

On Luis Camnitzer's Engraving Cycles

by Alexander Roob

At the end of the 1960s, the Uruguayan sculptor, printmaker and art critic Luis Camnitzer (born 1937 in Lübeck, Germany) asked his colleagues Liliana Porter and José Guillermo Castillo to join him in order to form the New York Graphic Workshop. It was their shared goal to take the elite nimbus off artistic printmaking by experimenting with new democratic forms of distribution. A crucial element of this intention was their interest in early Latin American revolutionary printmaking as a role model from which Camnitzer was able to draw vital impulses for the further development of his artistic practice, which let him explore the field of installative works as well as that of the graphic arts.

In the course of his development he moved from initial influences of late expressionist figuration in the early 1960s to political cartooning and then to more strictly conceptual works in the 1970s, eventually on to the idiosyncratic imagery of his later space installations and printed graphic cycles. Their strongly evocative force resides not only in the harsh contrast of near-to-surreal combinatorics of image and text characterized by a hallucinatory beauty on the one hand – and their clear and meticulously researched reference to the depressing catastrophic context of the politico-historical on the other.

Camnitzer's later printworks can be subdivided into three overlapping themes: unmediated physical violence (as in the cycle „Uruguayan Torture Series“, 1983-84), mediated violence that operates through an intoxication of the physical body (as in the series „Agent Orange“, 1984-87), and subtle violence that comes in an ubiquitous dimension and functions through complete and permanent exposure (as in

the great „vanitas“ series „Dance of the Dead,“ initiated by Camnitzer in 1993 as an homage to legendary Mexican lead-cutter José Guadalupe Posada).

The title of his 43-part cycle “Agent Orange,” which is presented here completely and chronologically, refers to the dramatic occurrences around the eponymous dioxin-based pesticide deployed by the US-American forces for tactical defoliation during the Vietnam war. Using this method, the Vietnamese population was to be bereft of any cover potentially provided by the thick rain forests of their country, exposing them to violent military aggressions. Some years after the end of the war, Agent Orange was publicly suspected to have caused pre-birth deformities. Through this, the relentless manipulation of natural “factors” in the war situation had reached an unexpected long-term dimension endangering the health of all living creatures on a genetic level.

During the painstaking working process for this graphic cycle, a gradual refinement of Camnitzer’s photogravure technique has become apparent. While the prints of the first two sequences were organized based on technically altered photographs, he turned to direct scans of his objects for the last “Dance of the Dead” series, thus depriving them from that last degree of intimacy that had granted by the level of photographic illustration before.

The MePri is particularly grateful to Luis Camnitzer for allowing it to publish a revised version of one of his text on his printing technique. It is a kind of instruction manual, and publishing it here certainly underscores his credo of artistic printmaking as a democratic medium. (Summer courses held in his Italian studio are also offering interested persons an opportunity to experiment with techniques under his guidance. For more information, please consult www.studio-camnitzer.com).

In a further text, “Printmaking: A Colony of the Arts”, published here for the first time, Camnitzer critically examines the field of artistic printmaking; the conclusion he draws out of the medium’s history not only highlight him as the original contemporary exponent of a Latin American tradition. They also allow to confront his approach with comparisons to the self-positioning of the revolutionizing practices of William Blake or the groundwork for a politically informed “Private Press” by William James Linton, as well as the multi-faceted conflicts and struggles within the Arts & Crafts Movement (spurred by Blake’s and Linton’s achievements) when they faced their artificial clone: the so called Art Nouveau.

In the MePri collections:

by Luis Camnitzer

Luis Camnitzer

„The code remained unbroken“, 1984–87

(from the series „Agent Orange“, photogravure, 75 x 56 cm, pr 15)

Luis Camnitzer

Three prints from the series „Dance of the Dead“, 1993

(photogravures, 75 x 55 cm, pr 30)

Other relevant materials:

Luis Camnitzer: The New Art of Cuba, Austin 1994 (2nd, revised edition 2004)

Luis Camnitzer - Zanoobia, exhibition catalogue, ed. by Galerie Basta,

text: Wolfgang Becker, Hamburg 1995

Luis Camnitzer. Werke von 1966 bis 2003, exhibition catalogue, Kunsthalle Kiel,

ed. by Dirk Luckow, Kiel 2003

TGP (Taller de Grafica Popular). Ein Grafikerkollektiv in Mexico von 1937–1977,

Helga Prignitz, Berlin 1981

The Works of / Das Werk von José Guadalupe Posada, ed. by Hannes Jähn, Frankfurt 1976

Journalism versus Art, Max Eastman, New York, 1916

A Treasury of American Prints, Thomas Craven (ed.), New York 1939

William Gropper : Retrospective , ed. August L. Freundlich, Miami 1968

A number of issues from the Marxist review New Masses: 1932, 1934, 1940, 1947

(Collaborators, among others, were Ben Shahn, William Gropper, Rockwell Kent,

Taller Grafica Popular, William Carlos Williams, Otto Slogow)