

BOMB 115  
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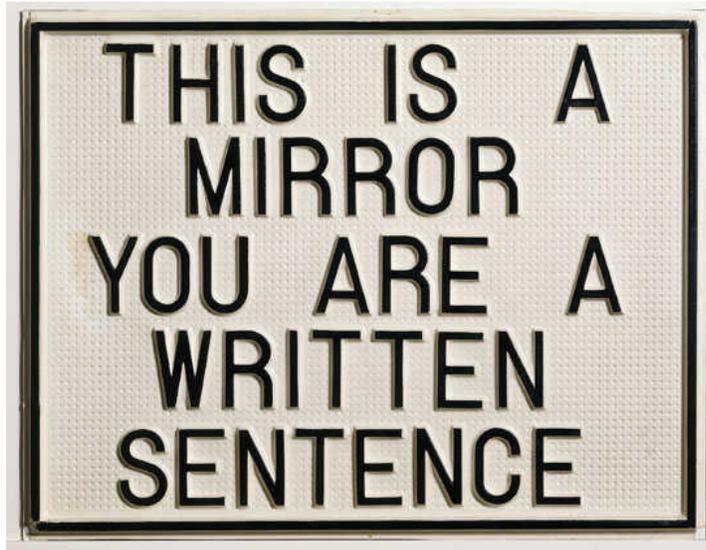
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Art : Interview

## Luis Camnitzer by Alejandro Cesarco



Luis Camnitzer, *This is a Mirror, You are a Written Sentence*, 1966-68, vacuum-formed polystyrene mounted on synthetic board, 18 4/5 x 24 3/5 x 1/2 ". Photo by Peter Schälchli, Zurich.

A bio of Luis Camnitzer, repeated numerous times in press releases for various projects, states, "Luis Camnitzer was born in Germany in 1937, grew up in Montevideo, Uruguay, and has lived and worked in New York since 1964. He has made his mark internationally not only as an artist but as a critic, educator and art theorist as well. Formally allied with the American Conceptualists of the 1960s and '70s, over the past 50 years Camnitzer has developed an essentially autonomous oeuvre, unmistakably distinguished from that of his colleagues in the US." In spite of sharing his North American counterparts' interest in language, Camnitzer is not necessarily allied with them formally, as his use of printmaking and other manual processes indicates. He is, however, very much in dialogue with them, being both a product and an instigator of some of the main aesthetic and political changes of the time.

In the interview included in his catalog for the exhibition *Luis Camnitzer*, on view at El Museo del Barrio through May 29, 2011, Hans-Michael Herzog, its co-curator, begins with the following disclaimer: "I find it difficult to interview Luis Camnitzer because he's a person who seems to have written everything, to know everything, to have said everything . . ." This is slightly excessive adulation and also partly true. Camnitzer has, in fact, been responsible for creating the main discursive context surrounding his own work. His growing body of writing ranges from cynical manifestos (where his own working strategies are taken to their logical absurdity); personal accounts on the history of Latin American conceptual art; texts addressing postcolonialism and multiculturalism (in the '80s and '90s); and

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Artes Plásticas in Montevideo, Camnitzer charted his own chronology and ended it with the following statement: “If explanations exhausted my work, it would die and stop being art. [...] The artwork 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.”

I did not ask him explicitly about these remarks, or why he decided to eliminate them from subsequent chronologies, but it is clear from many of his comments in the following interview that he still believes in, and is committed to, art’s inexplicable, transformative function.

**Alejandro Cesarco** I’d like to start by remembering the first time we met. I had just arrived in New York, so it must have been 1998. I didn’t know much about your work, but I knew you were an “established,” “conceptual” artist. Back then I also didn’t know what either of these categories meant or that they allowed for rather important subtleties. A fellow Uruguayan had given me your number and you had very generously invited me to visit you at home. That first meeting was something like a slap in the face. I mean this in the best possible way. It made me reevaluate my practice in a fundamental way. This is to say that my first appreciation of “Camnitzer” was actually through pedagogy and the role it plays in shaping our understanding of what art is and can come to mean.

You have a long history of teaching, and many of your current interests and undertakings concern precisely pedagogy and art education. You taught for 32 years at SUNY College at Old Westbury. Could you describe the program you designed there and its objectives?

**Luis Camnitzer** That first meeting could have ended in hate rather than appreciation. I remember the photographs you showed me then. They were excellent old-fashioned stuff, sort of realistic, trying-to-be-sharp-and-balanced photography. I don’t think I can take any credit for your present work, but your attribution makes me proud and very pleased.

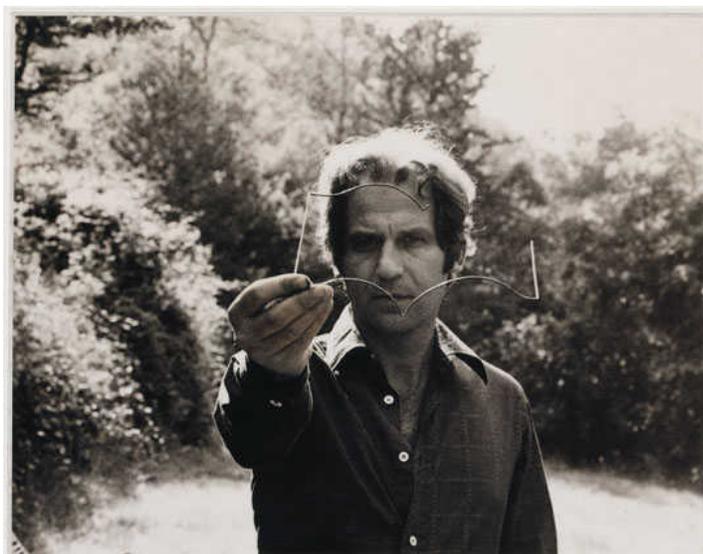
The college started in 1968 with the mission to “break the lockstep of traditional education.” That wording meant that Rockefeller needed a ghetto in which to isolate leftist faculty and students so they wouldn’t spread the student revolts of the time. Rockefeller was famous for dropping colleges all over the map of New York State (the system has 64 campuses), so we were one more with a specific function. I was hired to start an art department but first *tried* not to do that, preferring instead to integrate art into all the courses related to urban studies. That worked nicely, but slowly the dynamics of the college became increasingly conventional and, by 1975, the deadly departmental structure was fully implemented. Thus, by default, art became a department. So together with the Argentine architect Susana To had joined the program that year, we formalized the problem-solving and

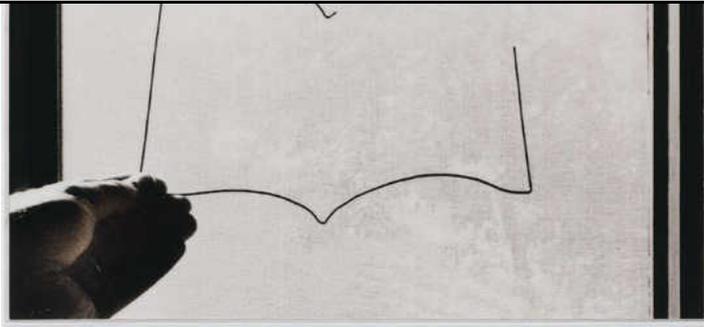
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problems and their solutions, and was based on individual tutorial meetings. Skills courses were added as needed. A third stage, an exit period, was geared to develop a critical and cynical distance from the art market so that students could use it to their advantage. The aim, however, was not to create art stars but to develop a creativity that would be useful in whatever field of action the student chose to engage. We tried to demystify art and to help students make connections and mental leaps. Over time, our approach became increasingly difficult. The college began giving primacy to student numbers instead of quality of education, attempted to quantify quality, and even invited Bill O'Reilly to a fundraiser. By the time I retired, we were forced to focus on professional training and place education on a secondary level. So, I am happy to have retired. After the Bill O'Reilly fundraiser I erased the name of the college from my CV and asked them to take me off all of their lists until a better administration was in place.

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Luis Camnitzer, *The Book of Holes*, 1977, three laminated black and white photographs, 11 x 14" each. Photos by Peter Schälchli, Zurich.

**AC** So the idea was to regard art as an instrument for problem solving. A post-disciplinary-based approach that you've called elsewhere "a form of art imperialism," in the sense that art thinking ought to be applied to other academic fields or systems of knowledge. In other words, art becomes a method to acquire and expand knowledge, right? Is this still the social function of art? Perhaps you could relate this to your interest in the writings of Simón Rodríguez and Paulo Freire.

**LC** Yes, art thinking should have the same overarching role that logical thinking has. Art has slowly deteriorated to become primarily a form of production instead of a way of shaping culture. Thus, it is viewed as a discipline and not as a methodology. I see art as the area where one can and should make "illicit" connections, connections that are not allowed in disciplinary, fragmented thinking. Art illuminates them through questioning and allows (though not necessarily) for their possible affirmation after a critical and imaginative evaluation. This should be art's social function, but it has been degraded by commerce.

Simón Rodríguez was clear about the social role of education during the first decades of the 19th century, and Paulo Freire picked up on that during the 1960s. Rodríguez not only developed his own diagrammatic form of presenting his ideas in an effort to minimize the erosion of information—that is, to convey his thoughts to the reader in the most unchanged and perfect way possible—but he also devised an ideology around his thoughts on the anticolonial construction of his nation, antiracism, and the confrontation of inequality. It's ironic that Rodríguez is revered for being Simón Bolívar's teacher and for witnessing Bolívar's oath to liberate the continent from Spain, but he is not admired for the much bigger feat of uncompromisingly standing for truly progressive pedagogy.

I don't know how much Freire knew about Rodríguez (the Portuguese-speaking sphere is relatively isolated from the Spanish-speaking one in South America), but, like him, he saw literacy as something that could only happen within, and stem from, social and political consciousness. Freire was more of a theoretician than Rodríguez and he articulated his position in a more elaborate manner. Brazil was bypassed by the university reform that started in 1918 in Córdoba, Argentina. The university system changed to become a society-serving institution, aware of injustice to correct it, and governed by a joint council that included students, faculty

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refine and expand the consumer base, but it does not fully activate people.

Presently art is like a corridor that we enter through an imposed door placed in the middle instead of the beginning—we're not able to see the whole thing or its reason for being. We can't even question the word *art*.

**AC** How did you apply these ideas about access, literacy, and viewer activation in your roles as Viewing Program Curator for The Drawing Center (1999–2006) and as pedagogical curator for the 6th Mercosul Biennial in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 2007?

**LC** At The Drawing Center, not much. I was bound by the art that the artists showed me and I had to think within their parameters. I had long, critical dialogues with the artists; I would try to get them to tell me what problems they were trying to solve through their art and then discuss their solutions in such a way that they would seem to come from them, not from me. In some cases, I encountered people who claimed that they only worked intuitively and didn't really know how to address my request, so we went on discussing their work until some articulation started taking form. I thought this formulation in terms of problems and solutions was important because it helped artists to establish a critical distance from their work and allowed them to then apply a quality control that didn't rely on taste or on the caprice of the muses.

With the 6th Mercosul Biennial it was different. Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro, its curator, created the position of "pedagogical curator" for me and we started to plan the Biennial together from scratch. He chose the artists, and I was there, representing the public and figuring out how its interests might be served. We had a two-pronged policy. Within the exhibition, we had pedagogical stations: little wall texts bearing a paragraph or two in which the participating artists phrased their research as a problem to be solved. The public would then go see the works and determine if they felt the artists' solutions were appropriate. They then would leave their comments on the wall. The artists could read the audience's opinions and suggestions as feedback, and the public could find them helpful in dealing with the art. I remember Beth Campbell's installation with successive panels that apparently repeated a bathroom wall, but actually introduced slight changes. The piece had three or four walls—someone suggested to have up to ten so as to bring the mirroring situation to full bloom. Basically, I tried to start the viewer on an educational path that would be useful for subsequent viewers. Outside the exhibition we approached schools in 52 cities of the state Rio Grande do Sul. Each school appointed a contact with the Biennial, a sort of ambassador. Teams from the Biennial visited the schools and organized daylong workshops to share background information and ideas with the teachers. I also developed assignments that responded to the problems of the artworks in the exhibition. We circulated little portfolios with reproductions of the works. I made sure that the assignments did not leave room to mimic the examples, but were more general. For example, Steve Roden had a sculpture which you walked into to listen to sounds. I asked students to organize, by clapping, yelling, or whatever, a sculptural situation in the classroom, without using visual references. So, in general, they did their assignments and, later, when they saw the exhibition they were able to fully compare their solutions with those of the artists.

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what they saw. We had about 300 “mediators” in the exhibition space, drawn from university students (from any field, not just art) who were available to chat with the visitors. They went through a three-month course that included some art history, but also involved issues of communication with the public, body language, and contact with the artists. Those who had worked in previous Biennials mentioned that, in the past, every day when they had gone to work they had feared that they might not be able to answer a question from a viewer—that they would fail the exam, so to speak. For this Biennial, I asked them to share their ignorance rather than their knowledge, that is, to explore those things they wanted to know but didn’t know together with the public, to start speculating together. There were 500,000 visitors to the Biennial. It was a success, not so much because of the quantity, but because of what we achieved with that amount of people. Looking back, however, I feel that the attachment to art objects that is forced by any exhibition is a little limiting. Today I would not circulate reproductions of the works, just problems.



Luis Camnitzer, *Signature by the Slice*, 1971/2007, laser-cut paper, 2 9/10 x 23 3/5 x 5 9/10", slices 4 1/3 x 5 1/3 x 1/40" each. Photo by Dominique Uldry, Bern.

**AC** Is this sort of platform something you’ve since incorporated into your own shows?

**LC** Not really. I am concerned with the communicability of my own pieces and focus on that aspect; I have not thought beyond that. In that sense, maybe I am a follower of Simón Rodríguez. I want to evoke certain things in the viewer’s mind and not others, like creating an angle within which the viewer is free, but which the viewer cannot overstep. The trick is to make the viewer believe that there is no limit to overstep. Only once did I design a pedagogical aid, for my recent show at the Daros Museum in Zurich. I prepared a box with questions addressed to children, like: “What happens to time when the watch stops?” Or: “With one eye I see two dimensions. With two eyes I see three dimensions. What do I see with three eyes?” As an artist, and probably for generational reasons, I am still bound to the its display, and do not think of applying curatorial criteria to my exhibition

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But I should confess that I am increasingly less interested in art and more interested in education and creative methodologies. This is probably due to the fact that I have fewer ideas than I used to and a diminished urgency in making art. Partly, it also relates to figuring that the impact on social change of a piece of art hanging on a wall is relatively small, while the effect of a major change in the approach to knowledge in schools is relatively big. So I am focusing more on that than on myself, even if I am not fully equipped to do that.

**AC** This goes back to what you were saying about questioning the word *art*. What art is and can be. Which is, in a way, a very modernist pursuit. Do you see a clear divide between your roles as a writer, artist, and educator? And, as a follow-up question to that, how do you participate in your own historicizing? Specifically in relation to exhibitions such as *The New York Graphic Workshop: 1964–1970* at the Blanton Museum in Austin, Texas (2009), featuring the work that you, Liliana Porter, and José Guillermo Castillo did when you had the workshop; your 2010 retrospective at Daros Latinamerica in Zurich, which is now at El Museo del Barrio in New York; and the publication of *Conceptualism in Latin American Art: Didactics of Liberation* (2007)?

**LC** I don't know if the term *modernist* applies to this. I agree it is utopian and I am, politically speaking, utopian. But I believe utopia is not so much a place or final station (which would automatically cease to be utopia once one gets there), but rather the continual engagement and process of getting to the perfect place. That is probably my main enterprise (to live utopia as much as possible). In that sense, I don't see any divide in my activities; they are all the same activity expressed in different media. It is all my versions of art, my moving toward utopia. In 1970, for instance, I declared that my drawing a pencil dot on a piece of paper introduces an irreversible change in the universe, and, in doing so, I reallocated power to anybody who wants it. A nuclear bomb cannot achieve this—my dot is infinitely more powerful and contributes to the construction, rather than the eradication, of a society.

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Luis Camnitzer, *Una Que Cubre La Palabra Que La Nombra*, 1973-76, mixed media, 13 1/2 x 9 7/8 x 2". Courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates, New York, NY.

The second question is more complicated to answer. I am not particularly interested in my own historicization, which does not mean that I am immune to flattery. I am cynical about those things. They are to be used but not to be believed. Initially, I was skeptical about having a show of the New York Graphic Workshop, to the point that I wasn't overly helpful. We had too much fun during the years of the Workshop, and I could not visualize an exhibition that would make any sense or be particularly interesting. Liliana Porter and I finally gave in, and afterward I was very surprised by how well it looked. Ursula Dávila and Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro did an amazing job with the show and the catalog. They managed to blend work with recreations of installations and documents in a fun way that avoided coming across as tedious or pedantic. I never would have conceived of the exhibition as a "historical" presentation; it would have been very presumptuous of me to do so.

The Daros show is mostly composed of works from their collection, and, therefore, it is their project. They collect not just works, but the discourses present in the artist's body of work. You are not faced with discrete objects by artists, but with a complex and representative overview of their whole trajectory, which makes a great documental reservoir for later research. There is historicizing there, but they are in charge of it and I am only a happy victim of the process. One of the criticisms that the show received in the European press was precisely of the way this history was created. It was pointed out that there was a lot of "political" art missing and that, therefore, it gave a distorted image of my trajectory. The collection's heavier emphasis is on my conceptual pieces of the mid-'60s. There is only one major installation from 1968, which does not have a political bend: *Living Room*, a room reconstructed solely with words. Yet the Daros team, like anybody else, has the right to create their own history following their own quality standards, and that's beyond the control of any individual artist. In any case, the show was terrific and I was totally happy with it.

The book *Conceptualism in Latin American Art* actually has a different agenda than that of historical documentation. I wanted to make a declaration of independence from hegemonic history telling, in the anticolonial sense, and also explore the regional needs and conditions that generated conceptualism in Latin America. I am aware that, from a recording-of-history point of view, as an artist, I am a part of the processes I describe in the book. But occupying the roles of both making and reporting is a conflict of interest and I chose the role of writer on this occasion. I faced the same dilemma when, with Jane Farver and Rachel Weiss, I orga

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ethical to be in both places at the same time. The show, as well as my book, dealt with more important issues than the work of a single artist.



Luis Camnitzer, *Real Edge of the Line that Divides Reality from Fiction*, 1974-75, mixed media, 13½ x 9 7/8 x 2". Photo by Peter Schälchli, Zurich.

**AC** I'm not sure that I fully believe your apparently disinterested, disengaged relation to history, but I won't push it. Perhaps the Argentine artist Eduardo Costa ideologically theorized conceptual art's historicizing best in his 1970 work *A piece that is essentially the same as a piece made by any of the first conceptual artists, dated two years earlier than the original and signed by somebody else*.

In any case, the criticism that you mention in relation to your show at Daros—the insistence for “the political” to appear in a recognizable way, in a familiar location, and that it use an established style of discourse—is curious, yet unfortunately predictable. In many cases when the work caters to this, it stops functioning as art and becomes inefficient reportage. What I find most interesting about your work is that even at its most political it never relinquishes the poetic—I dislike calling it this, but you know what I mean. Its tone and mode of address, in a way, relate to what, in my mind, are your two longstanding and all pervasive references: Borges

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library and the labyrinth, which you've substituted for the prison cell), and Magritte's image/text interplay. Could you talk about your use of references in general?

**LC** That piece of Eduardo's is his best! Although it consists only of a title, to me it's an essay. But I hope you don't classify me as a perpetrator here.

The criticism of the Daros show must be a product of my pieces in Documenta 11 in 2002: the photo etchings from the *Uruguayan Torture Series* (1983–84) and a site-specific installation about a prisoner's hallucinations. Although in the US nobody talks much about Documenta, in Europe it has, by far, the highest standing among international exhibitions, and whatever is shown there ends up as one paradigm or another (for one, it brands an individual commercially). Even if my pieces weren't totally explicit in terms of political content, they may have placed me in a more overtly political category, and hence the criticism of the Daros show. I don't like what usually is referred to as "political art" because it mainly expresses the views of the artist, something that nobody really cares about or should care about. Those views are only biographical material. The real aim of political art should be to convert those who think differently. You can only do this if you lead the viewer to reach his or her own conclusions on the matter and if these ultimately agree with your own views. Art has to be highly manipulative (or didactic in the best sense) to set the stage for viewers to reach the insight that you want them to reach in the belief that it all happened naturally and without coercion. I try to follow this process in all of my pieces; if sometimes something happens that you call "poetic," it is a by-product that I may feel is needed. Like nice wrapping paper. It's the same with a work's beauty. In this regard, I see both Borges and Magritte more as creators of methods than as presenters of interesting topics; their *methods* influenced me.

**AC** I think I liked your earlier definition of pedagogy better: a tool to foster creative, critical thought and inquiry. From what I understand, what you are talking about now seems to have significantly different objectives. Perhaps you could clarify what you mean by pedagogy: is it a form of manipulation or is it a way of providing tools?

**LC** Given my political inclinations, I don't think that there is a real difference between those definitions. The function of education is to free the person (yes, fostering critical thought and inquiry), but it's something that has to happen through personal insight and the subject's desire, and not because of the teacher's orders. This defines not only what should happen in school but also what should happen in society—it is unavoidably part of a political agenda. More than providing tools, we should generate the need to acquire the tools to be free. In art we have been stuck with the question of how to make art, rather than putting people in touch with the needs that are fulfilled by making art. You don't do this by informing them or by teaching them a craft, but by putting them into situations. That implies manipulation. Manipulation is nothing bad; it only becomes bad when it is used unethically. In *Arbitrary Objects and Their Titles* (1979) I made two piles, one of little things found in the gallery and the street, and another with words. Then I randomly took one from each pile and used the word as a title for the corresponding thing. Invariably, the viewer constructs a story line and then accuses me of having planned it myself. In fact, I am

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uses of art again. Let me backtrack a bit and ask you some more about your retrospective. You mentioned that you didn't take much part in its organizing, and you singled out one of the criticisms that appeared in the press, but I'm curious to know what your experience of looking back at all that work was. What did you learn?

**LC** That was actually the only criticism so far, and it was directed against Daros and not me. I was very happy with the exhibition. With few exceptions, it was based on their holdings and showed the collection's focus as much as my own trajectory. In that sense, the exhibition is more of an anthology than a retrospective. The criticism was somewhat unfair, leveled from the expectation of political content, and was also trying to challenge the criteria of the collection. Essentially, the critic was saying that he would have collected something else. The museography was exquisite and the work looked great. Both Hans-Michael Herzog and Katrin Steffen, the curators, did incredibly loving, exhaustive, and perfect work in the presentation—I was exhilarated. On my way to Zurich I actually had trepidation about it. I had just returned from an exhibition in Antigua, Guatemala, in which I had 1,000 linear feet of wall space practically without any objects. The show was called *Ideas para instalar* (Ideas to Install) and included the whole 130-foot long *Two Parallel Lines* (of which the *On Line: Drawing Through the Twentieth Century* show at MoMA included only a fragment). The result was a combination of lightness and depth that I had never achieved before and that represented my thinking in a very precise manner. Now, in Zurich, I was facing a heavily object-based display, a more traditional museum show that I feared would alienate me. Instead, I walked in when much of it was already hung and I was embarrassingly moved by my own work! It was a little like an out-of-body experience; an observation from a distance that allowed me to look at the work as if I was somebody else. It held up and I was calm again.

**AC** Besides personal interests and matters of taste, what is it that makes the work hold up in time?

**LC** I see the ideal lasting work of art (one I've never made) as the best and most elegant—in terms of its economy—solution to an interesting problem, to the point that it establishes a new paradigm or causes a paradigm shift. In that sense, my requirements are not that different from what I expect of a lasting contribution in science. Given that art is not science, it is liable to be the target of multiple readings and projections. So, the lasting work is one that is able to sustain the projection of new problems or new interpretations that are relevant at the time that the reading and projection takes place. This reactivates the work no matter what the original intentions were and makes it lasting. I don't believe in absolute and eternal values. I believe in this interpretative dialogue that keeps changing over time. The work in itself is relatively unimportant, regardless of the hype around its place in history and public relations. Who its maker was is also unimportant and only of biographical interest. The relevance of the dialogue, and how it may affect the present rather than how it has affected the past, is what matters. Questions change and require new answers. The Earth was flat because at the time that the question about its shape was posed, that was the correct answer. Once the answer was no longer correct it became anachronistic and the Earth became round. I may admire the flat s

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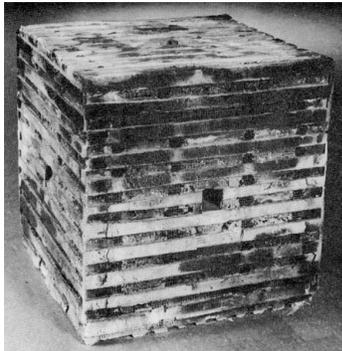
—Alejandro Cesarco will be representing Uruguay at this year’s Venice Biennale. He has upcoming solo exhibitions at Museo Rufino Tamayo in Mexico; Ignacio Liprandi in Buenos Aires; and Art Statements, Art 42 Basel. He is director of the non-profit arts organization Art Resources Transfer, where he initiated and edits Between Artists, an ongoing series of conversation-based books. He lives and works in New York.

All images courtesy of Daros Latinamerica Collection, Zurich, and El Museo del Barrio, NY, except when otherwise noted.

Tags: Methodology, Education, Curation, critical theory, institutional critique (art movement), interactive art, engagement (philosophy), latin american art

Art : Interview

Jackie Winsor  
by Craig Gholson



Art : Interview

Graciela Sacco  
by Marguerite Feitlowitz



Art : Interview

Carlos Garaicoa  
by Holly Block



Art : Artists On Artists

Alejandro Cesarco  
by Nicolás Guagnini

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Art : Interview

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by Sabine Russ



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