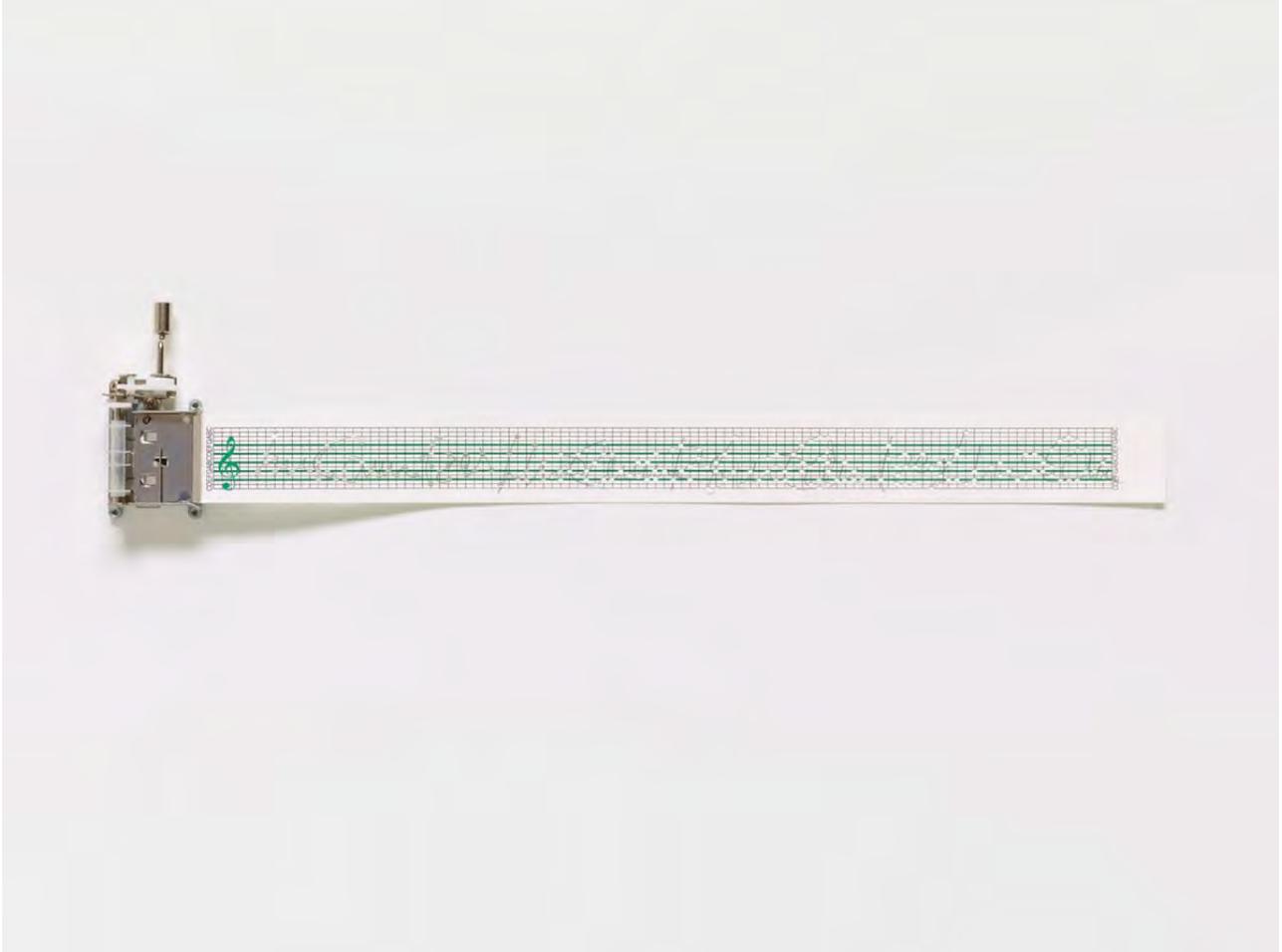


## Luis Camnitzer in Paris - The awakening lesson

Samantah Deman | February 25, 2014

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At the same time "average" and "model", language is at the heart of the research conducted by Luis Camnitzer for fifty years. Uruguayan, of German origin and living in the United States, the artist is also an essayist and teacher, these multiple activities being closely intertwined in one and the same approach. Engaged, endowed with a powerful evocative power, sometimes disturbing, his prints, sculptures and installations combine simplicity and efficiency, but also humor and poetry to summon without question the implication of the viewer. Twenty pieces testifying to various key stages of his career are currently

to be discovered at the Cortex Athletico gallery, in Paris, as part of the first personal exhibition ever dedicated in France to one of the pioneers of conceptual art Atlantic.

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*"I am an artist, but I can use a classroom, a book or an article as a medium," says Luis Camnitzer, when asked about the diversity of his work and his commitments. Teaching is an integral part of my artistic process. "Art and teaching have, according to him, as a common point to be a source of hope and help others to achieve a form of freedom, through critical thinking and the questions they encourage. Being a professor - he practiced for 32 years at Suny College in Old Westbury, New York - also assured him a certain, and precious, independence from the art market, a regular target. of its manifold manifestos, just as injustice and repression; it is also what led him to settle in the United States 45 years ago, without ever renouncing his Uruguayan nationality. "It is not so much the concept of nationality - a concept I do not believe in - but something more vague, not delimited by borders, but represented by a community whose core is Uruguay. . That's where I grew up, learned to think, look around, saw things for the first time. I remember smells, sounds, street names. All of this helped to shape my personality. To become a North American, it would have been necessary to erase everything and start all over again, I had no reason to comply with these constraints. "*

Luis Camnitzer arrived in Uruguay in 1939 at the age of two. His family, Jewish, fled Hitler's Germany for this country *"at the time very open and progressive"*. He grew up in Montevideo, the capital, where he studied Fine Arts, and more particularly sculpture, at the University of the Republic, between 1953 and 1961; In the middle of which he leaves, thanks to a scholarship, spend a year at the Academy of Munich to attend courses in sculpture, but also printmaking. At age 24, a second scholarship, awarded by the Guggenheim Foundation, leads him to New York to perfect, for six months, his apprenticeship in printmaking and other printing techniques, which from the beginning will occupy a privileged place in his work. In 1964, he created with the Argentine artist Liliana Porter - whom he married the following year - and the Venezuelan Guillermo Castillo (deceased in 1999) the New York Graphic Workshop - active until 1970. Together, they explore the possibilities offered by the print, that they consider as a means of democratization of art, and language, as a medium, a tool in its own right, in a troubled social and political context: the United States is bogged down in Vietnam; in Latin America, the beginnings of the various dictatorial regimes are clearly felt.

For a few years, Luis Camnitzer lives between New York and the country of his childhood. *"In 1969, we returned to Uruguay. The dictatorship (1973-1985) had not officially started but, de facto, the atmosphere was filled ... I had a proposal to teach in New York, so I went back. "* Soon he moved there permanently. After divorcing Liliana Porter in the mid-1970s, he met Selby Hickey - an American, then a professor at Suny College, who has been working on photography since 2000. From their marriage, celebrated in 1979, will be born four children. *"No one in my family spoke Spanish. I did not want to make them exiles, as I myself felt, by going back to South America. But, I never integrated myself perfectly. At the very beginning, I left driven by curiosity: I wanted to know what those people looked like who sowed disorder in my country. Later, it became easier to live in the boot rather than under the boot, "*

he concludes with a smile. Notions of identity, but also freedom, imprisonment, injustice are reflected in many of his

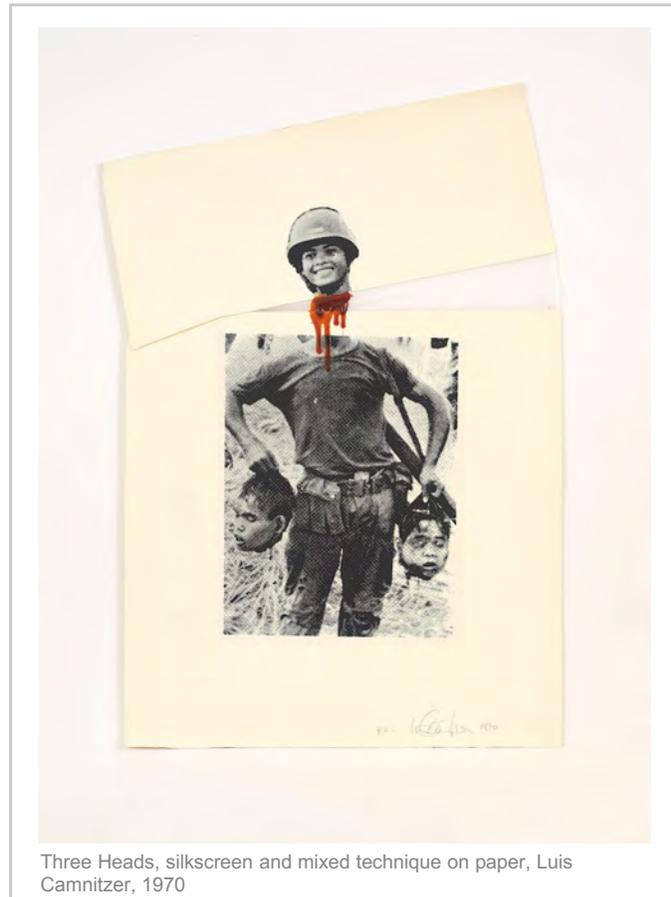
he concludes with a smile. Notions of identity, but also freedom, imprisonment, injustice are reflected in many of his works. Humor, sometimes cynicism, accompany his commitment and his deep attachment to Latin America, which is also witnessed by many writings on the history of art and thought from post-colonialism to conceptualism from the -continent. For a long time, a feeling of guilt persists, that of having escaped the repressive measures of the dictatorship which did not spare his friends remained in Uruguay. In 1986, only one year after the fall of the military

regime, the Montevideo Museum of Fine Arts devotes a retrospective to him. *"The institution wanted to include the series From the Uruguayan Torture Series (1983-1984)," he recalls. Not me, because I made it for an English-speaking audience - the texts accompanying the images were in English. And then, in the United States, few people understood the extent of the torture that had occurred in Uruguay, while in Montevideo, everyone knew what it was ... Finally, it was agreed to show the series in a separate room from the rest of the exhibition, so that people can avoid being confronted if they wish. The Museum had organized a meeting time with the public. I had only one fear: that one asks me why I had conceived this series. Of course, someone asked the question. I explained that it was for me to pay tribute to friends who had been imprisoned and tortured, that I was probably guilty of not being with them, but busy being happy elsewhere. I confided my doubts, finally, on this work through which I was afraid to exploit the pain of others. At the end, a former classmate - who had spent twelve years in prison after being one of the leaders of the Uruguayan guerrillas - stood up and threw me from the back of the room:"If you feel guilty about this job, you did not understand anything. We need more people working like you on iconography, because it will make the minds better than any document. " That was for me like an absolution. "*

Violence and censorship are among the themes that open the Parisian exhibition proposed by the Cortex Athletico gallery. The first room brings together pieces - mostly engravings - imagined in the 1960s and into the early 1970s, during the New York Graphic Workshop period. *"It was at this time that Luis Camnitzer began to associate text and image, says Florencia Chernajovsky, curator of the exhibition. As in the Dictionary series (1969-1970), where he plays on how a sign can have multiple meanings \*.It is also his way of breaking down labels and participating in an apprehension of conceptual art that is not necessarily political or ideological. What he calls conceptualism - rather than conceptual art - is not so much for him a formal movement of minimal art as a strategy used at the time to, among other things, circumvent censorship. . "*

On a wall are hung various objects, debris and tools, collected around the gallery or taken in his workshop New York. Luis Camnitzer has also drawn up a list of words that he associated one by one, in a completely spontaneous and arbitrary way, to each piece (*Arbitrary Objects and Their Titles*, 1979-2010). *"Then everyone has to make their own associations in reading,*

according to their own story," explains Florencia Chernajovsky. *There is always, in the artist, an oscillation between image and text; it is a way of stating that describing, or writing, something can be much more effective than a visual representation.* "In the same spirit, the Uruguayan artist proposes an "interactive" work by inviting the visitor to bring back an unidentified object to fix it on the wall and to choose a name for it ( *Assignment # 6: it* , 2011). A little music, repetitive, tickles the ears. It comes from *El sonido of a number* ( *The sound of a name* , 2012), installation that takes the form of a mechanical music box. The cardboard perforations follow the outline of the letters forming ... the first name and the name of Luis Camnitzer! Or how to make a strong mockery of the importance we give to the signature of an artist. The essential political consciousness



Three Heads, silkscreen and mixed technique on paper, Luis Camnitzer, 1970

Humor is, with the complex relationship maintained between text and image, one of the threads chosen by the curator to design the exhibition. To begin with its title, to say the least disconcerting: *corn, squash and carrot: game on arbitrary reports of language, "taken from an anecdote about Simón Rodríguez - philosopher born in 1769 in Venezuela - who had named his children with names of vegetables, to go against the current Catholic system advocating the use of names of saints "*. A character - first known to have been the mentor of the "liberator" of Latin America Simón Bolívar - to which Luis Camnitzer "*On the border between a very strong political commitment and a keen interest in teaching and pedagogy*" and who handled the language and its graphics with the clear intention of "*provoking maximum efficiency in the transmission of information.* " A work



THIS IS NOT A PIPE; THIS IS NOT INFORMATION ABOUT A PIPE; THIS IS NOT A WORK OF ART; THIS IS NOT A WORK BY MAGRITTE.  
 This is not a pipe; @This is not information @ about a pipe; This is not a work of art; @ (...), Luis Camnitzer, 1974