

## Luis Camnitzer: *The Mediocrity of Beauty*

February 19 – March 28, 2015

"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 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." —Luis Camnitzer, "The Mediocrity of Beauty," 2015

### Ground Floor Gallery



*Please Look Away*, 2015

To move into the Gallery in order to see the exhibition, the viewer must pass through Camnitzer's immersive and aggressive installation *Please Look Away*, constructed from absurd and misanthropic sentences written by the artist. Some terms, such as "no need to squeeze the bag," "enhanced questioning," and "to learn helplessness" came from an article about the torturing of Abu Ghraib prisoners during the Iraq War. As these written texts make up the entirety of the installation, they become visual objects that have a physical effect on the viewer, creating a cage-like space that envelopes and traps him or her. With this effect, Camnitzer wanted to create a work that causes the viewer to question his or her relationship with an artwork. Although the installation at first attacks the viewer, it eventually becomes subdued as an object that the viewer can "master" through sight and analysis.



*Jane Doe*, 2012/2015

In *Jane Doe*, Camnitzer challenges the notion that symmetry informs our perception of the beautiful. For the video, the artist fused fifty photographs of women's faces—taken from online police reports, legal documents, and newspaper articles—utilizing image morphing software. Once the image was complete, Camnitzer was delighted when he saw that the resulting portrait of Jane Doe was a seemingly "beautiful" symmetrical face. Yet, he soon realized, "The overlays are confirming conventional and shared features, while the particular and accidental ones were slowly being erased... The final portrait was an average of all the faces, with all the individual characteristics cleaned-out." Scrolling beneath the image is text Camnitzer culled from the same documents used to create the face, which provides identities for Jane Doe.



*Seven Virtues*, 2014

In *Seven Virtues*, Camnitzer inserts the seven cardinal and theological virtues—chastity, temperance, charity, diligence, patience, kindness, and humility—into Dorland's Medical Dictionary. For the virtues' definitions, he uses the dry, clinical tone of Webster's Dictionary. Playing with the viewer's expectations, Camnitzer provides a context for the Virtues that transforms these subjective good qualities with religious connotations into medical pathologies. The artist's intervention into the original medical text is subtle and almost unnoticeable. For Camnitzer, the ideal role of the artist is not to self-promote, but to present "non-declarative" artworks in which the personality of the artist all but disappears and the viewer is left to create his or her own experience. As Camnitzer writes, "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."

## Second Floor Main Gallery



### *Self-portrait series, 1968–1972*

This series of five etchings belongs to Camnitzer's early conceptualist project of replacing image with text. The artist found that "the verbal description of a visual situation could elicit the creativity of the spectator in a better way than the visual situation itself." He created the first *Self-portraits* as a member of The New York Graphic Workshop (1964–1970), which he co-founded with the Argentine and Venezuelan artists Liliana Porter and José Guillermo Castillo (1939–1999). The New York Graphic Workshop sought to democratize art through printmaking's potential of unlimited editions while challenging the accepted notions of printmaking's aesthetics and techniques. Camnitzer questions authorship, authenticity and seriality with this series. He created a self-portrait each year from 1968 through 1972 that simply included the stenciled words of his name, "selfportrait," the date, and his handwritten signature.



### *Pintura con títulos, 1973*

In this work, Camnitzer simultaneously pokes fun at formalist and modernist theories prevalent in the 1970s, and the way meaning is assigned to art. He has painted a canvas in an all-over form of abstraction common to Abstract Expressionism. Instead of providing a definitive title, he presents multiple possibilities, which translate from the Spanish as "Windblown Field in Autumn," "Tribal Orchestra," "Painting Recalling February 24th," "The Conflict Between Brush and Instinct," "Conflict," and "Dilapidated House (Possibly My Grandparents'"). Humorously jabbing at the formalist abstraction's attempt to negate content from art, Camnitzer demonstrates that the artworks meaning can be whatever that is assigned to it. He also plays with Modernism's assumption that art derives from the artist's personal and innate genius. He has critiqued Modernist Formalism's disavowal of content in art, which for him, "Didn't allow for an interpretation of the artwork as a manifestation of power." Yet, with *Pintura con títulos*, he makes the power relationship inherent in an artwork apparent. As the creator of the painting, he presents it as a work of art by titling it as such. The viewer, then, passively consumes what is presented by the artist. With the combination of image and text, however, Camnitzer seeks to expose this cycle. By including multiple possibilities for the title, the arbitrariness with which the painting has been bestowed with significance becomes apparent. An artwork's meaning, for Camnitzer, is ambiguous and fluid, depending more on the viewer's experience than the stipulations set forth by the artist and surrounding art world.



### *Questions and Answers, 1981*

Camnitzer created this work under hypnosis. In this experience, the hypnotist presented objects as a series of questions. Camnitzer then answered these perceived questions with another image, in an exercise of association. Yet, because he was under hypnosis, Camnitzer claims that he could hear and see what he was saying and doing, but had no control over himself. He was the witness and outsider to his own actions and dialogue. The photographs in the first column are the objects-as-questions posed to the artist by the hypnotist. The corresponding photographs in the second column are the artist's answers, in which these objects are placed in illogical contexts, which highlight Camnitzer's surrealist-influenced interest in the arbitrariness of meaning.



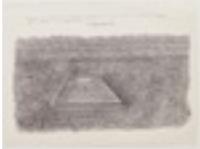
### *Symmetrical Jails, 2014*

*Symmetrical Jails* is Camnitzer's most recent suite of etchings. In these seven works, he stacked and mirrored each letter in the word "symmetry"—using the United Nations official languages Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian, Spanish, plus he adds German—to create seven unique characters. For the artist, "Words are never able to fully convey what one truly thinks: thoughts and feelings are pressed into an alien format, like when poetry tries to imprison poetics in stiltedness. Symmetry worsens this by curtailing the freedom of information." He follows modernist British sculptor Henry Moore's line of thought that "symmetry [is] a waste of information, since it uses twice the space to say the same thing." Camnitzer has found that although "symmetry is supposedly one of the important ingredients of beauty, nearly an indispensable condition," it instead limits and imprisons our perception within a certain framework.



*The Threat of the Mirror*, 1978

The mirror has been both a visual and thematic motif throughout Camnitzer's practice. In *The Threat of the Mirror*, Camnitzer tears a photograph exactly the way the corresponding mirror has been shattered, which not only produces a mirror image, but also gives the work a symmetrical composition. With the broken mirror, Camnitzer simultaneously explores how one's image of oneself in the mirror is closely tied to the shaping of one's self-perception. When looking at the piece, the viewer is forced to confront his or her own shattered image in the broken mirror. As art historian and curator Belinda Grace Gardner writes, this artwork "manifests itself in a disintegration of the once 'intact' (self-)image, which—one might assume—represents the coherence of the individual per se." To compound this loss, Camnitzer uses a photograph, another image and construct through which humans attempt to gain a sense of self and reality, as a stand-in for the self.



*Aqui yace una obra de arte*, 1973 and *Column (Prototype)*, 1967

Both of these works were created after installations with the same titles. The Spanish *Aqui yace una obra de arte* translates to "here lies an artwork." Originally installed in 1972, the inscribed slab in the drawing denotes a tombstone. *Column (Prototype)* is a prototype of an 1967 installation in which he created an invisible column, delineating it by placing a formica rectangular object made to look like marble labeled "base," and an identical object labeled "capital." For Camnitzer, the drawing and prototype serve as visual installation guidelines, and he has included handwritten instructions on the drawing that are descriptive yet ambiguous, allowing for curatorial creativity. The invisibility of the artworks in these works—whether underneath a tombstone or existing as an immaterial column—speaks to Camnitzer's pairing of direct images and text to encourage the viewer to generate alternative meanings. Camnitzer states, "I am interested in art as a formulation of and solution to problems, and it's there where elegance is really important. In art, there may be many correct solutions, but the best is the most elegant among the correct ones. Elegance is not necessarily simple, but it is the one that may achieve the greatest complexity without getting lost in stupidity."

