

Last Words: Expression and Quotation in the Works of Luis Camnitzer

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This article examines the tensions between expression and expressionlessness in the works of the artist Luis Camnitzer, with special attention to these three works: *Selbstbedienung* (Self-Service), *Patentanmeldung* (Patent Application), *Uruguayan Torture Series*, and *Last Words*.

Keywords: Theodor Adorno, art and death penalty, art and Holocaust, art and torture, Luis Camnitzer, Latin American conceptualism, quotation

EXPRESSION

There is nothing particularly new or even modern about writing texts or making art with quotations. The cento—"a poem or poetic sequence made up of recognizable shorter sequences from one or more existing poems"—is older than most contemporary literary genres, and the commonplace book has, for millennia, served to cultivate a self using the words of others.¹ Artists' educations have long emphasized copying, and Kant insists in *The Critique of Judgment* that geniuses must imitate other geniuses and create works that can be copied by others.² Although many contemporary critics declare quotational practices to

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¹The *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd edition, s.v. "Cento." An overview of scholarship on the cento can be found in Giovanni Salanitro, "Osidio Geta e la poesia centonaria," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt: Geschichte und Kultur Roms im Spiegel der neueren Forschung*, ed. Wolfgang Haase (New York: de Gruyter, 1997), vol. 34, no. 3, 2314–2360. On the history of the commonplace book and other types of quotation collections, see Ann Moss, *Printed Commonplace Books and the Structuring of Renaissance Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 1–100; and Willis Goth Regier, *Quotology* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010), 46–96.

²Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1987), 186–187 (§49); on Kant's differentiations between desirable and undesirable forms of imitation, see Martin Gammon, "Exemplary Originality: Kant on Genius and Imitation," *Journal of the History of*

be revolutionary, copying does not, in itself, undermine any conventional aesthetic concepts, and, in fact, conservative appeals to tradition often praise imitation and quotation.³

And yet, despite quotation's long history, there does seem to be something new about contemporary works of art and literature that quote and appropriate. When the poet Heimrad Bäcker quotes verbatim a German submarine log book from World War II in his 1985 book *SEESTÜCK* and the artist Sherrie Levine rephotographs Walker Evans's photographs of his son and presents them as her own work, this seems different from Ausonius's pilfering of Virgil's lines for his nuptial cento, Rubens's use of the Farnese Hercules as a model, Georg Büchner's quotations from historical documents in *Danton's Death* and *Lenz*, and Kurt Schwitters's appropriative "i" poems.⁴ This cannot be because Bäcker's and Levine's techniques are, in themselves, new. If there is something different about contemporary quotational practices, it might be found not in the practices themselves but in how these practices respond to historical developments in the materials that they copy and the situations that they mimic.

Quotational methods can be used to incorporate the words of "others" who would otherwise be excluded from direct expression art and literature.⁵ Bäcker's *SEASCAPE*, for instance, quotes this log entry that includes the plea of drifting sailors:

Sighted lifeboat of the Norwegian motor tanker *John P. Pedersen* drifting under sail. Three survivors were lying exhausted under a tarpaulin and only showed themselves as the U-boat was moving away again. They stated that their ship had been torpedoed 28 days before. I turned down their request to be taken

Philosophy 35, no. 4 (October 1997): 563–592; and Paul Guyer, "Kant's Ambitions in the Third Critique," *Cambridge Companion to Kant and Modern Philosophy*, ed. Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 565. On artists' copying practices, see Isabelle Graw, "Wo Aneignung war, soll Zueignung werden," *Texte zur Kunst: Essays, Rezensionen, Gespräche* (Hamburg: Philo Fine Arts, 2011), 273–274; and Rosalind Krauss, "The Originality of the Avant-Garde" and "Sincerely Yours," *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), 151–194.

³See E. H. Gombrich on the "conservative programme" of imitation in Reynolds: E. H. Gombrich, "Reynolds's Theory and Practice of Imitation," *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 467 (June 1942): 45.

⁴See Heimrad Bäcker, *SEASCAPE*, trans. Patrick Greaney (New York: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2013); on Sherrie Levine, see Douglas Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 151–163, and Howard Singerman, *Art History, After Sherrie Levine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); Ausonius, *The Works of Ausonius*, trans. Hugh G. Evelyn White (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1921), 1: 371–393; on Rubens, see Jeffrey M. Muller, "Rubens's Theory and Practice of the Imitation of Art," *Art Bulletin* 64, no. 2 (1982): 229–247; on quotations in Büchner, see Helmut Müller-Sievers, "On the Way to Quotation: Paul Celan's Meridian Speech," *New German Critique* 91 (2004): 131–149; and Kurt Schwitters, "i (Ein Manifest)," *Das literarische Werk*, ed. Friedhelm Lach (Cologne: DuMont, 1981), 5: 120.

⁵Craig Owens, "Sherrie Levine at A&M Artworks" and "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism" *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 114–116 and 166–190.

aboard, provisioned the boat with food and water and gave them the course and distance to the Icelandic coast. Boat and crew were in a state that, in view of the prevailing weather, offered hardly any prospects of rescue.⁶

Bäcker's text gives voice to this "request," and he allows for this historical detail, one inhuman act among millions of others committed by Germans in World War II, to emerge from obscurity. But there's a catch. In Bäcker's text, the request is relayed in the words of the man who decided not to save the Norwegians' lives. Allowing the excluded to express themselves may also entail quoting those who excluded them.⁷

In this way, Bäcker's text displays some of the ambiguities of expression and quotation in the postwar era, which appear most dramatically in the workplace. Walter Benjamin speaks with enthusiasm of the "coming to language" of work itself in the Soviet Union, and of a universalization of literary ability:

It began with the space set aside for "letters to the editor" in the daily press, and has now reached a point where there is hardly a European engaged in the work process who could not, in principle, find an opportunity to publish somewhere or other an account of a work experience, a complaint, a report, or something of the kind. Thus, the distinction between author and public is about to lose its axiomatic character.⁸

The ironic result of this transformation of authorship and the inclusion of workers' voices is the post-Fordist exploitation of workers' subjectivities. "Today's management thinking," Maurizio Lazzarato writes, "takes workers' subjectivity into consideration" not to allow for their self-realization or to combat alienation but to "codify [their subjectivity] in line with the requirements of production."⁹ This new form of labor based on information, knowledge, or services encourages workers and customers to express themselves, but this expression takes place in a "communications context that has been completely normalized by management."¹⁰

⁶Bäcker, *SEASCAPE*, u.p. This passage is a quotation of the International Military Tribunal, *Trial of the Major War Criminals Before the International Military Tribunal* (International Military Tribunal: Nuremberg, 1949), 14: 340–341.

⁷See Michel Foucault, "The Lives of Infamous Men," *Power: The Essential Works of Michel Foucault* (New York: New Press, 2000), 157–175.

⁸Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility (Third Version)," trans. Harry Zohn and Edmund Jephcott, in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings: 1938–1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 262.

⁹Maurizio Lazzarato, "Immaterial Labor," trans. Paul Colilli and Ed Emory, *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, ed. Michael Hardt and Paolo Virno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 134. Lazzarato presents Benjamin's works as "fundamental for any genealogy of immaterial labor and its forms of reproduction." Lazzarato, "Immaterial Labor," 147. See also Michael Hardt, "Affective Labor," *boundary 2* 26, no. 2 (1999): 89–100; and Maurizio Lazzarato, *Lavoro immateriale: Forme di vita e produzione di soggettività* (Verona: Ombre Corte, 1997), especially 85–114.

¹⁰Lazzarato, "Immaterial Labor," 134.

“We have here a discourse that is authoritarian: one *has to* express oneself, one *has to* speak, communicate, cooperate, and so forth,” Lazzarato writes.¹¹

For Lazzarato, capitalism’s inclusion of expression also reveals a “power of invention” that is “no longer related back to a finality, to a ‘use value’, but to itself” and thus retains some of the promise identified by Benjamin in expressive labor.¹² Expression is double: it is forced, and it reveals something that may undo this compulsion.

Modern art anticipates this situation. For Theodor Adorno, art’s “allergy to expression” has a different origin—hatred of what is “all too human” and thus all too weak—but can also be related to the expressive imperative that Lazzarato discusses.¹³ In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno argues that the “inwardness” that expression would voice has long been impoverished:

The category of inwardness, according to Max Weber’s thesis, is to be dated back to Protestantism, which subordinated works to faith. Although inwardness, even in Kant, implied a protest against a social order heteronomously imposed on its subjects, it was from the beginning marked by an indifference toward this order, a readiness to leave things as they are and to obey. This accorded with the origin of inwardness in the labor process: Inwardness served to cultivate an anthropological type that would dutifully, quasi-voluntarily, perform the wage labor required by the new mode of production necessitated by the relations of production. With the growing powerlessness of the autonomous subject, inwardness consequently became completely ideological, the mirage of an inner kingdom where the silent majority are indemnified for what is denied them socially; inwardness thus becomes increasingly shadowy and empty, indeed contentless in itself. Art no longer wants to accommodate itself to this situation. Yet art is hardly imaginable without the element of inwardness.¹⁴

Modern art hesitates to give expression to this “inner kingdom” and often cultivates an anti-expressive opacity. But, Adorno writes, remnants of another inwardness persist despite every attempt to reify it, and they register a “protest against a social order heteronomously imposed on its subjects.” Art must somehow express this other inwardness, even as it acknowledges its tendency to devolve into a compensatory “mirage.” This leads to a tension that, according to Adorno, aesthetics must face: conceptualizing art as the expression of an already existing free subject would ignore the subject’s deformation and lack of freedom, but a taboo on expression would keep the subject from lamenting its condition.¹⁵ There cannot be expression

¹¹Ibid., emphasis in the original. See also Roland Barthes on coerced expression in Barthes, *Leçon: leçon inaugurale de la chaire de semiologie littéraire du Collège de France* (Paris: Seuil, 1978), 14–16.

¹²Maurizio Lazzarato, “Machines to Crystallize Time: Bergson,” trans. Matthew Hyland with Alberto Toscano, *Theory, Culture, Society* 24, no. 6 (2007): 116.

¹³Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kenner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 115.

¹⁴Ibid., 116.

¹⁵Ibid., 117.

in art because of its instrumentalization, and there must be expression or else there could be no condemnation of that instrumentalization.

Adorno's solution to this aporia is itself aporetic. "Authentic art knows the expression of the expressionless, a kind of weeping without tears," Adorno writes. As examples of this specific form of expression, he names poems in which "Brecht or William Carlos Williams sabotages the poetic and approximates an empirical report" and in which "the empirical sentences translated into the aesthetic monad acquire an altogether different quality."¹⁶ This quality does not, Adorno claims, consist in a judgment about the linguistic material that these poets appropriate; there can be no explicit condemnation of reified language in its appropriations because this would reduce art to a message-bearer, and, Adorno insists, "of no artwork is it possible to determine its judgment or what is so-called message is."¹⁷

To illustrate this, Adorno quotes a Mörike poem in which a child invites a mouse to "pay us a visit tonight / when the moon shines bright" and to join in on a "little dance." The last line amounts to a sadistic taunt: "My old cat will probably be dancing along." The child's voice addresses the mouse only to invite it to be killed, and it offhandedly presents this death as part of a lighthearted celebration. But, Adorno argues, "the child's taunt . . . once appropriated by the poem [*vom Gedicht zugeeignet*], no longer has the last word." By presenting this sadistic dance and by doing nothing more than that, the poem opens it up to critique: "The poem's gesture, which points to this ritual as if nothing else were possible, holds court over the gapless immanence of the ritual by turning the force of self-evidence into an indictment of that ritual."¹⁸ By abstaining from judgment and condemnation, by just "pointing," the artwork also abstains from approval and presents itself as a "question mark" that undoes the taunt's naturalness. By repeating, the poem can be at once expressionless—because it adds nothing, because it says nothing about this taunt—and expressive, because it makes visible the taunt's sadism and the suffering it would cause. But it can do little more than that.

Adorno's reading of Mörike leads him to a gnomic conclusion: "Echo reconciles." It might be more accurate and more in line with Adorno's aesthetics to say that echo allows for "the hope of reconciliation," which is how he puts it at an earlier point in his discussion of expression.¹⁹

It's worth pausing to consider what, for Adorno, would be expressed in expression. When inwardness is expressed, what counts in this expression is not any specific content but the mere fact of its difference, as art, from what is repeated, its "protest" against the elimination of difference and its indication of a nonexistent "humanness." Echo and the echoic methods mentioned in *Aesthetic Theory*—"sabotage" in Brecht and Williams,

¹⁶Ibid., 123.

¹⁷Ibid., 123.

¹⁸Ibid., 124.

¹⁹For Adorno, art can include only what Peter Uwe Hohendahl calls "a weak indication of something different." Peter Uwe Hohendahl, "The Ephemeral and the Absolute: Provisional Notes to Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*," *Language Without Soil: Adorno and Late Philosophical Modernity*, ed. Gerhard Richter (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 224.

Mörike's "appropriation"—allow this humanness to appear by simply repeating what is inhuman and thereby showing, somehow, that it could be otherwise.²⁰ Although "art opposes society, it is nevertheless unable to take up a position beyond it; it achieves opposition only through identification with that against which it remonstrates," Adorno writes.²¹

To engage with contemporary forms of reification, expression in Adorno's sense must thus identify with the expression identified as authoritarian by Lazzarato. It takes on the forms of compulsive expression to point to the possibility of another kind of expression. Bäcker's quoting of Nazi-era documents in *SEASCAPE* and in his other texts can be read in this light, and so can the quotational works of Luis Camnitzer, the artist whose works will be the focus of this article. Camnitzer's installation *Patentanmeldung* (Patent Application) (1997) quotes the engineer of a high-capacity crematorium designed for concentration camps; his *Uruguayan Torture Series* (1983) seems to identify with the torturers in one of Latin America's most brutal dictatorships; and in *Last Words* (2008) he quotes from the website of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, which posts online the final statements of the prisoners it executes. In these works, and in many others that do not rely on quotation, Camnitzer points to the way in which communication and expression have been ruined and nonetheless live on in deformed ways in art.

EXILE

For most of his adult life, Camnitzer has lived in a double exile. He was born in Lübeck in 1937, and his immediate family fled Germany for Uruguay in 1938. His paternal grandparents remained and were killed in a concentration camp.²² Camnitzer grew up speaking German and Spanish in Montevideo, where he studied art and architecture. In 1961, he received a Guggenheim Fellowship to study printmaking in New York, where he moved permanently in 1964 and began his careers as an influential artist, teacher, and curator.²³ As part of a collective, the New York Graphic Workshop (1964–1970), and as an individual, he played an important role in the development of conceptual art and in the political and aesthetic debates among Latin American artists in New York. His North American stay turned into an involuntary exile between 1973 and 1985, during Uruguay's military dictatorship.

²⁰Christoph Menke presents this as "quotation" in Menke, *The Sovereignty of Art: Aesthetic Negativity in Adorno and Derrida*, trans. Neil Solomon (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 60.

²¹Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 133. Hohendahl examines the tension implicit in this quotation in his "The Ephemeral and the Absolute" 206–226. On this aspect of art, "thoroughly conditioned by what it opposes, verging on emptiness, complicit despite itself, and indefinitely vulnerable," see also J. M. Bernstein, "'The Dead Speaking of Stones and Stars': Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*," *The Cambridge Companion to Critical Theory*, ed. Fred Rush (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 150.

²²See Luis Camnitzer, "Hans Herzog in Conversation with Luis Camnitzer," *Luis Camnitzer*, ed. Hans Michael Herzog and Katrin Steffen (Zurich and Ostfildern: Daros Lateinamerika and Hatje Cantz, 2010), 40.

²³Camnitzer spent half the fellowship period in New York in 1962 and the other half in 1964. See Camnitzer, "Hans Herzog in Conversation with Luis Camnitzer" 37.

In the essay “Exile,” written for his 1983 retrospective in Havana, Camnitzer describes the linguistic and aesthetic tensions of his double exile, as a German Jew in Uruguay and as a Uruguayan in the United States. “My country doesn’t exist anymore,” he concludes, “I am a citizen of my memory, which doesn’t have laws, passports, or inhabitants. It only has distortions.”²⁴ Camnitzer seems to be writing about Uruguay when he writes “my country,” but the indeterminate antecedence is itself part of memory’s, and exile’s, distorting force. He experiences “his” country and “his” homeland through the lens of his bilingualisms—first German/Spanish, then Spanish/English—and his everyday life was determined first by his parents’ “Nazi memories” and then his relation, as a New Yorker, to Uruguay.²⁵ For Camnitzer, “all this”—the arbitrary fact of his birth and nationality, his bilingualism, his ethical identification as a Jew with “those who died in his place”—leads to “a certain feeling of difference.”²⁶

An anecdote he tells about his experiences during a grant residency in Munich in 1957 is telling in this respect. It was no return to a lost homeland, but the occasion for his realization that the term “homeland” no longer had any simple meaning for him. In Munich he was a

Uruguayan in Germany asking Uruguayan questions in German with an accent from Lübeck and a 1930s vocabulary projecting a very stupid image . . . It irritated me . . . that in my class [in Munich] nobody knew about the Bauhaus, that Mendelsohn didn’t exist . . . I made prints that in the Academy were complimented by classmates and professors as “very South American.” Upon my return, I was immediately classified as a German Expressionist.²⁷

In his reminiscences, Camnitzer groups together a number of things: the linguistic disorientation of a returning émigré; the pressure of the national stereotype on the individual artist and especially on an artist working in Latin America; and the uneven distribution of knowledge in the immediate postwar era. He was a “Uruguayan in Germany” and a German in Uruguay, although later in life, he says in an interview, his relation to Germany became purely linguistic.²⁸

²⁴Luis Camnitzer, *On Art, Artists, Latin America, and Other Utopias*, ed. Rachel Weiss (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 29. See also Luis Camnitzer, “Diaspora,” *Conceptualism in Latin American Art: Didactics of Liberation* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 223–244.

²⁵See his comments on bilingualism in Camnitzer, *On Art, Artists, Latin America and Other Utopias*, 121.

²⁶Luis Camnitzer, “Dada-Situationismus-Fluxus-Tupamaro-Konzeptualismus! Ein Interview mit Luis Camnitzer von Sabeth Buchmann,” *Texte zur Kunst* 50 (2003): 120.

²⁷Camnitzer, *On Art, Artists, Latin America and Other Utopias*, 24. In a 2009 interview, Camnitzer specifies that his peers at the Munich Academy knew “neither [Felix] Mendelsohn the composer nor [Eric] Mendelsohn the architect.” Camnitzer, “Hans Herzog in Conversation with Luis Camnitzer,” 45. See the remarks on Camnitzer as German Expressionist in Liliana Porter, *Liliana Porter in Conversation with/En Conversación con Inés Katzenstein*, trans. Kristina Cordero (New York: Fundación Cisneros, 2013), 34.

²⁸See Camnitzer, “Hans Herzog in Conversation with Luis Camnitzer,” 45.

As a result of his “German experience” in Munich, he says he “found a more or less personal way of expression.” This personal mode emerged from this concentrated experience of alienation and distortion, from this intense and irritating feeling of being linguistically, geographically, historically out of synch. He goes on to modify his description of this “personal” language: “that language of mine didn’t have anything to do with what I thought and believed. I thought in modern-social terms to the point of advocating the disappearance of art or—a little closer to current language—art as a tool for social change.”²⁹ He was involved in a university reform movement in Montevideo, and from the beginning his aesthetic choices were also political. In New York, he was active in political artists’ groups and actions, including the boycott of the 1972 São Paulo Biennial and of the New York-based Center for Inter-American Relations (now called Americas Society), which included among its board members “allies of the dictatorships in Latin America.”³⁰ While he was involved in these activities that were political in a straightforward and conventional way, Camnitzer always also examined the political dimension of aesthetic practices. He chose printmaking as his medium because of what he perceived to be its democratic potential, and he eventually turned to conceptual practices as a way to “provide processes, which would turn the viewer into a producer instead of a consumer.”³¹ His “personal way of expression” always aims to exceed the personal.

THE SOUL OF ART DWELLS IN THE SIGNATURE

Although Camnitzer’s works are often explicitly political, he always also maintains distance from any claim on immediate political relevance and for any naïve belief in the efficacy of viewer participation. If activity and creativity are exactly what the marketplace demands, why should an artist place great hopes in including the viewer? Camnitzer’s installation *Selbstbedienung* (Self-service), first shown at the Cologne Art Fair in 1996, seems to include the viewer in an exemplary way, to “provide processes” that allow for fairgoers to be involved in the creative and expressive act. The installation consists of six plinths, each bearing a pile of A4 photocopies with an aphorism written by Camnitzer, and a seventh plinth with a rubber stamp of Camnitzer’s signature and a slot (Figure 1). After inserting a German mark in the slot (or, in Camnitzer’s 2010 retrospective at the Daros Latin America Collection in Zurich, one Swiss franc), fairgoers are invited to help themselves to one of the sheets of paper, which they can then stamp with Camnitzer’s signature (Figure 2). “Since the signature is always placed individually by hand, each stamped sheet is unique,” an accompanying brochure explains.³²

²⁹Camnitzer, *On Art, Artists, Latin America and Other Utopias*, 24.

³⁰Camnitzer, *Conceptualism in Latin American Art*, 241.

³¹Luis Camnitzer, “Chronology,” *Luis Camnitzer*, 15–17. Camnitzer also points to the accidental discovery of printmaking in Luis Camnitzer and Liliana Porter, interview by Andrea Giunta, “A Conversation with Luis Camnitzer and Liliana Porter,” *The New York Graphic Workshop, 1964–1970*, ed. Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro, Ursula Davila-Villa, and Gina McDaniel Tarver (Austin: Blanton Museum of Art, 2009), 44.

³²Unsigned explanatory text in Luis Camnitzer, *Selbstbedienung, Installation von Luis Camnitzer: Sechs Aphorismen zum allgemeinen Kunstbetrieb* (Hamburg: Galerie Basta, n.d.), u.p.



FIGURE 1. Luis Camnitzer, *Selbstbedienung* (Self-Service), 1996/2010. Photocopies, rubber stamp, ink pad, seven wooden bases, dimensions variable. Installation view, Daros Latinamerica Collection, Zurich, 2010. Photo: Dominique Uldry. Courtesy Alexander Gray Gallery, New York. (Color figure available online.)

This seems, at first glance, to be a democratizing work meant to criticize the art fair in which it is shown, and a cursory reading of Camnitzer's aphorisms might reinforce this interpretation: "Looking without paying is stealing"; "Naked walls are unerotic"; "Aesthetics sells, ethics wastes"; "The soul of art dwells in the signature"; "One signature is an action, two are a transaction"; and, finally, "Acquisition is culture."³³ These are not quotations but seem written with the goal of becoming quotable. In their hyperbolic identification with the commercialization of art, these statements could be read as ironic indictments of the art fair, and their mass production by viewers would be part of this critique.

However, the viewers-cum-artists who stamp their photocopies to create unique works might also become aware of the fact that they, too, are engaged in a transaction (acquisition is culture!) and that they, too, invest in a signature—literally, because they pay for it, and metaphorically, because they participate in an artwork that is all about the force of the signature and because they seem to subscribe, by using Camnitzer's stamp, to the belief that "the soul of art dwells in the signature." Camnitzer's installation is a critique of the art market, and it allows the viewer to participate in the creation of art and thus to be more than a mere viewer. But it also shows how participation and the overcoming of the boundary

³³Ibid.



FIGURE 2. Luis Camnitzer, *Selbstbedienung* (Self-Service), 1996/2010. Detail. Photocopies, rubber stamp, ink pad, seven wooden bases, dimensions variable. Installation view, Daros Latinamerica Collection, Zurich, 2010. Photo: Dominique Uldry. Courtesy Alexander Gray Gallery, New York. (Color figure available online.)

between artist and viewer can be commercial practices and far from critical. Here, too, the “communications context . . . has been completely normalized by management”; it is just that in the museum and at the art fair the artist is part of the management. The joke is on the museum and the fair but also on the person who pays for a photocopy and for the chance to “play at participation in the art market,” albeit at the lowest level.³⁴ Even the title *Selbstbedienung* evokes the basest commercial establishments, such as a snack bar or a

³⁴Philipp Meier, “‘Nackte Wände sind unerotisch’: Die konzeptuelle Kunst des Luis Camnitzer—eine Retrospektive bei Daros Lateinamerika,” *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, March 11, 2010.

cafeteria, and not the luxury economy of the art market. And it calls to mind forms of labor, such as the “self-checkout,” that consumers are ever more frequently called to perform.³⁵

In any case, Camnitzer retains a great deal of control in the situation. In a talk given on a panel at the annual conference of the College Art Association on “The Idea of the Moral Imperative in Contemporary Art,” he insists that his job as an artist is to “manipulate” the viewer:

With the created object or situation, the artist is trying to work his or her way out of a known ground and push the audience into the unknown. The manipulation by the artist is orchestrated to achieve the crossing of the border. The audience, on the other hand, tries desperately to push the disconcerting feeling of the unknown back into the context of everyday cultural commonplaces. The tension produced is not always a friendly one . . .³⁶

This “tension” is a good way to think about the edge to Camnitzer’s work, which, Rachel Haidu writes, often “carries with it a subtle kind of threat.”³⁷ There is something vaguely cruel about Camnitzer’s works, even an apparently friendly work like *Selbstbedienung*. The participation that it encourages seems, to a critical eye, to be false because of its limitation by a number of constraints. As Haidu writes, Camnitzer “introduces the communicative dimension of language while undercutting, counteracting, and ruining it at the same time.”³⁸ But the critical awareness of communication’s ruination may indicate another kind of communication, a shared distance from the installation’s false promises. If Camnitzer’s works are successful, then it may be this awareness—and not the stamping of a piece of paper—that is the true participation in the artwork.

Selbstbedienung is not a quotational work, but it shows how the issue of expression is an object of examination for Camnitzer. The aphorisms perform a kind of “perverse mimicry” of art market principles, and the installation dictates the viewer’s expressive activity in the work but also questions its value.³⁹ For Camnitzer, what seems to be expression is not

³⁵See Charles S. Koeber, David W. Wright, and Elizabeth Dingler, “Self-Service in the Labor Process: Control and Consent in the Performance of ‘Consumptive Labor,’” *Humanity and Society* 36, no. 6 (2012): 6–29; G. Günter Voß and Kerstin Rieder, *Der arbeitende Kunde: Wenn Konsumenten zu unbezahlten Mitarbeitern werden* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2005), summarized in English in Kerstin Rieder and G. Günter Voß, “The Working Customer—An Emerging New Type of Consumer,” *Psychologie des Alltagshandelns/Psychology of Everyday Activity* 3, no. 2 (2010): 2–10. See the comparison of participatory art and neoliberalism in Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (New York: Verso, 2012), especially 11–40.

³⁶Luis Camnitzer, “The Idea of the Moral Imperative in Contemporary Art,” *Art Criticism* 7, no. 1 (1991): 21.

³⁷Rachel Haidu, review of *Luis Camnitzer*, El Museo del Barrio, New York, *Artforum* (May 2011): 275.

³⁸*Ibid.*

³⁹On the concept of “perverse mimicry,” see T. J. Demos, “Circulations: In and Around Zurich Dada,” *October* 105 (Summer 2003): 149; and on the related notion of the “traumatic mime,” see Hal Foster, “Dada Mime,” *October* 105 (Summer 2003): 166–176.



FIGURE 3. Luis Camnitzer, *Patentanmeldung* (Patent Application), 1997, etched glass tabletop, gas pipes, white carpet, lamp, sixteen photographs, variable dimensions. Installation view, Galerie Basta, Hamburg, 1996. Courtesy Galerie Basta, Hamburg. (Color figure available online.)

always expressive. The three works to be interpreted in the following pages use quotation to exacerbate this tension between expression and expressionlessness.

MOUTHPIECE

Camnitzer's installation *Patentanmeldung* (Patent Application) was shown twice in 1997, once in the Galerie Basta in Hamburg and once in the Gwangju Biennial in Korea. *Patentanmeldung* consists of a white carpet, an etched glass table, and sixteen photographs of dirt (Figures 3 and 4). At first glance, one critic writes, *Patentanmeldung* appears to just be "furniture," perhaps in a store display of sleek office equipment.⁴⁰

A closer look shows otherwise. Two architectural sketches from a 1942 German patent application for a crematorium are etched into the table (Figure 5), along with a text in German, which wraps around the table's edge. Here is a translation of that text:

I decided to build a high-capacity crematorium. In November 1942, I finished with the plans for the crematorium for mass cremation and turned them in to the Imperial Patent Office in Berlin. The crematorium was supposed to function like an assembly line, with the corpses being carried without interruption on a grate

⁴⁰Hajo Schiff, review of *Luis Camnitzer* at Basta Galerie, Hamburg, *ArtNexus* 26 (1997): 146.



FIGURE 4. Luis Camnitzer, *Patentanmeldung* (Patent Application), 1997, etched glass tabletop, gas pipes, white carpet, lamp, sixteen photographs, variable dimensions. Installation view, Galerie Basta, Hamburg, 1996. Courtesy Galerie Basta, Hamburg. (Color figure available online.)

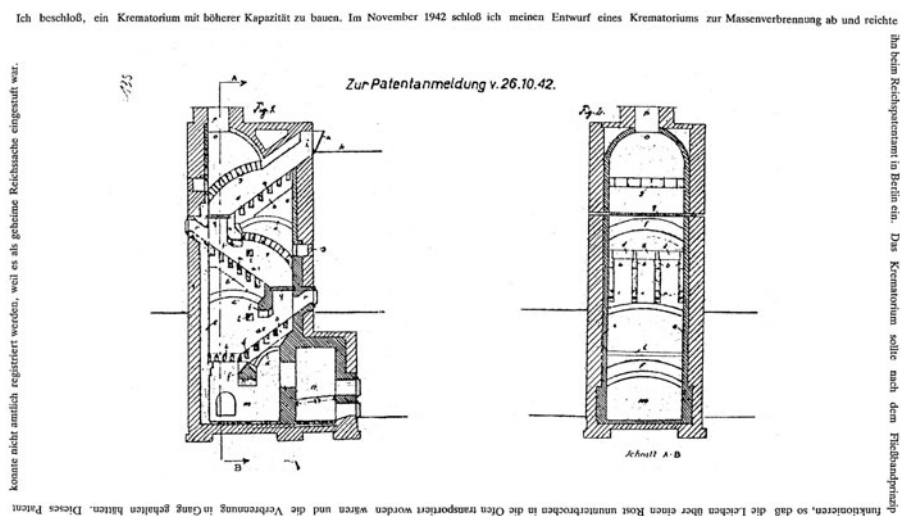


FIGURE 5. Luis Camnitzer, *Patentanmeldung* (Patent Application), detail. Courtesy Galerie Basta, Hamburg.

so that the crematorium could be kept going constantly. The patent couldn't be registered because it was classified as top secret.⁴¹

These lines are taken from an interrogation of Fritz Sander, an engineer for Topf & Söhne, the firm that supplied many concentration camps (including Auschwitz, Buchenwald, Dachau, Gusen, and Mauthausen) with crematoria and installed the ventilation systems in two of the gas chambers in Birkenau.⁴² Those camps' victims are absent in Camnitzer's work, evoked only as "corpses" in Sander's testimony and, possibly, as remains in the photographs of dirt, which depict, according to the installation brochure, "a patch of grass seen from below—the root side."⁴³ *Patentanmeldung* may stage the encounter between an engineer and the ideal result of his invention: invisible remains, undetectable in dirt.

Sander's words here reflect his concern about recognition as an inventor, and Camnitzer says it was this "bitterness of the inventor" that drew him to this subject matter:

His intellectual property was not recognized by the most prestigious office in his line of work. It is equivalent to a museum not accepting our art as valid. I felt that the engineer and artists like me are on the same path of distortion. The celebration of authorship/authority puts us on an ideological course with dangerous consequences. It is a road on which the differences between us and this engineer are only quantitative, not qualitative.⁴⁴

To distance himself from the celebration of authorship, Camnitzer quotes Sander's words and appropriates his drawings. Although there is some artistic activity here—Camnitzer photographs the dirt, and he remains true to his formation as a printmaker in the glass

⁴¹Luis Camnitzer, *Patentanmeldung, Installation von Luis Camnitzer: Ein Hochleistungskrematorium und andere irregeleitete Kreativität* (Hamburg: Basta Galerie, n.d.), u.p.

⁴²See Jean-Claude Pressac, *Auschwitz: Technique and Operation of the Gas Chambers* (New York: Beate Klarsfeld Foundation, 1989), 92; Volkhard Knigge, ed., *Techniker der "Endlösung": Topf & Söhne – Die Ofenbauer von Auschwitz* (Weimar: Stiftung Gedenkstätten Buchenwald und Mittelbau-Dora, 2005), 8, 40, 49; and Gerald Fleming, "Engineers of Death," *New York Times*, July 18, 1993. Sander was arrested by the Soviets in March 1946 and died soon afterward; see Knigge, *Techniker der "Endlösung,"* 72. On the technical operation of the proposed oven, see Knigge, *Techniker der "Endlösung,"* 9, 58. This particular crematorium was never built, but Topf & Söhne did finally get the patent in 1953. Sander's patent application was also the subject of a play by the Dutch-Israeli writer Wim van Leer. See the unsigned review of *Patent Pending*, New Arts Theatre, London, *Der Spiegel* 29 (1965): 85. The play is also known under the title *D.R.P. 861731* (German Imperial Patent 861731) (Tel Aviv: Elgad, 1966) and exists as a manuscript titled *The Final Solution: A Play in Three Acts*.

⁴³Camnitzer, *Patentanmeldung*, u.p.

⁴⁴Camnitzer, "Chronology," 25. For a study on art and patents in Camnitzer and other contemporary artists, see Robert Thill, "Intellectual Property: A Chronological Compendium of Intersections between Contemporary Art and Utility Patents," *Leonardo* 37, no. 2 (2004): 117–124.

etching—the focal points of the work depend on “uncreatively” mimetic activities of quotation and appropriation.⁴⁵ He simply provides the opportunity for Sander to speak, and he shows Sander’s plans.

By allowing Sander to complain about his inability to obtain the official, public recognition that he thinks he deserves, *Patentanmeldung* may be a critique of genius, but it also depends on a successful manipulative environment engineered by Camnitzer, who lures viewers into an apparently innocuous installation and has them follow the text around the table. As in *Selbstbedienung*, Camnitzer dictates behavior to the viewer. “One has to walk around the table in order to read the text, which has been set as a kind of ornamental border,” Hajo Schiff’s accompanying brochure text states.⁴⁶ Camnitzer opposes authorship to manipulation, an activity that he claims as his own in the passage quoted above: “My role is really only that of manipulating the situation, not one of big authorship,” he says in a 2012 interview.⁴⁷ Or, earlier, in a 2006 text: “I learned to elicit creativity from the viewer instead of promoting my own creativity. This art is not about me; it’s about you. I just set the stage.”⁴⁸ “Manipulation” and “staging” are more acceptable terms for describing his activity, perhaps because they are closer to manual labor and distant from the grand vocation of being an original, creative artist.

As a manipulative strategy in *Patentanmeldung*, Camnitzer activates one of the traits of installation art identified by Juliane Rebentisch: its ability to direct the viewer on a course.⁴⁹ This ability inheres not only in installation but also in the institution of the modern museum, which depends on what Tony Bennett calls “organized walking,” which allows for “an intended message” to be “communicated in the form of a (more or less) directed itinerary.”⁵⁰ The term “communication” in Bennett’s text may refer, in the context of Camnitzer’s installation, to Sander’s text as a message, or to the communicative act that consists of the experience of the context set up by Camnitzer. That second kind of message would be the problematization of Sander’s text, whose meaning would include, but would not be exhausted by, Camnitzer’s intention of depicting the similarity between technical and artistic genius. This would not be a “message” in any conventional sense, but one that

⁴⁵On “uncreative writing,” see Kenneth Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); and Marjorie Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

⁴⁶Hajo Schiff, “Patent Application,” Camnitzer, *Patentanmeldung*, u.p., translation modified.

⁴⁷Sam Durant and Luis Camnitzer, “The Church of Ethical Cynicism: A Conversation between Sam Durant and Luis Camnitzer,” *Mousse* 32 (February/March 2012): 199.

⁴⁸Luis Camnitzer, untitled text, in Laurel Reiter, ed., *Los desaparecidos/The Disappeared* (Milan: Charta, 2006), 82.

⁴⁹“The design of an installation can either dramatize or downplay the way the installation directs the viewer,” Juliane Rebentisch, *Aesthetics of Installation*, trans. Daniel Hendrickson with Gerrit Jackson (New York: Sternberg, 2013), 158.

⁵⁰Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 6. See also Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, 179–186. Organized walking also plays a key role in shopping; see Ursula Lindqvist, “The Cultural Archive of the IKEA Store,” *Space and Culture* 12, no. 1 (2009): 43–62. *Patentanmeldung* is not Camnitzer’s only work about dictated movement; see his discussion of *Living Room* (1968) in Camnitzer, “Hans Herzog in Conversation with Luis Camnitzer” 19.

would emerge in reflection. Camnitzer quotes Sander's words to begin this process of reflection, but by including those words in *Patentanmeldung* Camnitzer ensures that Sander does not have the last word, despite the fact that the engineer is the only one speaking in the work.

Camnitzer's attempt to retreat from the position of the ingenious artist results in what he calls *arte boludo*. "The closest translation" of "boludo," he says in a 2008 interview,

is dumbass. It's making art that acts like a black hole. Instead of emitting information, it just sits there and absorbs information from the viewer, and therefore reverses roles. The viewer is put in a creative spot instead of a consuming spot. That's a political reversal.⁵¹

This may be a way of describing *Selbstbedienung* and *Patentanmeldung*. The viewers of these works cease to be viewers as they stamp paper and follow a miniature itinerary; their movement through the installations becomes the content of the works of art, the work's "information." Of course, Camnitzer's work still "emits information," but he attempts to reduce his role to a minimum. "A perfect work of *arte boludo*" cannot be made, Camnitzer claims, but the term remains a valuable "instrument of evaluation," as he puts it, because it offers a way for him to think about the transformation of authorship.⁵² It also provides an alternative formulation for Adorno's expressionless expression, the way in which art might attempt to give voice to subjectivity while also acknowledging the emptying out of that subjectivity's inwardness.

There is expression and even testimony in *Patentanmeldung*, but it is decidedly not Camnitzer's. *Patentanmeldung* is also a *boludo* work because it is so literal. It is not a tasteful, evocative work about the Shoah but a literal, tasteless one. It quotes the Topf engineer; it presents the crematorium plans and has the viewer stand looking at them as if working with them. The sketched ovens and photographs of dirt are not subtle, and the installation brochure reports that the table rests on a frame made of DIN gas pipes. This is more than literal, more than *boludo*; it is overkill. This is a work of art reduced to the painfully obvious, the patently obvious. Everything is spelled out for the viewer: this is about the camps; look at the dirt; look at the crematorium; read the engineer's words. This is a work of art reduced to the imitative presentation of information, and the representation of the obvious. Camnitzer pushes Adorno's aporia of expression to its extreme. "There is no general test," the German philosopher writes, "for deciding if an artist who wipes out expression altogether has become the mouthpiece [Lautsprecher] of reified consciousness or of the speechless,

⁵¹Camnitzer and Porter, "Roundtable: New York Graphic Workshop" 59. Camnitzer and Liliana Porter developed the concept of *arte boludo* while working together in the New York Graphic Workshop. See also the remarks of Liliana Porter on *arte boludo* in Porter, *Liliana Porter in Conversation with/En Conversación con Inés Katzenstein* 55–56; and Luis Camnitzer and Liliana Porter, "A Conversation with Luis Camnitzer and Liliana Porter," 54. Camnitzer's most thorough discussion of *arte boludo* can be found in Luis Camnitzer, "Hacia una teoría del arte boludo," *De la Coca-Cola al Arte Boludo*, ed. Gonzalo Pedraza (Santiago, Chile: Metales Pesados, 2009), 115–127.

⁵²Camnitzer, "Hacia una teoría del arte boludo," 123.

expressionless expression that denounces it.”⁵³ Camnitzer becomes the mouthpiece here of reified consciousness, even of the reification of mass murder, but this intimacy with Sander’s words, their amplification by the artist acting as *Lautsprecher* or loudspeaker, allows them to be heard in all their monstrosity and allows for the continuities between the Shoah and post-Shoah culture, including the cult of genius, to be perceived.

AN ODD LACK OF HEAT

In most of the thirty-five four-color photo etchings in Camnitzer’s *Uruguayan Torture Series* (1983), he juxtaposes photographs of his hands and everyday objects with short, handwritten aphoristic sentences. Only the title makes explicit the relation to the brutal torture methods of the Uruguayan military dictatorship.⁵⁴ Contrary to what one might expect in a work by an exile with friends who were imprisoned and tortured, there is no clear identification with the victims. This has to do with the context of the work’s creation and exhibition. Camnitzer writes that he made it “for U.S. audiences” as “an attempt to open their eyes” to the fact that Latin America’s military dictatorships and their torture techniques were “the result of United States policy and training.”⁵⁵ To do this, Camnitzer aims to create “a configuration” that is “not just about being tortured, in empathy with the victim, but also with both the torturer and oneself as an accomplice.”⁵⁶ And yet despite this clearly political agenda, Camnitzer insists in the same text on his dissatisfaction with political art that is “declarative.”

The captions, photos, and series title all keep their distance from any kind of declaration, and together they sometimes seem to create an uncanny, tense solipsism. The lack of any stable identification with the victims results in a strange tone in the captions. The sentence “He was known because of his precision” appears below a hand with a clamp stuck to it (Figure 6); the laconism “The tool pleased him” appears below the photograph of a wrench that has caught a clump of hair (Figure 7). Some are deadpan, like “the instrument was explained in detail,” and some rely on literary devices, like the consonance of the repeated /k/ and /en/ in “the contact reclaimed spent tenderness.”

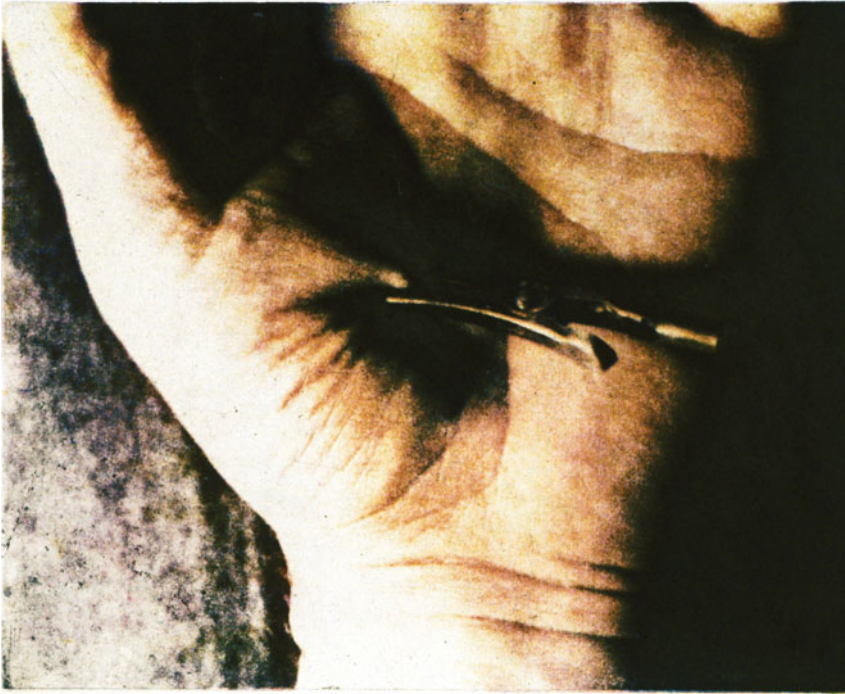
The viewer is forced to ask for each caption: Who is speaking here? Is this spoken from the perspective of the torturer, the victim, the accomplice, or, if this is possible, a neutral observer? This unsettling effect is intensified by the amount of attention Camnitzer seems to have paid to these captions, which seem inappropriately closed in on themselves, almost as myopic as the photos’ focus on the artist’s own hands. In the photos, the scene of torture is represented only synecdochically, by Camnitzer’s hands and fingers, and metonymically, by objects. And they offer only a series of seemingly unrelated extreme close-up shots, which retreat from the task of depicting in any general way the ambitious topic announced in the title.

⁵³ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 117.

⁵⁴ For a detailed account of the regime’s use of torture, see the report issued by the Servicio Paz y Justicia, *Uruguay, Nunca Más: Human Rights Violations, 1972–1985*, trans. Elizabeth Hampsten (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992).

⁵⁵ Camnitzer, untitled text, in Laurel Reiter, ed., *Los desaparecidos*, 82.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

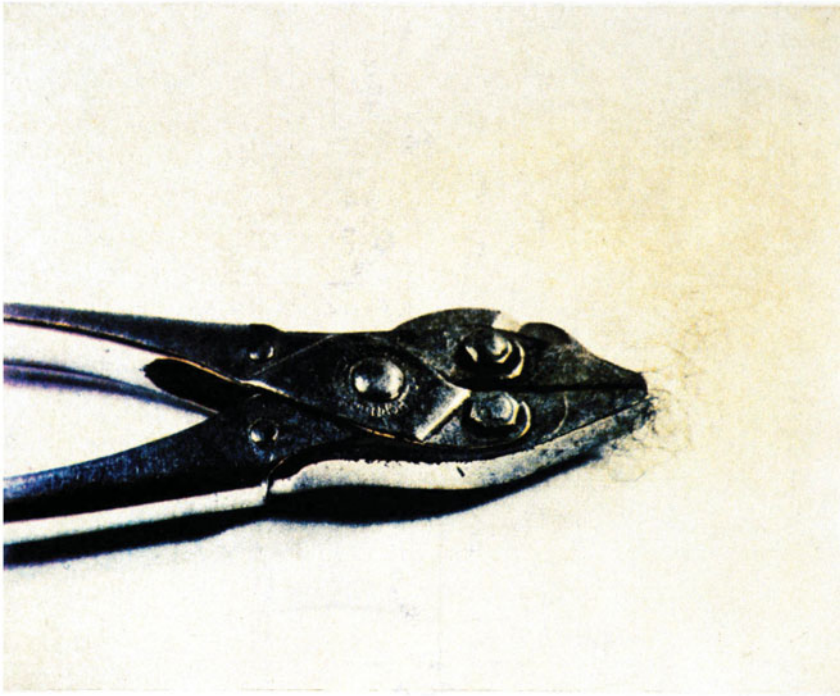


He was known because of his precision -

FIGURE 6. Luis Camnitzer, “He was known because of his precision,” plate 11, *Uruguayan Torture Series*, 1983, photo etching, 29.53 × 21.65 in. Courtesy Alexander Gray Gallery, New York. (Color figure available online.)

With his camera turned on himself and his efforts devoted to crafting pithy sentences, Camnitzer’s series seems focused on creating what one critic calls the series’ “corrosive subtlety,” and this seems to indicate that Camnitzer turns away from the actual scene of torture.⁵⁷ But at least one element of the series could not be more turned toward it: the title. “Uruguayan Torture Series” is an artless, bureaucratic phrase far from the craftsmanship of the captions, far from subtle. It seems like a working title; it seems as though Camnitzer gave up trying to find a final title for this work. The phrase “I was unable to” (Figure 8) appears in one of the photographs and could be interpreted as a confession of Camnitzer’s inability when faced with creating a work of art adequate to the task of depicting torture and writing

⁵⁷Holland Cotter, “Unresolved Chords Echo for ‘the Disappeared,’” review of *The Disappeared* (*Los Desaparecidos*), El Museo del Barrio, New York, *New York Times*, April 7, 2007.



The tool pleased him -

FIGURE 7. Luis Camnitzer, “The tool pleased him,” plate 12, *Uruguayan Torture Series*, 1983, photo etching, 29.53 × 21.65 in. Courtesy Alexander Gray Gallery, New York. (Color figure available online.)

captions adequate to the strange, reenactment-like photos.⁵⁸ The title, too, seems to express this feeling of inability. Absolute solipsism and recognition of the inability to represent, which could be the result of the work’s closed nature, are paired with the title’s hubristic, unsubtle claim to represent.

The disturbing tone of the allegorical captions is echoed by a text quoted, along with quotation marks, ellipsis, and source information, in one of the etchings (Figure 9):

“The fact that regrettable events like suicides take place in a prison, does not by itself justify the placing of responsibility for the events on the authorities of the prison Other circumstantial elements, of a personal nature, family as well as altered psychic states, that usually affect a person who is close to rejoining

⁵⁸See Madeleine Burnside, “Uruguayan Torture,” *Luis Camnitzer: Uruguayan Torture*, ed. Robert Browning (New York: Alternative Museum, 1984), 4.

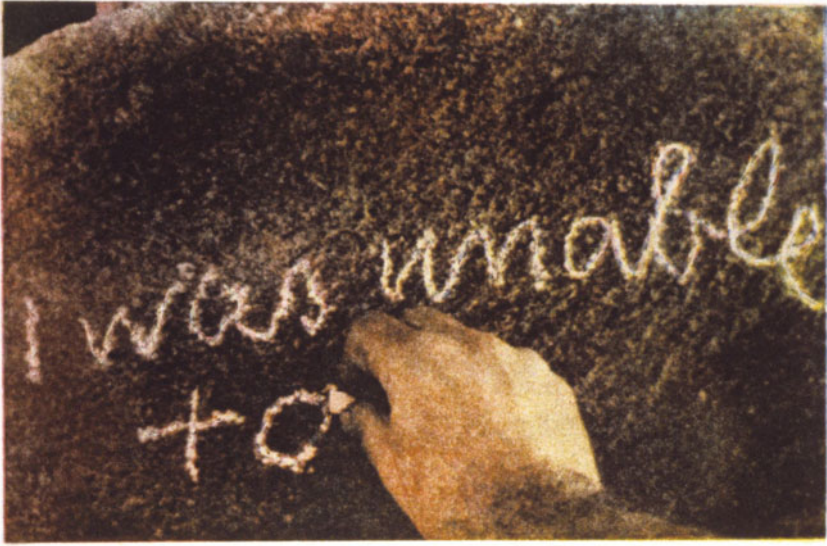


FIGURE 8. Luis Camnitzer, untitled, plate 34, *Uruguayan Torture Series*, 1983, photo etching, 29.53 × 21.65 in. Courtesy Alexander Gray Gallery, New York. (Color figure available online.)

normal social life after a period of confinement, are deliberately omitted. These kinds of psychological problems are precisely a matter of preoccupation of the Uruguayan authorities, who have instituted technical groups of specialists in the field to study the phenomena of the successful reinsertion of the prisoner into the social environment.”

Response of the government of Uruguay to an inquiry from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights of the Organization of American States.

This text pits the irrational prisoner—subject to circumstances, altered states, psychological problems, and mental imbalance—against the specialists and authorities who “study” them and, as mere technicians, cannot be held responsible for them. In this statement, just as in Camnitzer’s photos, humans appear as voiceless objects of study and experimentation. This quotation is the only site in the cycle where Camnitzer appears to step back from his subject matter and present it from a distance, and he does this by providing a text written from the perspective of the torturers and their apologists.

The author of the foreword to a 1983 catalogue for an exhibition of the *Uruguayan Torture Series* avoids confronting this unsettling aspect of Camnitzer’s work. “We are drawn into the world of the torturer and his victim,” he claims, sidestepping the difficulty of coming to terms with the captions’ perspective, which most often seems closer to the torturer. It is easier to claim a pluralistic perspective than to dwell on the insistent identification with the perpetrator. And despite the extreme literalness of these photos—as in the image of the

"The fact that regrettable events like suicides take place in a prison, does not by itself justify the placing of responsibility for the events on the authorities of the prison....Other circumstantial elements, of a personal nature, family as well as altered psychic states, that usually affect a person who is close to rejoining normal social life after a period of confinement, are deliberately omitted. These kinds of psychological problems are precisely a matter of preoccupation of the Uruguayan authorities, who have instituted technical groups of specialists in the field to study the phenomena of mental imbalance that have an unfavorable effect on the successful reinsertion of the prisoner into the social environment."

Response of the government of Uruguay to an inquiry from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights of the Organization of American States.

FIGURE 9. Luis Camnitzer, untitled text, plate 33, *Uruguayan Torture Series*, 1983, photo etching, detail, 29.53 × 21.65 in. Courtesy Alexander Gray Gallery, New York.

clump of hair, for example—the author claims that torture is a “metaphor” in Camnitzer’s series: “For all the horror evoked in the viewer by these prints, it is in their power as metaphor that their real strength lies. Torture as metaphor? Yes, for torture is about the wielding of absolute power,” and, ultimately, for the author of the preface, about “American political and economic aid that continues to support the ruthless military dictatorships of Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay.”⁵⁹ “Luis Camnitzer,” the foreword goes on to claim, “has expressed his outrage with a rare eloquence.”

These issues are all at play in the series, and yet this interpretation skirts the intractable non-identification and anti-metaphoricity that characterize Camnitzer’s work. The author has captured negatively what singles out Camnitzer’s series—and perhaps his oeuvre as a whole—as enigmatic and as worthy of attention: the resistance to metaphor, the absence of outrage, and the distance from any kind of straightforward expression. Even “eloquence”

⁵⁹Robert H. Browning, “Foreword,” *Luis Camnitzer: Uruguayan Torture*, 3.

doesn't seem right, despite Camnitzer's elegant phrasing, because his language in *Uruguayan Torture Series* cannot be described with terms like "expression" and "appropriateness," as the *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us "eloquence" should be.⁶⁰

An account of the specificity and literality of the *Uruguayan Torture Series* puts notions such as expression and eloquence into question without, however, rejecting them completely. The bureaucratic, impassive text quoted in the work inflects any reading of the cycle's nonquotational speech in the captions, which are just as distanced and, in their frequent use of passive voice, nonexpressive. The suspicion arises that the captions, too, could be quotations. The presence of one quotational text in a collection of texts casts doubt on all of them. Are they really Camnitzer's words? Has he carefully crafted them? Or craftily lifted them? The reader's faith in language as expression is unhinged, and so is the viewer's faith in art. In *Uruguayan Torture Series*, there is expression, but it is not Camnitzer who speaks, since the words are not spoken from a perspective that Camnitzer seems to sympathize with.

The disjunction between speech and subject finds expression in Camnitzer's use of quotation and in the forms of distant, mordant speech that he relies on throughout *Uruguayan Torture Series* and other works. His withdrawal of identification and stifling of outrage may allow for something like Adorno's "expression of the expressionless." But there is no guarantee; his works seem indelibly marked by a potentially insuperable distance from expression, which has brought him criticism. "Luis Camnitzer's work has often seemed a bit understated," one critic writes in a review of another work about the Uruguayan dictatorship:

For an artist protesting institutionalized torture in his homeland, there is an odd lack of heat in the work. Perhaps this reflects the fact that Camnitzer has lived in New York since 1964. One leaves [the exhibition] with a slightly uneasy feeling that the commitment found in the work is less than fully convincing. Is it really activism when it could have been based on reading the Long Island edition of *The New York Times*?⁶¹

What does this critic want? Warm, convincing activism that emerges from immediate experience, not from reading a New York newspaper, and definitely not from reading a Long Island edition. This is exactly the kind of art that Camnitzer would be incapable of making, due to his suspicion of the belief in the immediate ethical and political efficacy of art. The "odd lack of heat" in his works results from Camnitzer's successful withdrawal from expression, which this critic registers, despite himself, by describing the "uneasy feeling" that Camnitzer's works provoke.

⁶⁰*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "Eloquence."

⁶¹Thomas McEvelley, review of *Luis Camnitzer*, Carla Stellweg Gallery, New York, *Artforum* (January 1996).

ADMINISTRATIVE MEANS

On its website, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice publishes the last words of all the inmates whom it executes.⁶² The procedure for collecting these words seems like a literalization of the compulsion to express oneself that Lazzarato describes. The inmates offer (or can refuse to offer) a last statement in their final moments in the death chamber of the Texas State Penitentiary in Huntsville:

Strapped to a gurney in a spare brick room painted dark green, the inmates . . . speak into a microphone attached to a ceiling, their arms stretched out and buckled into a T-shaped gurney so the drugs flow easily from the IVs into their veins . . . [T]he warden asks the inmate if there is a last statement. The last words are not recorded, but transcribed by hand by staff members listening inside the warden's office.⁶³

The transcription apparatus, both technological and human, is an integral part of the death chamber, where it hovers over the condemned. The microphone may be the last thing the executed inmates see. The texts produced in the death chamber are in high demand: in 2012, there were three million page views.⁶⁴ The author of a 2013 *New York Times* article on the website claims that the statements “reveal a glimmer of the humanity” of the condemned but also quotes “opponents of the death penalty,” who call the publication of the statements “a perverse tradition.”⁶⁵

In *Last Words* (2008), Camnitzer digitally prints a selection of executed prisoners' last words on five six 66 × 44 inch digital prints (Figure 10). He seamlessly combines a number of statements into one uninterrupted paragraph. The layout on the first and last pages make the work seem like a chapter in a book, an impression that is reinforced by the page numbers centered on the bottom of each print (Figure 11). Reviews of the 2008 exhibition of *Last Words* use exactly the same terms as the *New York Times* article about the Texas website. One critic emphasizes Camnitzer's presentation of “the humanity of such affective content as love, thanks, hope, and regret,” while another highlights the ambivalent nature of these human statements produced and published in inhumane circumstances: “Camnitzer solemnly foregrounds the perversity of the government that not only condones capital punishment but makes an online, public spectacle of the final, tortured statements of those it plans to put to death.”⁶⁶ The art critics seem to believe in Camnitzer's distance from this “perversity,” his ability to “foreground” it while remaining safe in the background. But given the “subtle

⁶²The Texas Department of Criminal Justice, “Executed Offenders,” http://www.tdcj.state.tx.us/death_row/dr_executed_offenders.html (accessed 30 June 2013).

⁶³Manny Fernandez, “From America's Busiest Death Chamber: A Catalog of Last Rants, Pleas, and Apologies,” *New York Times*, June 30, 2013.

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶Caroline Busta, review of *Luis Camnitzer*, Alexander Gray Gallery, New York, *Artforum* 47, no. 10 (Summer 2008): 441; Sarah Valdez, review of *Luis Camnitzer*, Alexander Gray Gallery, New York, *Art in America* 96, no. 6 (June/July 2008): 190.



FIGURE 10. Luis Camnitzer, *Last Words*, 2008, digital pigment prints, 66 × 44 in. Installation view, Alexander Gray Gallery, New York. Courtesy Alexander Gray Gallery, New York. (Color figure available online.)

threats” and disturbing mimicry in other Camnitzer works, it is difficult to accept such rosy interpretations of *Last Words*. If Camnitzer revels in manipulating the viewer, *Last Words* might not offer such an unambiguous message or anything like a solemn, measured critique. Like *Uruguayan Torture Series*, *Last Words* may be about viewers’ complicity.

One of the same reviewers seems to realize this and recognizes that, although *Last Words* “humanizes” the speakers, “to read them is to be a voyeur.”⁶⁷ Camnitzer makes the viewing experience pleasurable: he offers his viewers a manageable digest of the hundreds of statements online, sparing them the dreary task of clicking back and forth on a drab administrative website; he prints his selections in a large font on high-quality paper; and he chooses only the most humanizing lines and omits the inmates’ references to their brutal crimes. In fact, most of the appropriated text is made up of declarations of love, as in the opening sentences:

Mom have no fear. Mommy I will be home when I get there. I love you all. I just want you to know that. To my family and my mother and my three precious daughters, I love you all. I love you, all of you. Stay strong baby. I love you forever. Please be strong and I love you all. I love you guys. I love you guys.

⁶⁷Busta, review of *Luis Camnitzer*, 441.

Mom have no fear. Mommy I will be home when I get there. I love you all. I just want you to know that. To my family and my mother and my three precious daughters, I love you all. I love you, all of you. Stay strong baby. I love you forever. Please be strong and I love you all. I love you guys. I love you guys. That's it. I ask the Lord to bless you all. Tammy, Irene, Betty, Dan Judy—I love you all. And Jack, thank you. To my family, I love you all. You look after each other. I love you all. Love you all. Let my son know I love him. Ya'll take care. I love ya'll. Momma, stay strong. Honey, I love you. Be strong and take care of yourselves. Thanks for being there. I love my children. I love my family. Tell my family I love them all and I will see them in Heaven. Stay strong. I love you. I love you. It's my hour. I love you all. Celina, I love you. I love you all and I will see you on the other side. Keep your heads up and stay strong. I love you all. I may be gone in the flesh, but I am always with you in spirit. I love you. I will miss you guys. I love you. I love you all. Tell momma I love her. Even though I die, that love for you will never die. I love you all. I love you all very much. Thank you very much. I love you. I love all you all. I appreciate all your support. I love you all. Give everybody my love. Give everybody my love, O.K.? I love you Mom and Dad, and all my family. To you Irene, Thank You. I love you all. I love you very much. And to my family, I love you and I will see you all in Heaven. I just hope everybody has their peace. Today I get mine. I love you all. I leave my love here; I am never going to stop loving you. My love is going to stay here. And I just want to tell my mom that I love her and I will see her in Heaven. I love you Earline and all of my friends that

FIGURE 11. Luis Camnitzer, *Last Words*, digital pigment prints, 66 × 44 in., detail. Courtesy Alexander Gray Gallery, New York. (Color figure available online.)

The original source material is not intended for gallery visitors; the opening address to “Mom” makes this clear. The phrase “I love you” is repeated over and over in Camnitzer’s selection, pointing to the viewer’s implication in a communicative context that often seems intimate, despite the fact that these words are uttered in the death chamber.⁶⁸ By choosing so many statements about love, Camnitzer emphasizes how intimacy is violated by the practice of collecting last words and by the voyeuristic participation of gallery viewers.

Camnitzer offers readers of *Last Words* the opportunity to read and participate in the killing process just as he invites them to stamp the sheets of paper in *Selbstbedienung*, follow the text around the table in *Patentanmeldung*, and work their way through the conflicted perspective of *Uruguayan Torture Series*. He lures viewers into compromising situations and aims to make them uneasy. Quotation is especially apt for this, since it complicates any simple interpretation of Camnitzer’s position as the artist in the work. This difficulty is central to the experience of reading *Last Words*, which confronts the viewer with a number of difficult questions. Is Camnitzer speaking for the condemned? Does he allow for the prisoners to express themselves, or does he show how compromised their expressions are? How is his work different from its source, the “perverse” website? Does *Last Words* offer a critique of the website or intensify its macabre, seductive power?

The words in *Last Words* are Camnitzer’s—he has selected them and retyped them, or cut and pasted them—but they are also the prisoners’ and the transcribers’ words. In a text quoted above about *Uruguayan Torture Series*, Camnitzer says that he aims to create a “configuration” that is “not just about being tortured, in empathy with the victim, but also with both the torturer and oneself as an accomplice.”⁶⁹ *Last Words* does something similar. It creates a configuration in which the victim, the executioner, and the artist all speak together, and in which the viewer reads along and moves across a room in a weak form of participation dictated by Camnitzer’s large prints. There is something disturbing about this implication of the viewer, who enters into communication with executed murderers and their executioners.⁷⁰

Camnitzer’s works point to the tensions in reified expression—in the workplace, in the museum, and on death row—and to the tension between art and politics. It is striking that in all of the works discussed here Camnitzer adopts administrative forms: the patent application, an interrogation protocol, a government press release, and a prison agency’s website. And yet Camnitzer is able to escape Benjamin Buchloh’s condemnation of a certain conceptual

⁶⁸This intimate character distinguishes the Texas website statements from the sensationalistic and moralistic “last words” genre discussed in Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1977), 65–69. This difference belongs to a general transformation in the understanding of crime, the confession, and criminal subjectivity. See Michel Foucault, *Mal dire, dire vrai: fonction de l’aveu en justice*, ed. Fabienne Brion and Bernard E. Harcourt (Leuven: Presses Universitaires de Louvain, 2012), 223–228.

⁶⁹Camnitzer, untitled text, in Laurel Reiter, ed., *Los desaparecidos*, 82.

⁷⁰Especially since *Last Words* was first shown (in 2008 at the Alexander Gray Gallery in New York) along with a Camnitzer work whose title is an actual threat: *Sifter (The Mechanism for Killing a Spectator)* (1978).

art's mimicry of the "operating logic of late capitalism and its positivist instrumentality," since he does something more than "subject the last residues of artistic aspiration toward transcendence . . . to the rigorous and relentless order of the vernacular of administration."⁷¹ He appropriates "communications contexts that have been completely normalized" to show that there might be some other kind of communication, but he can show this only by treading the fine line between repeating and denouncing reified speech. In this way, he follows Adorno's call to appropriate and transform administrative means:

Whoever unflinchingly, critically, deliberately makes use of institutions and administrative means is still able to bring something about that would be different from merely administered culture. The minimal differences from the ever-constant which are open to him represent—no matter how tentatively [*wie immer auch hilflos*]⁷²—the difference concerning the totality; it is into difference itself—into divergence [or aberrance, deviation, *Abweichung*]⁷²—that hope has retreated.

These "minimal differences" may not exist; they are "open" only to those who "use" administrative means in a certain way. The final phrase explains Adorno's caution: there can be only a hope that this difference exists. Camnitzer's use of quotation and appropriation tries to do something similar to what Adorno describes here. He allows victims and perpetrators to speak while maintaining a minimal distance from them. This testifies to a certain helplessness. "I am unable to" do anything more, he writes in *Uruguayan Torture Series*. But Camnitzer commits himself fully to this helpless position. His works unflinchingly, critically, deliberately use administrative forms, in the hope that, once appropriated, they might not have the last word.

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⁷¹Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," *October* 55 (Winter 1990): 142–143.

⁷²Theodor W. Adorno, "Culture and Administration," *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J. M. Bernstein (New York: Routledge, 2001), 146, translation modified.