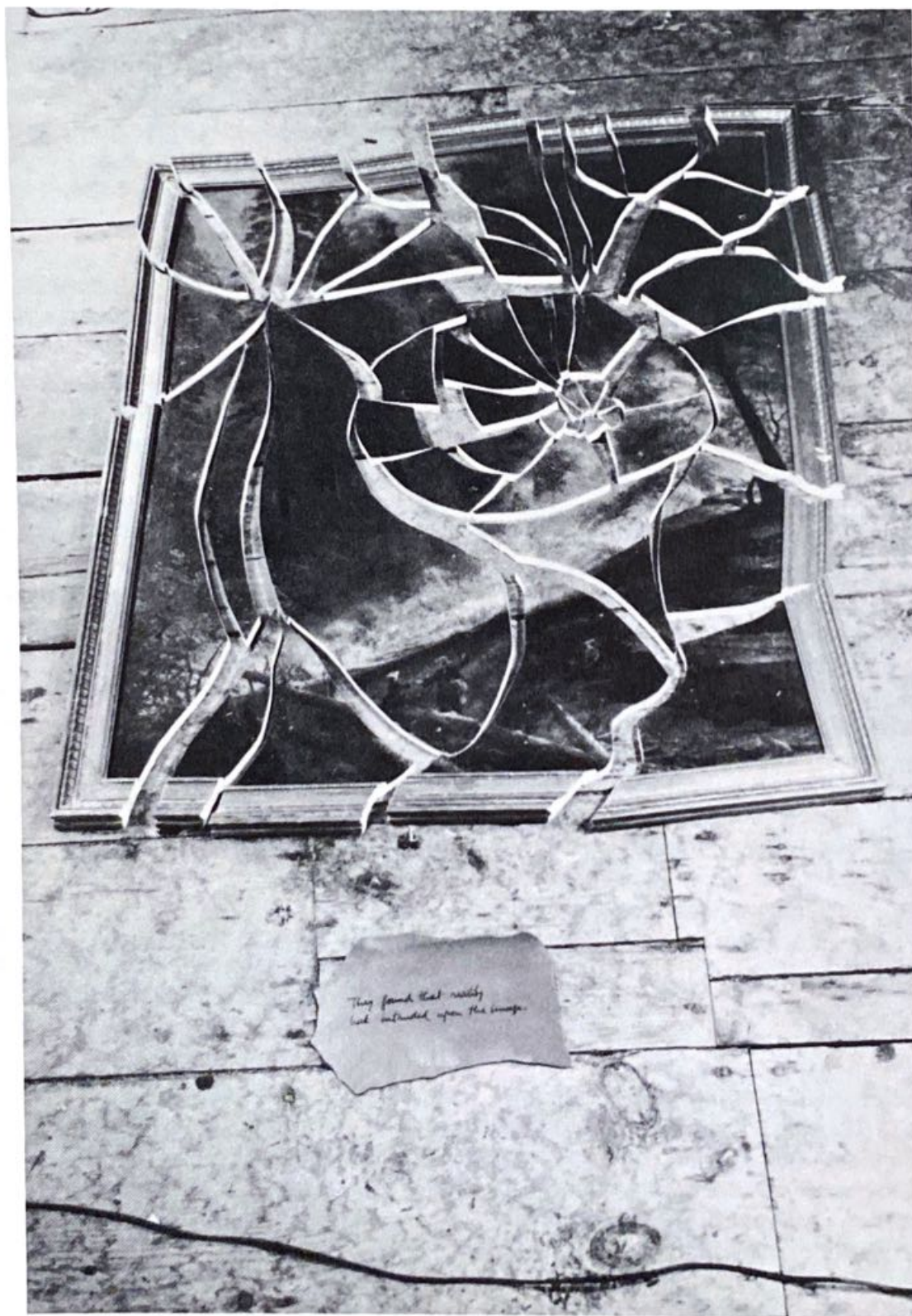


LEHMAN
COLLEGE
■ ART
GALLERY

LUIS CAMNITZER



They Found That Reality Had Intruded Upon the Image (1986) Mixed media. 1" x 2" x 30"

RETROSPECTIVE EXHIBITION: 1965-1990

Organized by Jane Farver

February 1 - March 16, 1991

Lehman College Art Gallery, 250 Bedford Park Blvd. W., Bronx, N.Y., 10468

LUIS CAMNITZER: CHRONOLOGY

I started making prints, about thirty years ago, as a consequence of my belief that art should be a common rather than a private good. The choice of the medium was a political one, even if it had aesthetic consequences. With this choice I committed two involuntary errors. The first error was to believe that art made in editions could democratize art. The second error was to allow the medium to stimulate my expressionist tendencies. It took me time to correct both.

My first editions were "infinite" in size. Eventually I realized that "infinite" is a relative concept. In my particular situation it signified a variable number placed somewhere between five and ten. In the art market, however, it meant well over one thousand. Translated into the realm of economics, I found myself selling my work at one percent or less of a fair market price. The difference was my subsidy to the buyer, a buyer which, in spite of my fantasies, was not a derelict bypassed by cultural processes and possibilities of income. On the way to my disappointment I also realized that with my prints I wasn't creating a body of common goods. I was organizing buyers as a group of stockholders of my work.

The second error, about expressionism, was a more personal one. About 1965 I had lost any sense of risk when making prints. To compensate for boredom I had let the work grow to absurd dimensions, woodcuts beyond four square meters, and still I was unable to capture the unpredictable. Making prints had become a form of self-therapy. After a small crisis I decided that I preferred to be an intellectual exhibitionist rather than an emotional one. To work with ideas would allow me to approach mystery in a more lucid and transmittable manner, with results which might be both less authoritarian and less narcissistic. Instead of delivering results to the viewer, I could deliver processes. I could allow the viewer to become the producer of the results. Borderlines between creation and pedagogy would be erased. Material possession of art would lose its meaning since possession would take place through reading. The ideal was the newspaper headline: a simple reading allowed appropriation which then unleashed imagery within the viewer.

Consistent with this utopia I began to work on texts without images like "This is a mirror. You are a written sentence." (1966). Having some difficulty in exhibiting these pieces, I started to make mail exhibits and to affix stickers in elevators and bathrooms. (1967). The work with words made me look at their relation to their meanings. A scientist friend led me to hypnosis. My visual descriptions could be illustrated under a state of heightened concentration ruling out spurious associations. With a statistical quantity of illustrations, deviations from the text would become apparent and allow me a more precise rewrite of my text. I could achieve a perfect text, an equivalent of a photographic record of an idea. In 1966 a dentist in New Jersey, who used hypnotism for anesthesia, offered his services and a twelve year old patient as the illustrator. My subsequent move to New York unfortunately aborted the project.

The research of words took me into many predictable directions. One was "Envelope" (1967), a constant image which by means of the change of titles alters its dimensions and the relative position of the viewer ("envelope" vs. "tunnel" vs. "chimney"). The arbitrariness of meanings became obvious and, with it, the right and ability to see things any way one pleases.

In 1968 I constructed a model of a living/dining room solely using the words needed for the nomenclature of the parts. The following year I exhibited it in full size in the Museum of Fine Arts in Caracas. I was proud that, without instructions, people walked over the words describing the rug, but walked around the ones designating the fully set dining table.

I discovered that logic carried to the extreme of its possibilities could lead to something akin to magic. To inhabit an architectural floor plan could provide a deeper experience than to inhabit architecture. The Caracas environment led to a recreation of the "massacre of Puerto Montt" in the Museum of Fine Arts in Santiago. The massacre consisted of the killing of peasants who occupied unworked land. They first had been gathered by the army in a central place for "negotiations". It took place early 1969 under the government of Frei in Chile. Words were used to place port-holes, information about soldiers manning them, arms used in the operation and dotted lines marking the trajectory of the bullets.

A subsequent exhibit in New York (Paula Cooper Gallery, 1970), expanded the subject to repression in Latin America. Inventories of weapons were added to a wall constructed with numbered boxes wrapped in bloody gauze. Form became a pure and secondary product of content, inevitably existing for presentation, but without really influencing it.

At the same time, under the fashionable influence of semiology and structuralism, I was also interested in tautological, self-referential, metaphoric statements and other grammatical issues. I produced descriptive and evocative phrases and sentences which by some were seen as invading the, for me, alien field of poetry. The categorization never preoccupied me too much. I am more concerned with what I do than with how I do it. The "how" is the technique and, as such, it always reduces intentions and ideas to a partial and fictitious semblance. Technical virtuosity consists of convincing the viewer that the work of art is the perfect incarnation of an intention. This is so even when in fact the work of art is no more than an approximation formed by an accumulation of errors wisely administered.

I stopped being a "printmaker", a "sculptor" or a "technician," to become an "artist" or a "cultural worker." It is sad that these new answers to the question: "What do you do?" sound more pedantic and presumptuous than the technical ones. Regardless, it became clear that I was working with ideas. Ideas allowed me, with a modest investment of energy, to change and reorganize the universe according to my own wishes and design. The true answer to "What do you do?" really was: "I am omnipotent and I do whatever I fancy," though I never dared to use it. I discovered (1971) that if I made a minimal mark on a piece of paper, I irrevocably altered the order of the universe. Any new order would have to include my mark. My action conditioned any new definition of order. Thus, to change the universe wasn't that difficult and anybody could do it. It was more difficult to convince the art market of the fact that the alteration had taken place.

A mixture of omnipotence, politics and philosophy led me to sell my signature by the inch (\$2.73 per centimeter, in 1971). The same mixture also gave me the insight that any future buyer of my art was working with my money during the time lapsed between the dates of production and of purchase. I

therefore proceeded to add accumulated interest to the price of those pieces.

The story of the sale of my signature invariably elicited smiles. Later, in 1978, this reaction made me return to hypnosis. This time I became the subject. I wanted to find out if my signature pieces were truly art or if I had, unconsciously, designed them as some kind of a joke. The hypnotist (this time a psychiatrist) projected me into important ages in my life (six, fourteen, twenty-three, thirty-four, forty-one, sixty-five and seventy-five). Except for the age of fourteen, where the question of my signature taking the place of a work of art seemed incomprehensible, my answer was consistently positive in regard to the seriousness of the enterprise. There were more works of mine, indecisive between revelation and banality, but I didn't pursue the search for their truth.

Politically explicit work became secondary for a while. This was not because of any lack of interest on my part, but due to frustration. I felt unable to produce a big enough body of ideas combining both artistic and political weight to make me feel like a productive artist. In 1973, however, I became aware that my work was extremely disorganized and, if there was any common thread uniting it, it was beyond my grasp. My pieces were like loose pages which belonged to different books and the solution to the problem was not to be found in bookbinding. I needed a general matrix, a grid into which work could be organized and where irrelevant pieces would automatically be excluded. I found the answer in works from 1967 and 1978, a series of dictionary pages. They belonged to an image-language dictionary, where any image could accept all the meanings attributed by myself or by the public.

The newly found matrix allowed me to design a format for the work before dealing with the particular pieces. Once the relation between image and text was laid out, the content of either one became unimportant. Any room for aesthetic speculation was eliminated for myself and for the viewer. Communication became immediate. It was resolved in a form of packaging.

The matrix functioned for many years and is probably still guiding me today. The most elegant and disconcerting example (1979) was a random combination of twenty objects with twenty titles written in advance which, together, produced an apparently coherent narrative totality. While I was offering chaos, a planned story was received thanks to the viewer's power of organization. I had discovered evocation.

The following piece, also in 1979, was "The Archeology of a Spell". The evoking process was organized around a tenuous argument line, only known to myself and inaccessible to the viewer. "Fragments of a Novel" (1980) carried the same principle through thirteen sequential pieces, again having a story narrated in the viewer's mind. Once it became clear that it was possible to convey the conditions for an argument without defining the argument itself, I was ready to reintroduce politics into my work. I now could bypass both pamphlet and description. The pamphlet alienates and description is banal.

Through controlled ambiguity I could try to generate the terror of things. The spectator then could take authorship of that terror instead of just remaining a consumer. Hopefully this would produce a perceptual and political awakening of the viewer and, some day, release me from art to do other things.

All this now seems relatively clear. That is alright since art should be demystified so that it can be understood as art instead of being believed as obscurantism. However, if explanations exhausted my work, it would die and stop being art. The explanation would suffice and there wouldn't be any need for the art work. The art work would be no more than a redundant illustration of a theory. It is possible that much of my work is no more than that. But if there is any part of it that survives beyond the reading of this text, it does so because of its inexplicability. Only this inexplicability is capable of an expansion of knowledge. Therefore, we find ourselves again in the realms of magic, of a surprised credulity, of passing mysteries as a validating condition for art. The creative process is lighted by theory, but true art stalks from shadows incompletely evanesced.

—Luis Camnitzer, 1986

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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LUIS CAMNITZER

Born in Germany, 1937, immigrated to Uruguay, 1939. Living in the United States since 1964. Professor of Art at the State University of New York, College at Old Westbury from 1969 to the present.

Education: Graduated in sculpture, School of Fine Arts, University of Uruguay. Studied architecture at the same university. Studied sculpture and printmaking at the Academy of Munich.

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITONS

Parque Lussich, Punta del Este, Uruguay, 1991
Carla Stellweg Gallery, New York, N.Y., 1990
Museo de la Universidad Nacional, Bogotá, Columbia, 1989
Centro Municipal Miraflores, Lima, Peru, 1988
Museo Histórico, Santa Clara, Cuba, 1988
Uruguayan Pavillion, Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy, 1988
Fototeca Havana, Havana, Cuba, 1987
Fundación San Telmo, Buenos Aires, Argentina, 1987
Artworks, Berlin, Maryland, 1987
Galerie Stampa, Basel, Switzerland, 1987, 1974
Massachusetts College of Art, Boston, Massachusetts, 1986
Retrospective Exhibition, Museo de Artes Plásticas, Montevideo, Uruguay, 1986
Alternative Museum, New York, N.Y. 1984
Casa de Las Americas, Havana, Cuba, 1983
Galería San Diego, Bogotá, Columbia, 1982, 1979
Museum Wiesbaden, Wiesbaden, Germany, 1982
Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, N.Y. 1978
C-Space Gallery, New York, N.Y. 1978
Galleria Ariete Grafica, Milan, Italy, 1976
Stadt Bibliothek, Mainz, Germany, 1975
Galleria Banco, Brescia, Italy, 1973
Printshop, Amsterdam, Netherlands, 1972
Libreria Einaudi, Milan, Italy, 1972
Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, N.Y. 1970

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

"China, June 4," P.S.1, Long Island City, N.Y. 1990
"The Power of Words: An Aspect of Recent Documentary Photography," P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York, N.Y.
"Signs of the Self: Changing Perceptions," Woodstock Artists Association, Woodstock, N.Y. 1990
"Whose Wars?: Vietnam and Central America," Bronx River Arts Center, Bronx, N.Y. 1989
"Out of Bounds," Guildhall Museum, East Hampton, N.Y. 1989
"Affinities," Jamaica Art Center, Queens, N.Y. 1988
"Latin American Spirit," Bronx Museum, Bronx, N.Y. 1988
"Jewish Museum Collects," Jewish Museum, New York, N.Y. 1988
"Project Democracy," Group Material, Dia Foundation, New York, N.Y., 1988
"Rosenberg Era," travelling exhibition, 1988

"The Debt," Exit Art, New York, N.Y. 1988
"Committed to Print," Museum of Modern Art, New York, N.Y. 1988
Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, France, 1988
"Drawings as Drawings," North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, N.C., 1987
Il Biennial de Havana, Havana, Cuba, 1986
"Disinformation," Alternative Museum, New York, N.Y. 1985
"World Print IV," San Francisco, CA., 1983
"Intergrafik," Berlin, Germany, 1983
Documenta Urbana, Kassel, Germany, 1982
"Further Furniture," Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, N.Y., 1978
"Third World Biennial of Graphic Art," London, England, 1980
"Buch Objekte," University of Freiburg, Freiburg, Germany, 1980
"Objects," Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, N.Y. 1978
"Printmaking, New Forms," Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, N.Y. 1976
"Information," Museum of Modern Art, New York, N.Y. 1970
"Language Show," Dwan Gallery, New York, N.Y. 1969
Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, N.Y. 1969

SELECTED FELLOWSHIPS/AWARDS

Art Matters, Inc., 1990
"Messages to the Public," Public Art Fund, New York, N.Y., 1988
Guggenheim Fellowship for Visual Art, 1982
Prize, Biennial of Puerto Rico, 1979
C.A.P.S. for Sculpture, 1978
Faculty Exchange Scholar of the State University of New York, 1978
Prize, British International Print Biennial, Bradford, England, 1974
Honorary Member of the Academy of Florence, 1965
Pratt Graphic Center, 1962
Guggenheim Fellowship for Creative Printmaking, 1962

SELECTED PERMANENT COLLECTIONS

Museum of Modern Art, New York, N.Y.
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, N.Y.
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, N.Y.
The Public Library, New York, N.Y.
Museo de Art Moderno, Buenos Aires, Argentina
Museo del Grabado, Buenos Aires, Argentina
Museo de Bellas Artes, Santiago, Chile
Museo de Bellas Artes, Caracas, Venezuela
Yeshiva University Art Museum, New York, N.Y.
Print Cabinet, Geneva, Switzerland
Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, France
J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu, California
Museum el Barrio, New York, N.Y.

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