

Luis Camnitzer. *Conceptualism in Latin American Art: Didactics of Liberation*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007. ISBN-13: 978-0-292-71629-2

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Luis Camnitzer's book *Conceptualism in Latin American Art: Didactics of Liberation* was published as part of the Joe R. and Teresa Lozano Long Series in Latin American and Latino Art and Culture of the University of Texas Press. The series encompasses a wide variety of titles on subjects ranging from pre-Columbian art and monuments to modern Latin American poetry and sociological studies. In his latest book Camnitzer examines a movement of which he was very much a part as both artist and critic, contributing unique insight into Latin American conceptualism.

As he explains in the Foreword, Camnitzer initially conceived this book in response to the 1992 exhibition "America: Bride of the Sun," at the Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp. The author's engagement with questions about the proper way to convey the historical context of Latin American conceptual art resulted in the 1999 exhibition "Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s," for which he was a project director (along with Jane Farver, now director of the MIT List Visual Arts Center, and Rachel Weiss of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago). Organized by the Queens Museum, the exhibition examined the conceptual art of Africa, Asia, Europe, and North and South America, challenging the perception that conceptualism was a movement born in New York that then spread in diluted form throughout the world, and instead acknowledging local currents that allowed for the international development of this movement.

Many of the ideas articulated in the 1999 exhibition have been reexamined here in a text devoted to Latin America. In early chapters Camnitzer sets out the basic frameworks through which he examines the conceptual art of Latin America beginning in the 1960s. Although the author explains the specific national and sociopolitical circumstances that led to each of the artistic responses he discusses, he also argues that a uniquely Latin American consciousness gave rise to the conceptualist production of the period. He notes that many artists were inspired by events like the Cuban Revolution and experienced feelings of continental unity, and they promoted the idea of a pan-Latin American culture in the 1960s. Camnitzer argues that political, social, and artistic changes in the world at large during this period impacted Latin America differently than other regions. As in the introduction to *Global Conceptualism*, the present text makes a distinction between *conceptual* art of the mainstream, which was based on the relationship of dematerialization and language to the process of art-making, as opposed to *conceptualist* art, the term he uses to describe the related art that was produced in non-mainstream environments, often characterized by a connection to local influences and audience involvement.

According to Camnitzer, the conceptualist art of Latin America was more likely to be open-ended and interdisciplinary. He contends that the conceptualist artists of Latin America were more devoted to social change than their mainstream counterparts were, and thus they were more focused on the social and ideological roles of art. This was often achieved through critiques of social and political struggles and government hypocrisy. Camnitzer suggests that when politics entered the conceptual art of the mainstream it was primarily in the form of written explanations accompanying artworks, which in some cases came to replace the physical work of art, while in Latin America both form and content carried political messages.

The author identifies two precursors to conceptualism that he considers important to the development of a specifically Latin American brand of conceptual art. Early in the book he introduces Simón Rodríguez, the educational theorist perhaps best known as Simón Bolívar's tutor, and the Tupamaros, a group of political dissidents active in Uruguay in the 1960s whose protest activities often veered toward the aesthetic/performance. Camnitzer views both as important intellectual predecessors of the conceptualists and believes that the socially transformative spirit of their work left an important mark on Latin American cultural consciousness. Throughout the text he uses these precedents as organizational paradigms that set the stage for the political conceptual art that followed.

Rodríguez and the Tupamaros are credited with at least partly inspiring *Tucamán arde* (*Tucamán is Burning* [1968]), an event organized by a group of artists in the Argentine cities of Rosario, Buenos Aires, and Santa Fe during a time of increasing censorship and repression under dictator Juan Carlos Onganía. Camnitzer sees this as an important precedent for early conceptualist activity in Latin America because it provided an opportunity for artists to engage in political debate and advocate for social change. Tucamán was a poor province that was a major producer of sugar but also suffered from few opportunities for education, healthcare, and other services. The artists involved in this project

created an operation of “counter information” that was intended to undermine the government’s marketing of the region as an idyllic rural site of potential future growth, instead exposing it as a site of suffering and growing unrest. The exhibition’s title, “Tucumán arde: The Garden of Miseries,” was a direct response to the government slogan dubbing the province “the Garden of the Republic.” Throughout his text, Camnitzer refers to this exhibition as a paradigmatic example of art as political action and supporting evidence for his claim that “Latin American conceptualism emerged as an aesthetic more concerned with reality than with abstraction” (72).

With the Tupamaros and *Tucumán arde* as points of reference, Camnitzer examines the work of many of the best-known conceptual artists of Latin America, including the Brazilian Cildo Meireles; Argentine León Ferrari, a member of the *Tucumán arde* group who went on to a prolific career as an independent artist; and Brazilian neoconcrete artists Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica. Artists who are less likely to be known to non-specialists and have not been as frequently exhibited in the United States, including the Peruvian collective EPS Huayco, Brazilians Waldemar Cordeiro and Antonio Manuel, and Polish-born Mexican artist Marcos Kurtycz, are also discussed. Throughout the book Camnitzer acknowledges artistic antecedents from both Latin America and elsewhere and cites connections between the ideas employed by conceptualist artists and those of important Latin American writers, especially Jorge Luis Borges and Oswald de Andrade, whose “Anthropophagite Manifesto” (1928) was a seminal text for the Brazilian avant-garde art of the 1920s and 1930s.

With the notable exceptions of Puerto Ricans Rafael Ferrer and Rafael Montañez Ortiz, Camnitzer does not discuss artists from the Caribbean in any depth, even though his previous body of work, specifically his *New Art of Cuba* (1994; revised 2003) is evidence of his knowledge and enthusiasm about art of this region. A great deal of interesting, politically relevant art has been produced in Cuba in particular, and Leandro Soto’s documentations of his public performances in the late 1970s and early 1980s, some of the earliest examples of such work on the island, would have been an interesting addition to this book, as would the equally compelling conceptual projects of artists from Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. Perhaps an even more striking absence is that of Cuban-born artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres, who is less frequently discussed and displayed as “Latin American,” but whose emotionally evocative installations addressing the AIDS epidemic manifest many of the socially conscious qualities that, for Camnitzer, set Latin American conceptualism apart from the mainstream. Critics have often called for Gonzalez-Torres to be treated as a Latin American artist, and this would have been an excellent opportunity to do so.

In the final chapters of the book Camnitzer raises lingering issues that he feels demand further attention. He examines in more detail the similarities between the situationists and that of many Latin American conceptualists, which is useful but might have been more so if it had appeared earlier in the text. He also notes that most surveys of international conceptual art fail to acknowledge Latin American artists, and that surveys of Latin American art have also been remiss in not including more conceptual work. He specifically cites the Museum of Modern Art’s 1992 “Latin American Artists of the Twentieth Century” as an exhibition that did not adequately address this subject matter. He overlooks, however, the Bronx Museum of Art’s 1988 survey of Latin American artists working in the United States, “The Latin American Spirit,” which is widely regarded as the best of the surveys of the 1980s “boom” of Latin American art exhibitions in the United States. The exhibition’s catalogue includes an excellent essay by Carla Stellweg that discusses in depth conceptual artists from Latin America who made their careers in New York, including Camnitzer himself as well as Ferrer, Montañez Ortiz, and Eduardo Costa (Argentine, also discussed in Camnitzer’s book). More recently, “Inverted Utopias,” a 2004 survey exhibition organized by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, includes many of the artists discussed by Camnitzer.

Overall, Camnitzer conveys the political and social expediency of conceptual art in Latin America as a tool for change that was useful more for the purposes of eluding repressive governments and conveying ideas about social reform than for subverting the dominant powers of the art world. His insights into the field in which he was a participant are interesting and cannot help but be useful, but perhaps what is most inspired about this book is the author’s clear belief in the conceptual art of the region. As he writes in his introduction, “Latin American conceptualism synthesizes a commitment to art with a commitment to a better life.”