



Vol. 6, No. 2, Winter 2009, 236-241

www.ncsu.edu/project/acontracorriente

Review/Reseña

Luis Camnitzer. *Conceptualism in Latin American Art: Didactics of Liberation*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007.

Where Art, Politics, Poetry, and Pedagogy Converge

Gina McDaniel Tarver

The University of Texas—Austin

Luis Camnitzer's *Conceptualism in Latin American Art: Didactics of Liberation* stands as the most detailed and thoughtful attempt yet to describe and explain conceptualism—an approach to visual art—as it emerged in Latin American countries. This book describes the art and explores why it developed, why it has cultural relevance, and how it differs from U.S. conceptual art. As a Uruguayan artist and critic who has lived in New York since 1964, Camnitzer is particularly well positioned to write about the topic; he analyzes Latin American conceptualism as an insider, drawing from experience as well as from thorough research of primary and

secondary sources. His research is well-documented; sometimes the notes are as fascinating as the main text. The book is dense, but far from pedantic. Camnitzer uses crisp, clear, concise, evocative language that is easy and enjoyable to read.

Conceptualism has been widespread since the 1960s not just in Latin America but globally, as shown in 1999 by *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin 1950s–1980s*—an exhibition organized by Camnitzer with Rachel Weiss and Jane Farver that was itself an important predecessor to Camnitzer’s book. Conceptualism is a kind of art that has as its main goal the communication of ideas. Because it focuses on concepts, it is difficult to define in any conventional formal or stylistic manner (though this hasn’t stopped art critics and historians from attempting to do so). Conceptualism can take on any form that serves the idea and its communication.

One of Camnitzer’s main arguments is that Latin American conceptualism was born from a convergence of art with politics, poetry, and pedagogy, a confluence that is typical of Latin America “for reasons rooted in the Latin American experience” (37). Conceptualism in the region was nurtured by various forms of visual art, but also by sources ranging from leftist political thought and action to liberation theology, from Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* to Brazilian concrete poetry. By organizing his book into twenty-three short, thematic chapters, Camnitzer emphasizes that Latin American conceptualism is a complex and interdisciplinary artistic phenomenon whose goals, various aspects, and influences are best elucidated from a variety of angles. This multiple approach is evident in his inclusion of two introductions and three concluding chapters, as well.

Another important characteristic of conceptualism in Latin America is that it was concerned with its immediate context, both intellectual and material, and it sought to address a specific, local public in ways that organized members of the public into a receptive community, “which is a political issue.” It incorporated strategies for agitation (“shaking the platform that is taken for granted”) and creation (“helping to build a new culture”), two actions that are often seen as opposite. Within conceptualism in Latin America, “Art, politics, pedagogy, and poetry overlap, integrate,

and cross-pollinate into a whole—a form overcoming the agitation/construction polarity” (20).

Camnitzer’s scope is formidable: the book deals with conceptualist art throughout Latin America as well as that made by Latin Americans living in New York, and it covers a period from the late 1950s into the early years of this century, though with an emphasis on works from the 1960s. He chose to deal with conceptualism as a regional phenomenon because, he argues, Latin American artists of the 1960s generation who introduced conceptualism shared a sense of being Latin American, whether they worked in Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires, New York, Caracas, Bogotá, Mexico City, or Santiago de Chile (the main Latin American centers of conceptualist production). As he explains, it was a “Latin Americanism that went further than the feeling that one belonged to one nation-state, and, without opposing it, fell somewhat short of the other feeling that one belongs to one world” (3); it was a vaguely sensed regionalism that included “sharing a more or less common language and to some extent an irritation or worse toward imperialism” (3). It was imbued with ideas about a political and economic Third World and marked by the existence of Cuban Revolution as an alternative to U.S.-capitalist model.

Early in the book, Camnitzer explains how conceptualism in Latin America differed from its better-known cousin, North American and European conceptual art, particularly conceptual art as developed in New York City in response to minimalism. Camnitzer sees conceptual art as one particular strain of conceptualism that is often (incorrectly) taken as the origin of global conceptualism. This misconception is dangerous to an understanding of the art since it leads to a view of peripheral artistic production as derivative. What Camnitzer calls mainstream conceptual art insists on purity. The best-known practitioners of conceptual art, like the U.S. artists Joseph Kosuth and Lawrence Weiner, “try to isolate meaning from any form, narrative, or material support as far as possible” (23). Since Latin American conceptualism may use any of these to convey meaning, by mainstream standards it is hybrid, impure. By adopting “conceptualism” in distinction to “conceptual art,” Camnitzer insists that art from Latin America be framed in different terms.

Camnitzer sets the stage for a Latin American approach to conceptualism by examining, in two early chapters, the cultural production of Simón Rodríguez and the Tupamaros who, though not strictly a part of Latin American conceptualism, are “incidental to its understanding” and, Camnitzer argues, can help “position Latin American conceptualism on its own axis” (10). Camnitzer believes that the “aesthetically inspiring” teachings of Simón Rodríguez, a nineteenth-century Venezuelan intellectual who was deeply concerned with politics and pedagogy and who is best known as Bolívar’s tutor, has a much closer relationship to conceptualist approaches to art in Latin America than does U.S. conceptual art. Rodríguez did not have a direct influence on Latin American conceptualists, but his flexible and innovative way of communicating is echoed more than a century later in their art: “Rodríguez represents an attitudinal foundation that, even when not explicit, is latent in most Latin American cultural expressions. Partly this is due to the social role and social awareness of the artist as a helper in the construction of a culture whose development seems to be continually interrupted” (43). The Tupamaros, an Uruguayan urban guerrilla movement active in the late 1960s and early 1970s, carried out “aestheticized military operations” that blurred the boundaries between art and politics. Though not concerned with art, per se, the Tupamaros have a direct relationship to conceptualism in that many of them came out of the same classrooms as Uruguayan conceptualists. As Camnitzer notes, neither Rodríguez or the Tupamaros are normally discussed within the context of art, despite the strong aesthetic component of their work. His decision to do so is bold and interesting and provides a good starting point for examining questions about regional cultural formation, such as how and why innovative cross-disciplinary approaches to communication emerged and persisted in diverse Latin American countries.

Several of Camnitzer’s short chapters, though integrally tied to his arguments, can also stand alone, serving as instructional tools for specific topics. The chapter on *Tucumán arde* is one of these. In 1968 a group of artists from Rosario and Buenos Aires worked with sociologists, economists, journalists, and photographers to create a multi-media event

they called *Tucumán arde* (*Tucumán is Burning*). Tucumán is a province of Argentina known for its sugar production. In the 1960s the government publicized an industrial plan for the region with the slogan “Tucumán, the Garden of the Republic,” yet Tucumán remained impoverished and neglected, becoming a symbol of government hypocrisy and misinformation. The artist collective launched *Tucumán arde* as a counter-information project to expose misery in the region. They held their event in both Rosario and Buenos Aires, at buildings of the Confederación General de Trabajadores de los Argentinos (CGT) in both cities.¹ It combined photographs with written and oral testimony and statistical data contrasting the lives of the rich and the poor. This unusual exhibition was open for two weeks in Rosario but only two days in Buenos Aires, closed down under pressure from the police. The collective is important as an extreme example of how artists in Latin America “used art to make politics,” in the words of artist León Ferrari, one of the members of the collective (70).

Most chapters in the book focus on a particular theme (art, pedagogy, literature) rather than on a particular figure or group. Within each theme, Camnitzer identifies important precursors to conceptualism: artists, sociologists, writers, and other cultural producers who shaped the intellectual formation of conceptualist artists. Within these chapters, Camnitzer often includes brief discussions of artists and works that relate closely to the theme, but most of the works of art he discusses appear in later chapters under titles like “Postpoetry” (artists emphasizing a poetic approach and influenced by poetry), “Postpolitics” (artists exploring the integration of art with everyday life and with politics), and “Diaspora” (Latin American conceptualists working in New York).

The book’s greatest shortcoming comes as the flip-side of one of its greatest strengths, that is, its scope. The necessary emphasis on the broader

¹ Although the CGT it is currently called the “Confederación General del Trabajo de la República Argentina,” after the 1966 coup the group had split in two. The main body was called the CGT Azopardo (after the name of the street where it had its headquarters), and it favored some cooperation with the military junta. The other splinter group was more radical. They were known as the CGT de los Argentinos. It was this oppositionist CGT that hosted *Tucumán Arde*. For a brief summary, see James D. Rudolph, *Argentina: A Country Study*, 3rd ed. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government, 1985), 238–39.

cultural context of conceptualism's emergence leaves limited room for discussion of particular artworks. The treatment of the art itself is uneven—he deals with some works of art in great detail but with most he gives only cursory descriptions and suggestions of specific context. He leaves out any discussion of production in some countries, especially those where conceptualism developed late, like Guatemala. Though he emphasizes the importance of context to this sort of art, there is not room, in a work like this, to go into much detail on specific contexts. This book, however, is very good as an introduction and stands to inspire other studies on more specific contexts that will complement, and perhaps complicate, Camnitzer's view.

Though there have been contributions to exhibition catalogs and anthologies dealing with the topic of conceptualism in Latin American art, Camnitzer's book is invaluable as the first book on the subject. But more importantly, it offers a fresh approach to conceptualism, enriching our understanding of the dynamics of cultural production in the 1960s. It will appeal not just to art historians but to anyone interested in cultural studies and, in particular, in political and cultural struggles for liberation.