here where the ethical quandary arises: either the artist can concentrate on the supply by following one’s conscience, or focus on generating and satisfying the demand.

Furthermore, we read in two different ways: either to determine what the author says, or to find our own ideas as they emerge as we read. In the first case, there is a transmission of information to be consumed by the reader. In the second case, there is a transmission of stimuli that generates the organization and creation of new information in the reader’s mind. The second kind of reading, what we may call “selfish reading,” is the one I consider truly important. It is this kind of reading embodies what I mean by “elegant” in art. It’s reading that makes me invest in my own creation, and leads me to new dimensions beyond my original field of vision, but nevertheless is a consequence of both.

Now, I want to go to the other extreme and propose something that in reality is unattainable, but may serve as a referential model. Instead of thinking of art as emitting information, consider the possibility that art could absorb data in the same way black holes in the cosmos absorb energy. In its purest state, this work has just enough information to be identified as a work of art, but everything else is non-declarative. Any possible declaration is contributed by the spectator, who is forced to create instead of consume. For this, we would want to produce works that ultimately deny their own presence without reaching the extreme of non-existence. It is about creating a work that operates on the borderline between imbecility and invisibility, without falling into one or the other. If there is any information that seems to be emitted, it is nothing more than a reflection of the information absorbed.

In this ideal art, the viewer emits energy without receiving anything for it. There is no exchange. There are neither traces nor documentation of the dialogue between viewer and art. Negating the norms of capitalist exchange, there is no intellectual reward for the public, either emotional or hedonistic, except for the viewer’s own activity. If there is any experience

En el caso de lo sublime, la obra no pasa de ser un vehículo que sirve para transportar al observador y llevarlo a otro nivel, al plano de la revelación sobrecogedora. Lo sublime no está en la obra misma, está en lo que sucede luego de verla. Esto, por supuesto, genera un gran respeto por la obra que lo logró, o sea que la obra sublime no es algo que se pueda desdeñar. Se podría decir que lo sublime actúa sobre la obra en forma similar a como un chisme actúa respecto a una persona. La persona no cambia, lo que cambia es nuestra percepción de esa persona porque el chisme nos reveló algo. Y en ambos casos, obra o persona, no importa realmente si es bella o no.

Parecería entonces que es más importante el tipo de relaciones que se establecen en el recorrido artista-obra-observador que la apariencia física de la obra en sí misma. Diría incluso que si nos limitamos a la consideración del objeto, en lugar de considerar el recorrido artista-obra-observador, no estamos entendiendo la obra de arte. Es la importancia de estas relaciones es el recorrido la que obliga ineludiblemente a incorporar la noción de ética en esta ecuación. Y no solamente la de ética, sino también la de política. La desconfianza de Broch hacía la ética en el arte se explica por el hecho que su atención se concentraba en el objeto y, además, porque estaba empapado por un arte formalista y enfrentado a las discusiones sobre el rol posiblemente negativo del contenido. Era en realidad un reflejo de la desconfianza hacia las narraciones literarias que, cuando se hacían presentes en una obra visual, podían destruir su pureza. Este contexto bastante restringido del arte como una producción de objetos formales no permitía una interpretación de la obra de arte como una manifestación de poder. Pero si proponemos la consideración del recorrido artista-obra-observador en lugar de la apreciación del objeto, el ingrediente “poder” queda puesto sobre la mesa. Una vez que hablamos del poder y de su distribución, también tenemos que considerar la ética como uno de los ingredientes fundamentales.

Salidos de los confines físicos de la obra misma, entonces, el asunto cambia radicalmente porque ya no interesa tanto la apariencia. Importa lo que la obra de arte provoca en nosotros y también importa qué es lo que hacemos nosotros en presencia de esa obra. En esta situación, casi se podría decir que la belleza es el opio de los pueblos porque es un elemento que nos condena a la pasividad. En una sociedad donde el arte en su mayor parte es una forma de producción mercantil, la manera en que se envuelve o presenta el producto adquiere una importancia particular y debiera enfrentar al artista a una cantidad de decisiones éticas. Se dice que la necesidad es la madre de la invención. En nuestra sociedad capitalista me gustaría invertir ese refrán y decir que la invención es the
of the sublime, it is only there because the viewer projected it, and not because the artist created or suggested it.

In the attempt to abolish power, non-declarative art taken this far not only avoids the emission of information, but also tries to eliminate authorship. The viewer is no longer in the presence of an individualized artist, but sees a vacant and impersonal gaze that forces the understanding and elaboration of his or her own gaze. The monologue of the artist, as expressed in "traditional" art, stops existing. The artist offers silence, and if there is any dialogue, it occurs between the viewer's monologue and its echo. If there is any poetic aspect, it's solely nourished by the viewer. The responsibility of the creative effort is transferred from the artist to the public, and the act of consuming (as a static and passive attitude) loses its meaning.

This radical transference of the creative effort from the artist to the public changes many things, one of which is that the artist no longer directs his or her work toward the market of consumers, but attempts to create a field of activation. The work of art does not reach fullness in an object, but in a situation.

The definition of art in this context requires a reinterpretation of formalist reductionism, utilized, for example, by Minimalism. It's about the elimination of the superfluous, but this process is no longer intended to isolate a mythical and obscure essence attributed to art. Instead, art becomes a non-formalist operation focused on the control of information. The purpose of this control is not to find an essence, but to negate the artist's ego and elicit a maximum informative emission from the viewer. By shifting from formalism to projected information, there is a change in the criteria used to evaluate quality in works of art. I would go even further and say that these criteria disappear. Instead, there are functional criteria for the fostering of imagination. The work of art does not reach fullness in an object, but in a situation.

The efficiency of the non-declarative work in regard to its quality as an activating situation may only be measured in relation to the amount of information it absorbs, which depends more on the viewer than on the artist. Here, the less sophisticated viewer probably projects much more than a specialist, which means that the importance of the work is no longer defined by a group of connoisseurs, but by a broad cultural collective. With this shift, we may find ourselves in an area close to kitsch. But the difference is that in genuinely consumed kitsch (one without madre de la necesidad. Nuestros mercados se basan muchísimo en la fabricación de necesidades artificiales. El artista generalmente comienza con una creación o invento y luego busca como mercadear esa creación. O sea, busca como crear una necesidad para su obra, lo que llamamos una demanda para su oferta. Es allí donde surge la disyuntiva ética de dónde poner el acento, si concentrarse en la oferta de acuerdo exclusivamente a la conciencia del artista, o concentrarse en la creación y satisfacción de una demanda.

Por otra parte, podemos leer de dos maneras: para enterarnos de que cosas nos dice el autor, o para enterarnos de nuestras ideas, esas que afloran como reacción a lo que leemos. En el primer caso hay una transmisión de datos que el lector consume. En el segundo caso hay una transmisión de estímulos que generan la organización y creación de datos en la mente del lector. El segundo tipo de lectura, el que podemos llamar egoísta, es el que considero realmente importante. Es el tipo de lectura que se asemeja a lo que describo anteriormente como una obra "elegante". Es la lectura que me lleva a invertir mi propia creación y entonces me lleva a un plano que no estaba en el original y que no estaba en mi antes de leer, y que sin embargo es consecuencia de ambos.

Es aquí donde me quiero pasar al otro extremo y proponer algo que en la realidad es inaccesible, pero que nos puede servir como un modelo de referencia. Es la obra que en lugar de emitir información la absorbe, tal como lo hacen con la energía los agujeros negros en el cosmos. En su estado más puro, esta obra solamente tiene la mínima información suficiente para identificarla como una obra de arte, pero en todo lo demás es completamente no-declarativa. Toda posible declaración es contribuida por el espectador, quien por lo tanto se ve forzado a crear en lugar de consumir. Para esto, querríamos entonces producir obras que en última instancia nieguen su propia presencia sin llegar al extremo de la no-existencia total. Se trata de crear una obra que funcione en esa frontera frágil que se establece entre la imbecilidad y la invisibilidad, pero sin caer ni en una ni en la otra. Si hay alguna información que parece ser emitida, ésta no es más que un reflejo de la información absorbida.

En este arte ideal, el observador termina emitiendo energía sin recibir nada a cambio. No hay intercambio, no quedan huellas ni documentación de diálogo entre observador y obra. Negando las normas de intercambio capitalista, no hay una recompensa intelectual para el público, no importa si emotiva o hedonística, salvo aquella producida por la propia actividad del espectador. Si aquí se logra una experiencia de lo sublime es
snobbish intellectual refinement), the consumer feels empathy towards a prefabricated and packaged solution. The genuine approach to kitsch doesn’t require an active effort. On the contrary, imagination is annihilated by the act of consumption. In truly non-declarative art there is no finished product demanding empathy. If the artist reached this ideal and extreme way of production, the danger lies in the possibility that the artwork would not be perceived and thus die in invisibility. Therefore, the skillfulness of the artist doesn’t rely on the refinement of craft; it shifts to the administration of artistic declaration instead. All the artist’s effort is concentrated toward waking the viewer’s attention enough to start the process of projection but without any interference.

This mission is perhaps the most difficult found in the history of art. It requires a formalist sense that allows for the elimination of form, a conceptualism without concepts, and an artisanal ability of self-elimination up to a precisely defined minimum. The artist has to prove that the work belongs to art, but without declaring it, without participating in the competition that establishes accepted artistic qualities, and escaping any possibility of comparison. The artwork also has to (contradictory and insidiously) lay out parameters so that the viewer’s reading and projection only happens within a parameter of acceptable directions. In this framework, the artist does not deny the viewer’s transformative power. The artist only renounces what pertains to the egotistical power of a declaration, which opens the way to what I like to call a socialism of creation, an alternative to “traditional” socialisms based on the distribution of consumption that have failed to achieve an authentically progressive reorganization of society. It would be a form of socialism that doesn’t need the mirage of static beauty to be realized. It would be a socialism of constant stimulation.


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The first version of this essay was written by Luis Camnitzer in 2010, and published in Spanish in Quien le teme a la belleza?, ed. Javier Domínguez et al. (Medellín: La Carreta Editores, Universidad de Antioquia, 2010), 151–168. The essay published in this catalog was edited and modified by the author in 2015.
de la obra ya no es definida por un grupo de especialistas sino por un colectivo cultural amplio. Con eso, probablemente también, y nuevamente, nos ubicamos en un campo muy cercano al kitsch. Pero la diferencia es que en el kitsch genuinamente consumido (es decir sin la actitud esnob del intelectual refinado), el consumidor utiliza su empatía con una solución pre-fabricada y envasada. La observación genuina de un objeto kitsch no proviene de un esfuerzo activo ni lo requiere. Al contrario, la imaginación es aniquilada por la actividad de consumo. En cambio, en el arte verdaderamente no-declarativo no hay un producto terminado que genere empatía. Si efectivamente el artista llegara a lograr este extremo ideal de producción, correría el peligro de que su obra pase completamente desapercibida y muera en la invisibilidad. Por lo tanto, la definición de la habilidad del artista tiende a dejar de basarse en su refinamiento artesanal. Pasa en cambio a transferirse a un refinamiento de la administración de la declaración artística. Todo su esfuerzo se concentrará en despertar la atención del espectador lo suficientemente como para que éste comience su proceso de proyección, sin nunca llegar a interferir con él.

Esta misión es quizás la más difícil que hasta el momento se haya encontrado en la historia del arte. Requiere un sentido formalista que ayude a eliminar la forma, un conceptualismo sin conceptos y una habilidad artesanal capaz de auto-eliminarse hasta un mínimo cuidadosamente preciso. El artista tiene que demostrar que la obra pertenece al campo del arte pero sin declararla, sin participar en la competencia que establece la aceptación de las calidades artísticas y escapando a toda posibilidad de comparación. Tiene, además—contradictoria e insidiosamente—, que proveer parámetros para que la lectura y proyección del observador suceda dentro de un abanico de direcciones aceptables para el artista. Es aquí donde el artista no renuncia al poder de conversión del observador. Renuncia solamente al poder egolatría de la declaración y abre el camino a lo que me gusta denominar un “socialismo de la creación”, un socialismo alternativo a los socialismos tradicionales, basados en la distribución del consumo y que han sido incapaces de toda reorganización auténticamente progresista de la sociedad. Sería un socialismo que no necesita el espejismo de una belleza estática para poder realizarse. Sería el socialismo del estímulo constante.

*Luis Camnitzer, New York, February 2015.*

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LUIS CAMNITZER

SELF PORTRAIT 1968

Self-portrait 1968, 1968

LUIS CAMNITZER

SELF PORTRAIT 1972

Self-portrait 1972, 1972
The object-boxes anticipate one of Camnitzer’s most important works, the wood-framed glass boxes with text printed on brass plaques. In many ways, work producing a series of “object-boxes” that placed ordinary items within a society, while also examining a dimension of human psychology by pairing images and text to create new meaning.

In 1964, he co-founded The New York Graphic Workshop, along with fellow artists, Argentine Liliana Porter and Venezuelian Guillermo Castillo (1941–1999). Until 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 created work in a variety of media exploring language as primary medium, shifting from printing text on paper or walls, such as his Dictionary etchings and the room-size installation Living Room (both 1969). As his interest in language unfolded, so did his examination of socio-political problems through his art. Through the 1970s and 1980s Camnitzer responded to the growing wave of Latin American military regimes taking root while also pointing to the dynamic political landscape of his adopted country, the United States.

During the 1970s and 1980s, Camnitzer blended language and humor in his work producing a series of “object-boxes” that placed ordinary items within wood-framed glass boxes with text printed on brass plaques. In many ways, the object-boxes anticipate one of Camnitzer’s most important works, the Uruguayan Torture Series (1983–84). This photo-etching suite 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 has not left New York, his practice remains intrinsically connected to his Uruguayan 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.

Luis Camnitzer’s work has been exhibited at important institutions since the 1960s, including one-person 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 Latinamerica Collection in Zurich, Switzerland, El Museo del Barrio, New York; and Museo de Arte Moderno de Medellin, Bogota, Colombia.

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 the subjects of social injustice, repression, and institutional critique. His humorous, biting, and often politically charged use of language as an art medium has distinguished his practice over four decades.

In 1964 fundó The New York Graphic Workshop junto a Liliana Porter, artista argentina, y el venezolano Guillermo Castillo (1941–1999). El colectivo trabajó conjuntamente durante seis años explorando el significado conceptual detrás de la técnica de grabado, buscando experimentar y ampliar su definición. A finales de los ’60 y principios de los ’70, Camnitzer desarrolló un cuerpo de trabajo que exploró el lenguaje como medio principal, alternando entre texto impreso sobre paredes y papel, como en la obra Diccionario y la instalación Living Room (ambos 1969). Mientras que su interés por el lenguaje se acentuaba, de igual forma su intención por identificar problemas sociopolíticos a través del arte tomo forma y presencia dentro de su obra en gran parte como respuesta a la creciente ola de regímenes militares tomando posesión de América Latina durante las décadas de los sesenta y ochenta. Durante la misma época su trabajo también tornó la mirada el panorama político de su país adoptivo Estados Unidos.

Durante la década de los setenta y ochenta, Camnitzer unificó lenguaje y humor a través de sus cajas-objetos, obras en los cuales colocó artículos ordinarios protegidos por un armazón de madera y vidrio, acompañados de texto impreso sobre una placa de metal. Podría decirse que estas cajas-objetos anticiparon una de las obras más importantes de Camnitzer, Uruguayan Torture Series (1983–84). Esta serie de fotograbados personifica la habilidad de Camnitzer para cuestionar el rol social y político que desempeña un individuo dentro de una sociedad, asimismo examina el alcance de la psicología humana, asociando imágenes y texto para así crear un nuevo significado.

Aunque Camnitzer hizo de Nueva York su residencia permanente, su obra permanece vinculada a su tierra natal, Uruguay; y en general con América Latina. Tanto su obra como escritos lo han posicionado como voz clave dentro de los debates sobre poscolonialismo, conceptualismo y pedagogía en el arte.

El trabajo de Luis Camnitzer ha sido presentado en instituciones distinguidas desde los años sesenta, incluyendo muestras individuales en El Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos, Santiago, Chile (2013);
(2010–13). His work has been included in numerous group exhibitions, including Under the Same Sun: Art from Latin America Today at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (2014); the seminal Information at Museum of Modern Art, New York (1970); among others. 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, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2000); and Documenta 11, Kassel, Germany (2002). His work is currently on view at the Fonds Régional d’Art Contemporain Lorraine, Metz, France and will be featured in upcoming exhibitions at Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Trienal Poligrafica de San Juan: América Latina y el Caribe, San Juan, Puerto Rico; Museo Jumex, Mexico City; among others.

Camnitzer’s work is in the permanent collections of 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; among others. 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). He taught at the State University of New York, College at Old Westbury since 1969, and he continues to serve as professor emeritus.
Checklist

Column (Prototype), 1967
Mixed media
24.44h x 10.5w x 10.5d in
(62.08h x 26.67w x 26.67d cm)

Self-portrait 1968, 1968
Etching on paper
24.02h x 23.11w in (61.01h x 58.7w cm)
Edition of 5

Self-portrait 1969, 1969
Etching on paper
27.63h x 27.75w in (70.18h x 70.49w cm)
Edition of 2

Self-portrait 1970, 1970
Etching on paper
28h x 17.69w in (71.12h x 44.93w cm)
Edition of 2

Self-portrait 1971, 1971
Etching on paper
27.88h x 27.69w in (70.82h x 70.33w cm)
Edition of 2

Self-portrait 1972, 1972
Etching on paper
27.94h x 27.63w in (70.97h x 70.18w cm)
Edition of 2

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

Pintura con títulos, 1973
Aluminum and acrylic on canvas
36h x 40w in (91.44h x 101.6w cm)

The Threat of the Mirror, 1978
Mixed media
10h x 8w x 0.3d in (25.4h x 20.32w x 0.76d cm)

Questions and Answers, 1981
Laminated silver gelatin photographs (12 parts)
76.25h x 18.5w in (193.67h x 46.99w cm) (all parts)
Edition of 5

Jane Doe, 2012/15
Digital video
45 min 44 sec
Edition of 3 with 1 AP

Symmetrical Jails, 2014
Etching on paper (7 parts)
22.25h x 29.75w in (56.52h x 75.57w cm) (each part)
Edition of 18

Seven Virtues, 2014
Pigment prints (7 parts)
14h x 11w in (35.56h x 27.94w cm) (each part)
Edition of 5 with 1 AP

Please Look Away, 2015
Vinyl
Dimensions variable
Published on the occasion of the exhibition

**Luis Camnitzer: The Mediocrity of Beauty**
February 19–March 28, 2015

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Cover image: *Symmetrical Jails*, 2014, Etching on paper (part 3 of 7), 22.25h x 29.75w in (56.52h x 75.57w cm)

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Through exhibitions, research, and representation, Alexander Gray Associates spotlights artistic movements and artists who emerged in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Influential in political, social and cultural 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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