

Luis Camnitzer. Hospice of failed utopias



Vista de sala de la exposición **LUIS CAMNITZER. Hospicio de utopías fallidas**
Lo había ofrecido sin expectativa (de la serie Proyecto Venecia), 1987
Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía. Octubre 2018
Archivo fotográfico del Museo Reina Sofía

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PLACE:	Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía
ORGANIZATION:	Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía
CURATOR:	Octavio Zaya
COORDINATION:	Gemma Bayón

Born in Germany (Lübeck, 1937) and raised in Uruguay, Luis Camnitzer, essayist, art critic, exhibition curator, pedagogue, lecturer, and creator of actions and objects, has produced a prolific oeuvre centered on the transformative capacity of art, which he regards essentially as a product of reflection. On the basis of an analysis of the function of language, its ambiguities and arbitrariness, and the evocative power of images, his whole practice, whether artistic, intellectual, or educational, is characterized by a concern with some of the controversial issues of our time, such as the critique of commodified art, the demystification and obsolescence of the role of the artist in the consumer society, the strategies used by power to impose its logic and perpetuate its dominion, or the capacity of neoliberal societies to convert education into an instrument of propaganda, thereby rendering it irrelevant.



Vista de sala de la exposición LUIS CAMNITZER. *Hospicio de utopías fallidas*
Tratado sobre el paisaje, 1996. Detalle
Botellas de vidrio etiquetadas y otros materiales
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With these tools, Camnitzer seeks to spur viewers into active participation and direct involvement with the artistic process, and these aspects are the principal focus of this ample retrospective. While the exhibition permits us on the one hand to gain a contextualized global view of a multifaceted oeuvre developed over nearly

sixty years, it is also arranged around three “phases” or lines of work opened up in the course of his artistic practices.

The first reflects Camnitzer’s peculiar conceptualism, whose starting point is the dematerialization of the artistic object. Unlike classical conceptualism, however, it does not stop at the self-referential aspect or the autonomous condition of art, but extends to political and social reality. In the 1960s, he produced pieces classified as Mail Art, such as *Adhesive Labels* (1966) and *Envelope* (1967), and later others like the series *Autorretratos/Selfportraits* (1968–72) and the installation *Living Room* (1969), where the objects on the walls and floor are represented through linguistic descriptions. In the limited space of a room, the boundaries between the visual and the textual are thus blurred.

The second line is the natural denouement of the previous one, with more declarative and evocative works in which the visual elements acquire greater prominence. These are the pieces which could be grouped together under the heading of “political art.” This new approach results in the establishment of a sort of formula whereby political art is not defined by its explicit content but by the polyvalence of its linguistic and visual resolutions and registers. Although this tendency began in the 1970s with *Leftovers* (1970), it was not until the 1980s, the 1990s, and the new century that Camnitzer

produced the political works that had the greatest repercussion, such as *Uruguayan Torture Series* (1983–84), *Los San Patricios* [The San Patricios] (1992), *El Mirador* [The Observatory] (1996), *Documenta Project* (2002), and *Memorial* (2009), broadening his repertoire to embrace a practice that is perhaps more complex and open to spectator participation.

In the third and final phase, the exhibition focuses on his most recent production, whose basis lies in his conscience of the general political failure that has accompanied the triumph of the neoliberal system, and above all in his defense of an art that must function in complete communion with education. While we may join the artist in affirming that the important thing in



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Aula, 2005
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these works is helping to spread knowledge and explore alternative orders, what they also achieve is the assertion that art and education, understood not only as teaching but also as learning, speculating, questioning, challenging, discovering, and engaging in the collective task of facilitating knowledge, are almost the same thing. These ideas are encountered in *Insultos* [Insults] (2009) or in the series *Cuaderno de ejercicios* [Assignments Book] (2011/2017), and in installations like *Lección de historia del arte, lección n.º 1* [Art History Lesson, Lesson No. 1] (2000), *El aula* [The Classroom] (2005), and *El museo es una escuela* [The Museum is a School] (2009–18).

The work *Utopías fallidas* [Failed Utopias] (2010/2018), included in this section, lends its title to the exhibition at the express wish of the artist. In keeping with his habitual irony, he alludes to the “dark” history of the Sabatini Building as a hospital and a place for the “demented or witless.” Besides this, however, the retrospective traces the theme of the utopia in Camnitzer, who describes it as “a process through which one seeks perfection, where perfection, like a mirage, constantly grows distant at the same speed one believes oneself to be nearing it. Something similar to the revolution in the revolution.”

Education, and the role proposed for education by Camnitzer in the course of his long and versatile career, situate us precisely in a participative space that raises hopes of creation and learning: “My utopia”, the artist says, “is an egalitarian and just society, classless and creative, where power is equitably distributed. To engage in the process of this utopia, I need education to be creative and to help to create, and I need what we call art to be educational and to generate learning. So the accent in education is not on transferring information but on learning how to access it. And where art is concerned, it

doesn't lie on the object called an 'artwork' but on the processes that its presence generates in the viewer, and on how it transforms individuals, giving them independence in their own creativity without forcing them to continue consuming what I do as an artist. Art and education, then, are almost the same thing."



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El mirador, 1996
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Camnitzer is aware that in our neoliberal societies, education can become an instrument not only for inculcating authoritarian, regressive, and propagandistic convictions, but also for stifling and crippling the ability of the population to form ideas, beliefs, and alternatives aligned with justice, liberty, and critical thought. For many, it is also evident that we have reached a point in the history of modernity where

historical conscience and utopian thought have irrevocably parted ways. Our present therefore appears to us as obscure and opaque, because it cannot be connected either with a past from which it derives its difference, or with a future from which to extract its orientation. The utopia of which Camnitzer speaks, however, is liberating because it has abandoned the illusion that comes from imagining utopia as a determined totality. He is obviously aware that all the utopias of modernity have been easily transformed into dystopian nightmares. What faces us, in any case, is the task of renewing our trust and our belief. For Camnitzer, it is a precisely a question of opening up the field of possibility and restoring the critical discourse in education and art.

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