

ART WALL

Luis Camnitzer below/here/above/ahead/was

November 30, 2022–May 31, 2023

CHRISTINA YANG (CY): What was it like to come to New York as a young artist in the 1960s?

LUIS CAMNITZER (LC): After attending school in Uruguay for art and architecture since the age of sixteen, I received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1961 (age twenty-four) to work in the United States. The way I put it, I knew how it is living under the boot, and I would like to see how it is living inside the boot—it was an anthropological curiosity. I never thought that I would end up living here. I interrupted the fellowship after six months, then returned to complete it in 1964. In 1965 the Argentinean artist Liliana Porter and I were married. In 1969 we checked the feasibility of leaving the United States with Argentina under a full-fledged dictatorship and Uruguay in a state of pre-dictatorship [and] with the economies in disarray. We decided to stay in the United States but divorced in 1979. With my present US-born wife, Selby Hickey, we have four American children, and forty years later, we are still happy, which makes up for my dislocation. But I go back to Uruguay as often I can to work on projects.

CY: Can you talk about how your practice as a conceptual artist developed?

LC: I still don't know if I really am an artist. . . . I think I slowly evolved from craft-focused to one that focuses on knowledge. When handling materials in crafts, it's about the power relation the artist has with the material. I was lousy in drawing and would fail exams [in] both art and architecture school. I realized that my problem was that I tried to impose my power on the material and tools, and that they resisted. I decided to work as a team with them. That informed my political ideology and led me to what I call "ethical anarchism." It helped me in

printmaking (I ripped instead of cutting). In drawing, I let clumsiness take over instead of hiding it. The next step was to break down the authority of fragmentation in knowledge and find a transdisciplinary ground. That meant to work with projects, problems, and knowledge in general. Art then becomes both a form of visual philosophy and—because it's made for communication, dialogue, and generating more knowledge—a pedagogical tool. That only works if the distribution of power and an awareness of the interests being served are constantly on the table. There is no rational argument to be made to have creative writing separate from visual arts. There is no reason to have education as an activity separate from art. Ultimately, the aim is to achieve a free society.

CY: You often use maps and objects from institutions of learning, such as lists, chalkboards, encyclopedias, slide projectors, and more. Can you speak to BAMPFA's Art Wall and its specific imagery?

LC: I really don't start out from materials, images, or things. I look for problems that I find interesting and that might affect the viewer toward independent creative thinking. Jorge Luis Borges wrote his short story "Aleph" that deals with a little ball, one inch in diameter, containing all the images of the universe. Basically, it implies that everything contains everything. For me, that is an important pedagogical device because it helps to unravel connections and build a holistic view of the universe. In that sense, I try to produce stimuli and not self-enclosed works of art.

The BAMPFA installation constantly displaces the viewer by using a sheet of a yellow notepad. The point is that the viewer learns that displacement is in the viewer's hand and not in the hand of the artist. The real piece is what happens afterward, a viewer's secret that will never be revealed to me. As an educator, I always tried to present assignments that have infinite solutions and that would force breaking disciplinary thinking and help analyze systems of order. When does a group of individuals become a crowd, which is similar to when does a

printed image dissolve into halftone dots?

CY: We met through your work as an organizing cocurator, with Rachel Weiss and Jane Farver, on the *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s* exhibition (Queens Museum of Art [New York], 1999). Can you talk about working collaboratively across nations as a theorist and organizer?

LC: The main point of *Global Conceptualism* was to decenter hegemonic art and put it in the context of a federation of artistic provinces without a capital. We used a thinking model that Jane Farver suggested, with 1968 as a paradigmatic date, but to find out when change took place in different regions using local clocks. That led to 1950 for Japan, early 1950s for Latin America and Europe, 1980 for Korea, 1989 for China, etc. That new calendar upset the hegemonic calendar and forced Western art history to understand Yoko Ono and Situationism in the late 1950s as part of early conceptualism, instead of waiting for 1965 as a starting point because of the US-based canon. At the time, this premise caused a lot of irate reviews in the United States but had great success outside of the country.

In terms of organization, it was a nightmare that I don't want to repeat, but that I'm happy I lived through. There were some territorial fights, but also dilemmas—like If we were colonizing Frédéric Bruly Bouabré by including him in the exhibition, or not, or if we put ephemeral materials in a vitrine and make them into fetishes for history's sake, or if we keep them ephemeral to be true to them. The show only was possible because we were a trio of close friends and friendship held us together.

CY: Why do you collect museums?

LC: You make a piece that is directed against the establishment, and then the establishment puts it into a museum and fills it with innocence. In certain ways, that is good because it always forces you to try again and keeps the juices flowing. But it's also frustrating. That is why early on I decided to collect museums, instead of having

them collect me. It's a way of accumulating credibility while evading corruption. After MoMA [the Museum of Modern Art, New York] acquired two prints in 1962 at half price, I figured 1) it was good for my career to be in the collection and I shouldn't complain, 2) that artists are as much a philanthropist as they are a producer, and 3) over time, it might be a good policy to accumulate museums in my CV. So, I proceeded to get into as many institutions with the word museum in their title [as possible], sometimes donating and other times having friends do it for me. The ideal, of course, was to sell, but that was rare in the beginning. I think that by now I have around forty-five museums in my collection.

ARTIST BIO

Born in 1937, Luis Camnitzer is an Uruguayan artist and writer living in New York. He is professor emeritus at SUNY Old Westbury, where he taught from 1969 to 2000. Part of the vanguard of 1960s conceptualism, Camnitzer was a member of New York's Museo Latinoamericano and the splinter group Movimiento de Independencia Cultural de Latino América. Along with Liliana Porter and José Guillermo Castillo, he cofounded the New York Graphic Workshop (1964–70). His book *Conceptualism in Latin American Art* (2007) is widely considered one of the most influential texts on the subject, arguing that Latin American conceptualism is not a style but rather a strategy that developed independently of North American and European influences.

His most recent retrospective, *Luis Camnitzer: Hospice of Failed Utopias*, was presented by the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, Spain (2018), following the retrospectives presented by Daros Museum, Zurich, Switzerland (2010), and Lehman College Art Gallery, Bronx, New York (1991), among others. His work has been included in group exhibitions, including *HOME—So Different, So Appealing*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art (2017); *I am you, you are too*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (2017); *Under the Same Sun: Art from Latin America Today*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (2014); *Information*, Museum of Modern Art, New York (1970); and many more. He has been featured in the Bienal de la Habana, Cuba (1984, 1986, 1991, 2009); Pavilion of Uruguay, 43 Biennale di Venezia, Italy (1988); Whitney Biennial (2000); and Documenta 11 (2002). Camnitzer's work is in the collections of more than forty museums, including the Centre Pompidou, Paris; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Tate Modern, London; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

Art Wall: Luis Camnitzer is organized by BAMPFA staff and curated by independent curator Christina Yang. The Art Wall is made possible by major funding from Frances Hellman and Warren Breslau.



UC BERKELEY ART MUSEUM & PACIFIC FILM ARCHIVE