

Luís Camnitzer

Blue Star Art Space

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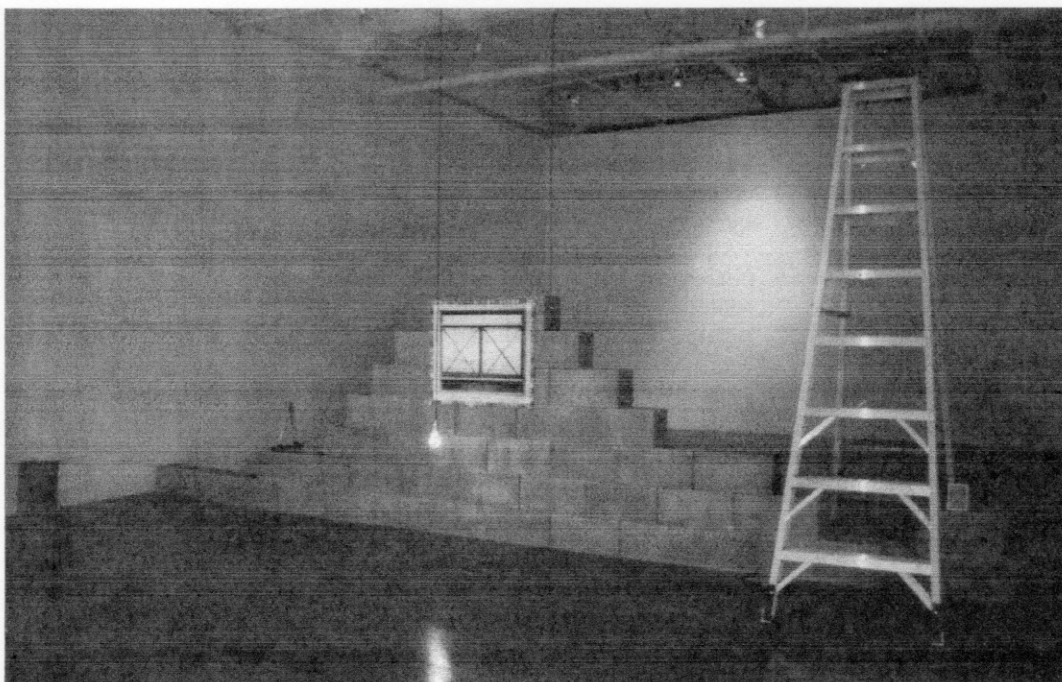
As one of Conceptualism's early practitioners, Luís Camnitzer has for over 30 years combined images, objects, and text-based media into politically conscious dialectics. In low-tech installations that stress an economy of means, the Uruguayan artist, writer, and scholar has addressed such controversial subjects as the "torture machines" of Latin American dictatorships and the United States use of Agent Orange in the Vietnam War. Eschewing outright polemic, Camnitzer's brand of conceptualism relies heavily on a Surrealist field of ambiguous imagery modified by pithy or seemingly unrelated phrases. Open-ended, multi-layered, and deeply ironic, Camnitzer's work often critiques the abuses of political power while asserting a clear ethic of empathy for its human casualties.

This exhibition, "The Fence," continues these practices with a new emphasis on a particular geopolitical site, a barrier wall between Nogales, Mexico and Nogales, Arizona. On photo-etched brass plates, Camnitzer reproduced a 1997 article from *The New York Times* that conveys the long-standing ambivalence surrounding issues of border control on both sides of this fence. As reported in the article, official specifications design the barrier to resist "repeated physical assault by welding torches, firearms, climbing over or penetration with vehicles," yet be "absolutely as friendly looking as possible, something that will evoke the friendship between the two nations."

As the installation's point of departure, Camnitzer interpolated this news item into a conceptual and chiefly metaphorical experience of the wall and suffuses it with his signature tropes. More evocation than replication, the barrier is sparingly suggested by cinder blocks. Laid down in a low row, the blocks rise to a central apex that contains a photographic detail of the actual wall showing its classic architectural elements, pink and blue color scheme, and steel mesh openings. On both sides of the blocks are everyday objects (e.g., wine bottles, loaves of bread, paper parcels, mounds of dirt) carefully placed on the gallery floor to mirror each other. Additional objects have been

altered with a homespun touch of the absurd, like the suitcase, mirror, shoe, and puddles of blue sky that are evenly split in half by the wall. This forced symmetry is painfully wry; despite the native similarities of the two populations on either side of the fence, competing political and economic interests prevent actual parity. The low wall also plays with viewers' attitudes about art and challenges nationalistic prejudice. Should we step across it? Is it safe? On which side is Mexico? Camnitzer's "The Fence" is a border Rorschach test.

*John Ewing is a writer living in San Antonio.*



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"The Fence" (installation view), 2000.

Mixed media, dimensions variable.

Photo by Roger Welch, courtesy of Blue Star Art Space.