

A Case For Ethical Cynicism

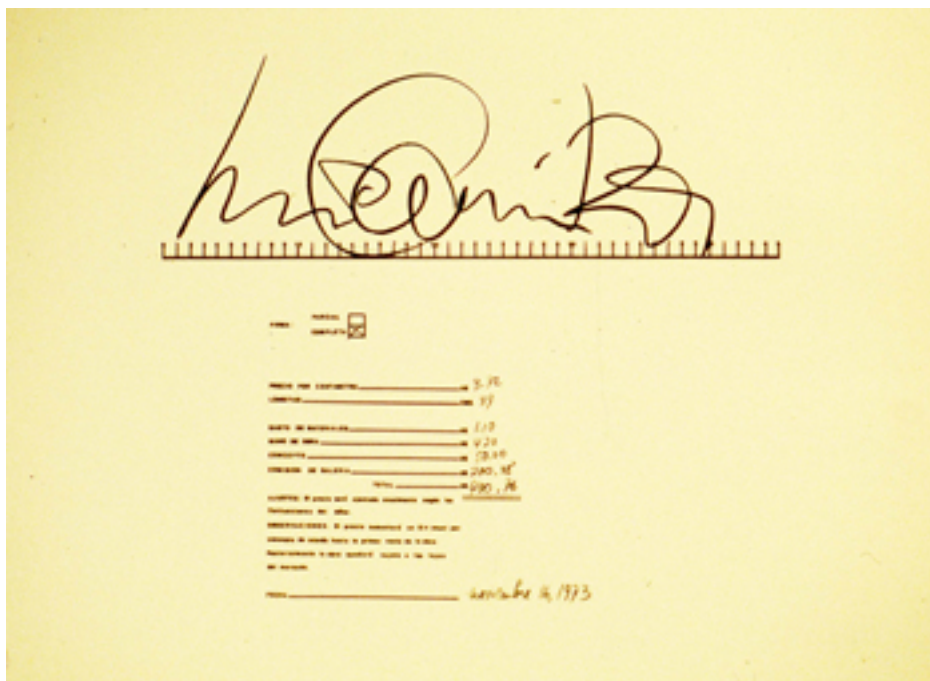
A dialogue between Luis Camnitzer and Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy

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A dialogue between Luis Camnitzer and Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy New York City, April–May 2005

Sofía Hernández: I have an interest in artists that critically engage in cultural work apart from, although, occasionally inter-dependent with, art making. You are an exemplary figure of this kind of practice. You are known through your conceptually driven art, but are also renowned as a lecturer and author who has contributed to the understanding of contemporary Latin American art, and as an attentive critic who has organized and curated exhibitions such as the traveling show *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s* (1999)[1] and most recently, *León Ferrari: Politiscripts* (2004)[2] Your work has been internationally exhibited, and your statements, essays, and texts written between the early 1980s to the present have been widely circulated. Taken together, these diverse practices have had an enormous international influence on artists, curators, and art historians, particularly those interested in art and political agency, conceptualism, and Latin American art.

Since your way of working and the subjects you address are intrinsically associated to politics, I would like to go into specifics. Can you talk about the context you were experiencing when you began working as an artist, and the personal motivations you initially had for making art *and* cultural work?



Luis Camnitzer, 1971-1973

Luis Camnitzer: I grew up in Uruguay during the 1950s, in a very politicized university reflecting the militant thinking of students. When I began studying art and architecture, art issues were always relating as much to society as to self-expression. It was clear that art was not a profession that led to economic survival. Thus by the age of 17, I had decided that I would never try to live off my artwork. By the time I was 21, some peers and I started to instigate changes in the course of study of the School of Fine Arts. We succeeded in 1960 and soon after I started to teach, and ever since I've felt

that teaching is a form of art making. When I started writing in 1964, it was part of the same package; and it was the same later, when I began curating. So, I never saw myself as multidisciplinary, but rather as inter-disciplinary, addressing interests in different media and seeing art as a meta-discipline useful to explore knowledge and a set of questions. Since many of the questions I had dealt with the distribution of power, one could class my work more specifically as political, although I don't believe there is something like non- or a-political art.

Ultimately, I am interested in ethics. Politics inform my strategies to pursue those ethics. And art, in this broader sense, is my tool for organizing myself and for implementing things with some consistency. This order of steps is quite important for me, as I believe that one uses power when one makes art (and when one shows it) and, therefore, is always in danger of abusing power. Without an awareness of these things there may not be enough critical distance to seriously ponder on the effects of one's doings. In that sense, the influence you are attributing to my work is quite scary because it may describe an involuntary abuse of power.

And yet, it is undeniable that one wants to be heard; that many steps I took were to accumulate some power in order to be heard. Very early on, I began collecting museums, figuring that once I could show a list of collections on my résumé, this would give me some type of authority. I tried to sell or donate works to any institution with the word "museum" in its name. That began favorably, and it helped validate my work to other museums. It works like credit cards—to get the first one is difficult, but once you have one, the others are very easy to come by. I had a head start here, in New York City, because a friend of a friend was a prints and drawings curator at the MoMA, and, as early as 1962, I was able to place two prints in their collection. I got \$25 dollars for each print, which gave me the feeling of being a philanthropist and also of having broken-through some huge barrier towards the acquisition of power.



Luis Camnitzer, 1969

SH: Today, that type of intervention seems a little bit more difficult to perform. Museums are a different type of machine. Particularly in the last decade, they have grown exponentially, and their acquisition processes are much more complex. To add to this, the art market has extremely expanded. But this is another topic, which I prefer to discuss at another moment. I want to get back to your story. Can you talk about how you feel the contexts and motivations for making art and cultural work changed throughout the years, say from the 1960s to the present day?

LC: I don't think that my positions changed much over the years. I was always center-left politically—what in Uruguay we called *tercerista*, a third position that basically meant to be non-aligned with either the USA or the USRR. Today, that position seems to be perceived as a form of rabid leftism; this is

neither my fault nor my problem. I am still a moderate leftist from the 1950s who awoke when the USA bombed a democratically elected government in Guatemala for the sake of fetching bananas.

If there has been any change over the years it is losing some of my purism. While I lived in Uruguay, I never participated in anything that was official—not in its museums, salons, competitions nor international biennials. I would represent Uruguay only if I was invited as an individual. That is, I would represent Uruguay, but Uruguay could not use me to be represented. After the dictatorship was over (in 1984), I realized that keeping one's personal purity could be in the way of more important things, like, for example, the cementing of a regained democracy. It was after realizing this and after much discussion with friends that I gradually accepted to participate in some official events, such as representing Uruguay in the 1988 Venice Biennial. Since, I developed something I call "ethical cynicism." Developing this was a big step for me.

Ethical cynicism basically means that I can take certain steps that are not fully consistent with my beliefs as long as its effects are conducive to some larger standing goal. Whether subtly or not, it somehow also meant accepting the belief that ends justifies means—something that I always abhorred—or maybe that I was being corrupted by USA pragmatism. However, if I were to step in this direction with a clear mind, at least this corruption is reversible and one can maintain one's ethics to a certain point. It is when corruption seeps without one's awareness that it appears irreparable; in this case one can be cynical about that, but without ethics. So, we are back to ethics first, politics as a strategy, etcetera. I didn't change much. Maybe I did. I used to believe that with ethics one could change the world. I don't believe that anymore. Now, I see ethics as the last pathetic form of resistance against an overwhelming wave of obscurantist and unethical chauvinist fundamentalism that tries to cover up greed with biblical quotes.



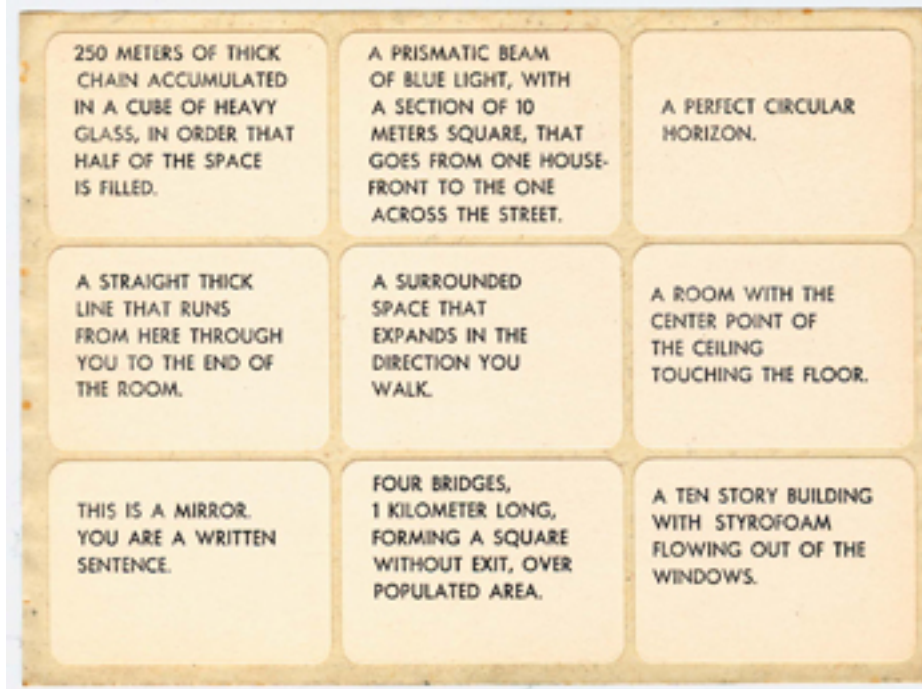
Luis Camnitzer, 2002

SH: You talk about the politics in Uruguay and the USA as edifying environments. First, studying and teaching in a politicized university during the 1950s in Uruguay, a country eventually suffering an oppressive dictatorship (1973-1984); and later, living during the mid-1960s and 1970s in the USA, a country at war. I would like to discuss certain ideas around collaborations and collective activity that were perhaps shaped by these circumstances.

Since 2000, I have been interested in the emergence of artists' collectives and artist-run spaces, and I've particularly worked with those that have surfaced since the mid-1990s. Some of these groups or spaces have now disbanded or closed. And most of them weren't (or aren't) as overtly political as the groups or spaces formed in the 1960s and 1970s, probably because today there is a less-oppressive cultural and political context or at least more established channels and support mechanisms for artists are in place. In any case, my initial interests in approaching this type of activity was to understand a little bit more what being "alternative" meant in terms of artistic practice and cultural policy. Certainly, not all groups or spaces were founded with the intention of being alternative. For some, this was simply an assigned classification that for better or for worse incorporated them into a larger history.

In the 1960s, you and two other artists of Latin American-descent initiated The New York Graphic Workshop. Little has been written about this group or space. Can you please share the intentions behind its foundation, the way it actually operated, and your role in this project?

LC: The New York Graphic Workshop was a group started thanks to Dr. Julian Firestone, a dentist interested in printmaking. He had a press in his apartment, and invited a group of us to use it. Initially, the group comprised of Sharon Arndt, Liliana Porter, José Guillermo Castillo, Firestone, and me. The initial reason of coming together was to have a good studio, and to teach printmaking from a non-traditional point of view, like incorporating three dimensions and using mass production. Since Firestone kept his activities to a hobby and to financing the studio, and since Arndt eventually moved out, the working group really became Porter, Castillo, and me. The three of us started to think beyond printmaking, to deal not only with production but also with creative issues. In 1966, we came up with a manifesto that we thought would revolutionize the history of printmaking forever. It was called FANDSO, an acronym for the Free Assemblable Non-functional Disposable Serial Objects. Therefore, I cannot say that it was an overtly political group. In fact, I would say it mostly was a group that tried to transcend a craft. In the process, it became clear that we were dealing with ideas as much as with technical issues. That pushed us into stuff that would later be called "conceptual" art.



Luis Camnitzer, 1966, Mail Exhibition 1967

Luis Camnitzer, 1966

SH: How did The New York Graphic Workshop personally help you crystallize and make public a set of interests, histories, and artwork?

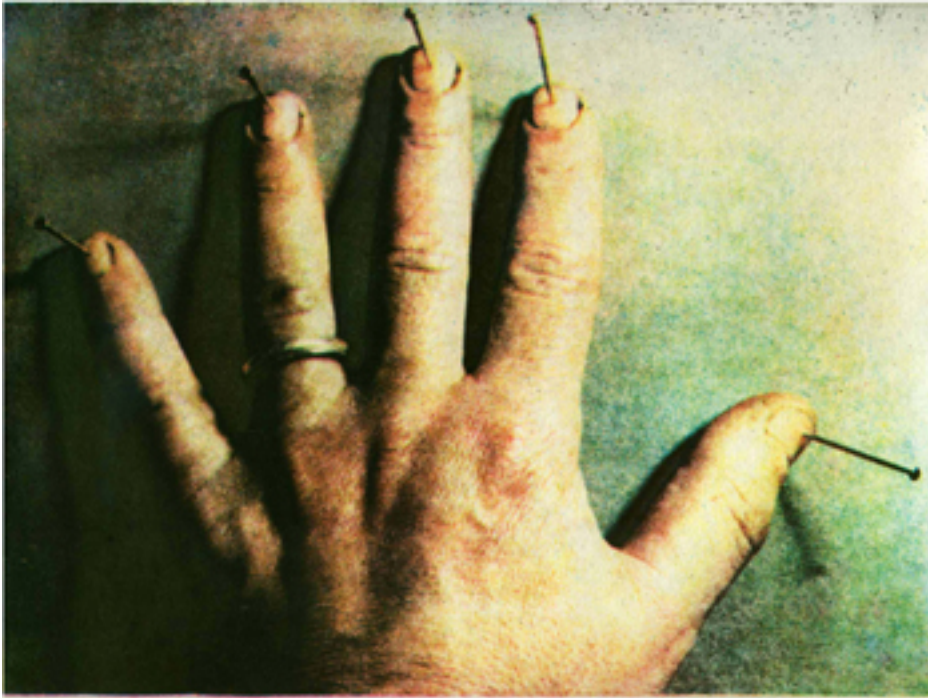
LC: Of the three of us, I was the only one that jumped into language in 1966. Porter and Castillo continued working with images, although giving priority to a framework of ideas. The group had strategic importance for us in terms of our career. We started exhibiting in museums in Latin America in a plan devised by Castillo, who felt that if we wanted to “make it” in New York, we first had to make it in Latin America. Our group discussions also helped us break free from our old art baggage. And, we had very frank discussions of our work in which we all tried to achieve internal consistency. In that group situation I probably had my best education.

SH: Yes, it’s clear that language became a concern. You began writing profusely, and a couple of decades later your texts were amply distributed. Unlike your work of “collecting museums,” where the placement of artworks is a visible outline in a resume—a drawing of sorts comprising positioned arrangements and accumulations of lines—your writing created something else. It didn’t wait for placement, and subsequently for legitimization. Instead, it produced that gradually and simultaneously. It’s articulating as another way of drawing. Let’s go into specifics.

In 1988 you wrote *Latin American Art in the U.S.: Latin or American?*, which you later expanded into the essay *Wonderbread and Spanglish Art*.^[3] This latter text became a recurring or somewhat classic reading on curriculums dealing with art and multiculturalism, specifically in colleges and universities in the USA. In this article, you stated that for artists who migrated to cultural centers, “the common unifying experience [was] that of uprootedness,” and thus posited two different ways in which this condition was addressed and made manifest in the content and form of their work, and even of its potential audiences and markets. You identified “Spanglish” art as an existing alternative to these, representing “the merging of a deteriorating memory with the acquisition of a new reality distanced by foreignness.”

If you were to re-write *Wonderbread and Spanglish Art* today, how would you characterize today’s

hegemonic cultural centers and peripheries? And what type of existing pressures and aesthetic strategies would you draw attention to explain the relationships of the mainstream, the market, and migrant artists operating in the cultural center vis-à-vis the periphery that you've here identified?



He practiced every day.

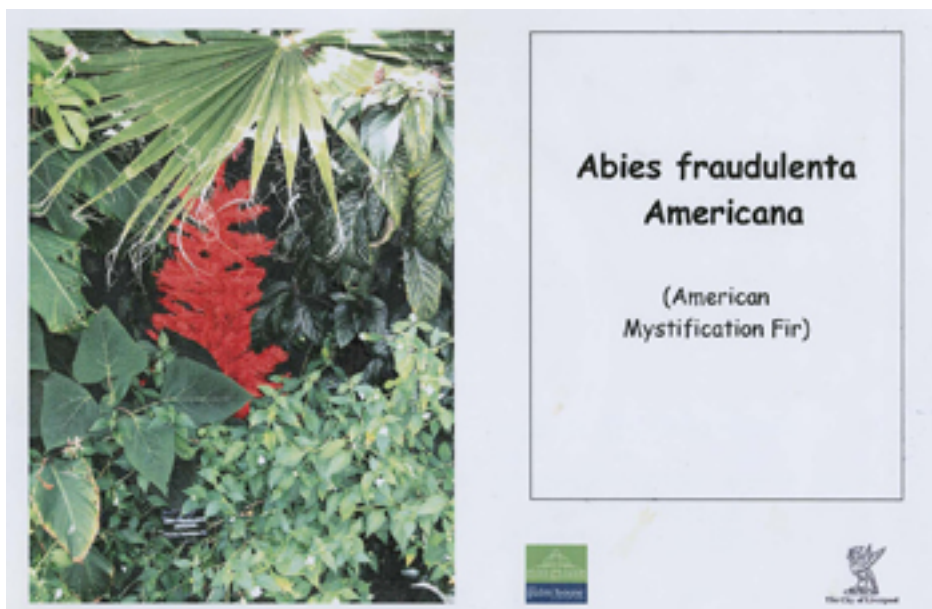
Luis Camnitzer, from Tortura Uruguay Series, 1983

LC: Some years ago, for a paper presented at a panel at the New Museum, New York, I wrote that mayonnaise—an emulsion where all the ingredients are suspended, evenly spread all over the place and yet keeping their identity—was becoming the new model for the world. The periphery is no longer geographically placed. It is “info-graphically” placed. That is, position is defined by crossings of information. I prefer this model because it encompasses communities that are united in a physical locus, but it also allows for the creation of dispersed communities where only interests and/or information, or the relation towards information in regard to its emission, holds them together. In this sense, today, I would probably write *Wonderbread* differently.

But in any case, I believe there still is a center/periphery relation. Power continues to be centralized; even if it sometimes only defined by the way information is clustered and distributed. On occasions, we revert to old geographical models, even medieval ones, like when there is a revival of the Crusades to convince people or to steal their goods. Either way, the division between haves and have-nots continues. What the info-graphic distribution may affect is the definitions of Diaspora, which in turn may change the dialects generated by distance and semi-assimilation. However, I believe that in one form or another, *Spanglish* and its likes will always exist, and as long as there is an unjust distribution of power the conundrums posed by resistance and assimilation won't be erased.

SH: I want to transition from this to contemporary strategies of resistance, although my departing point might seem the most abstract way to address this. I will try. In our last meeting, I mentioned that a colleague has insisted in discussing “new ways of doing nothing.” I confessed to you that I have explored various ways of approaching this, but have yet to identify or understand what that could be,

what that could mean, and even how to begin discussing this without falling into an existential trap. You seemed to be more confident. You took your pen and made a drawing on a napkin sitting by your teacup. It was a simple, abstract-looking rectangular figure with a triangle inside. You said it was an envelope. We agreed. Then you extended one of its lines, and the image ceased to be a figure of anything, you looked at it, at me, and boldly concluded by saying: *arte boludo*. Is this a new way of doing nothing, and if it is, what does that mean to you?



Luis Canitzer, 2004

LC: It is not exactly a way of doing nothing. It is rather a way of creating an artistic black hole. I still don't exactly know how to do this. The envelope drawing (the piece is actually a real envelope altered with the little line) was an approximation. The other day I found a forgotten piece of mine from 1967 with the inscription of *arte boludo*. During the days of The New York Graphic Workshop, this was one of the aesthetic concerns we had as a group, although we were never able to formulate it clearly beyond the name.

In Uruguayan and Argentinean slang, *boludo* means dumb ass—with the stress on “dumb.” In more theoretical terms, it means that information is not being emitted by the work of art. It is the absolutely non-declarative and non-referential piece. Therefore, the only option open to the viewer is to endlessly project information into it. At this point, the viewer stops being a consumer to become a complete creator. Until now I've believed in ambiguity; in giving clues to generate evocation; in setting margins within which the viewer could come up with his or her own insights. My margins were set by political motivations. I wanted people to have insights that raised their political awareness through creative actions. But I always believed that the artist's ultimate function was to create him/herself out of the job, to erase the creator/consumer divide. Artists are mediators between the universe and the public, and we might as well help people to deal with the universe on their own rather than keep doing it for them. So, *arte boludo* seems to be the ideal vehicle to achieve that, to truly break our monopoly on art and to democratize it at a maximum. My problem is that I may be too dumb to achieve this goal.



Luis Camnitzer, Catalog Cover for Retrospective Exhibition at Kunsthalle, Kiel, 2003

SH: Perhaps by being dumb is how one can begin. Leaving space for accident, for possibilities of new experiences.

NOTES

[1] <http://web.mit.edu/lvac/www/exhibitions/FALL/2000/Global.html>

[2] <http://www.drawingcenter.org/talespinning.htm#ferrari>

[3] http://ca80.lehman.cuny.edu/gallery/luis_camnitzer/wonderbread.htm

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