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Oral history interview with Luis Camnitzer, 2020 January 16 and 17

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Luis Eugenio Camnitzer on January 16, 17, 2020. The interview took place in Great Neck, NY, and was conducted by Josh T. Franco for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Luis Eugenio Camnitzer and Josh T. Franco have reviewed the transcript. Their corrections and emendations appear below in brackets with initials. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

JOSH T. FRANCO: This is Josh T. Franco for the Archives of American Art, at the home of Luis Camnitzer in Great Neck, New York, on January 16, 2020, to record Luis's oral history. So thanks, Luis, for agreeing to do this.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well, you're welcome.

JOSH T. FRANCO: We're very excited. So, in researching, I realized that the published conversations with Alex Alberro by the Cisneros Foundation is a very good resource for a lot of the biographical touchpoints of your life, and that's very helpful. You know, the researcher should know that exists. It's very helpful, and it also gives us some room to use this I think more in line with your practice. And we'll see. I have some ideas.

So I want to pose—I think biography—I may ask some touchpoints as we go, but I want to pose in an unusual way, I think—than what we usually do. Usually we ask, you know, what's the day you were born, [laughs] and what was going on. But I think here, it might be more interesting to think about what this is, this object, the oral history. Because you're so good at deconstructing these museum objects and these pedagogical tools.

So the Archives of American Art, like most archives, really exists for the future. You know, we're dedicated to preserving for some imagined audience in a long time. And possibly more than others, we can say—because we're part of the Smithsonian—that, you know, we can reasonably think in 200, 300 years what we create or preserve will still be available. So with that in mind, I was—you know, the kind of—I don't know if you would call it a mantra, but the idea that the museum is a school kept echoing. [00:02:02] But I wonder, you know, if the museum is a school—which you can elaborate on here a little bit—what does that make the archive? So if the museum is a school, what is the archive?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: I don't know if there's a parallel because ideologically, I think the archive is probably at odds with schooling. There's no way that you wouldn't be interested in anecdotes, which focus on the individual telling them, but which ultimately are irrelevant in any pedagogical sense. So nobody should care where I was born or do I have three feet or two or four or quirks or idiosyncrasies, which don't add to an intellectual history. So a biography for me is really kind of a monument to the ego and not a monument to cultural agency. And this, where—an oral history, unless you guide it into cultural agency, for me becomes sort of irrelevant. Okay? I'm not meaning this in an aggressive term, but it is an issue. I'm now actually increasingly, maybe because of old age, thinking more and more about the importance of anonymity versus the lasting imprint of the ego. And there were—you probably are at crossroads, in which—do you favor, and which are you allowed to favor, in your job? Which I don't know, but we may discuss it over [laughs]—[00:04:02]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Sure, you mean as far as who we choose to interview and preserve? Or crossroads in what sense?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No, in terms of guiding questions. Okay?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: So I think personal experience only is useful if it becomes a metaphor or an example to generate other experiences, but not if it's locked in into its own narrative. Okay? We don't care that Beethoven was deaf, for instance; it doesn't change—it may make it more admirable that he was able to do what he did, but ultimately, that doesn't affect what he left. Okay?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. So, with that in mind, what compelled you to say yes to doing this oral history?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: I was lukewarm about it. I thought this might be a topic [laughs] we might discuss, and therefore, it could become a pedagogical situation. But I'm not particularly interested in posterity, and I don't care what happens afterwards. So in that sense, your time capsule, which is what it is, should only be useful in as much as it generates other ideas in other people, not cements an archeological search, let's put it that way.

JOSH T. FRANCO: So one way I think of—lately, I've been thinking about what we do as an analogy to cave paintings, especially considering the recent discovery of a yet older series in Sri Lanka. And, you know, there's the question of, Those people, did they care or not? Who knows? If we saw them, did they care if they lasted after their lifetime? [00:06:04] And they're anonymous to us, those people. Yet we witness those markings now, and they mean—maybe they don't mean a lot in themselves, but they certainly generate a lot of meaning that we ascribe to them. Or—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah, but I mean, the way we are celebrating that find is really a projection of our own ideologies that is totally unrelated to what they—as far as they are concerned, may have been ephemeral, and they just didn't know how to erase it. I mean, who knows?

But I think—well, first of all, I always believe that art history should be taught from the present into the past and not from the past into the present. And I don't have many accolades on that theory, but I think if we would do it that way, we would be constantly aware that we are projecting our present onto the past—recent past first, which is more accessible, distant past more. And that the further away, the more artificial and unrelated to the origin or interpretation comes, which is still valid because it's useful for us. So as long as we know it's not an absolute research but a kind of ornamentation of our own present, it's fine. And that should be nailed into each step of the research.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Simultaneously understanding that whatever we project is artificial but still valid.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: It's valid for our present.

JOSH T. FRANCO: For our—yes. And that validity is based on, you know, its political usefulness, no? Or its ethical usefulness, perhaps? [00:08:04]

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah, I would try not to separate it because everything is political and everything has ethical implications. It's ultimately placing where the power is and taking responsibility for it. The way we are dealing with it, we're not taking responsibility for it. And mostly, we're not identifying where the power is. So you have not only a study of history that way, which is a fake intellectual history when it actually becomes an intellectual history, which is not the usual. It's merely a string of anecdotes. And the way I see it, it would force us to constantly understand why are we doing something, who is benefiting from it, whose interest are we serving, and what would we want to do, and what are the obstacles that prevent us from doing it, and who puts those obstacles there, and how can we remove them. And all that is a political construct, even if it's not party or militant, but it is a product of a political awareness that informs how we relate to our environment.

JOSH T. FRANCO: So, yeah, I think of the coming—contracting time much more. I think about the researchers who come into our reading room every day to listen to these oral histories or to look through people's papers that we preserve. And you know, I don't—it seems like they're—you know, I know that your practice is so much premised on making the audience aware that they are active and not letting them be passive. [00:10:10] So maybe this is another false analogy, but if we think of the researchers in the Archives as the audience of that material, this material we're making now, you know, who—whose job is it to make them aware of their active role—their active role in using that material to identify power for instance?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: I guess their teachers should have prepared them to do that. I would

presume that most of your researchers want to find out what makes this particular person tick, and resurrect or reconstruct or resuscitate that individual and make him graspable in the present. And that's a totally uninteresting [laughs] venture for me, and it really doesn't matter. It really matters what ideas were consequential for what we are thinking and will generate new ideas that will improve society.

So, we are respecting and adoring and giving huge prizes to objects that we don't have a clue what problem were they really trying to solve. And some of those masters that occupy a lot of real estate in art history were dealing with problems. We don't have a clue what they were. And not only that, whatever problems we may project on to their work are not interesting. [00:12:07] Yet, there's a kind of obscurantist religious attitude towards them that makes them icons, that makes them untouchable.

So, if I look back in art history, there are not that many figures I admire beyond their skills, beyond their crafts. And a lot of them, whatever problems I can project onto their work are problems that I'm not interested in pursuing. Therefore, for me, they're dead. And I wouldn't spend a penny on them. Some few are open enough for me to project problems that are interesting, from which I can take off and go on. But I have no certitude that what I'm interpreting has anything to do with the original proposal. And it's an anti-dogmatic communication, I would say, that the original author may think, 'Oh, wow, I hadn't thought about that, and if I would redo my work, I might consider it.' Or say, 'You're totally off. This has nothing to do with me, and you are on your own.' And both are valid.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Do you think—or what, you know—as I've read your words about your own work, it's been—you've set it up as—you know, you see a problem, and you'll work to solve it, and every problem's solution will look different, which of course affects the form. And I want to talk about forms, the installation versus print versus sculpture. [00:14:00] But for a broader question now, do you think you are going to leave—or, what questions will you leave unresolved?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Oh, probably all of them.

JOSH T. FRANCO: [They laugh.] Yeah. Well, then, which ones are the most interesting that you hope someone else picks up?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well, no. I mean, in fact, if there's something to be left, is the freedom to ask, and not particular questions. So. I mean, I tried to make connections of things that I feel are not connected. And with that, I do not intend to give a new connection but just the ability to connect things that you really are not connected to. So I don't have any particular attachment to particular works.

JOSH T. FRANCO: I see. I will say researchers often—

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JOSH T. FRANCO: —you know, they—I think—I'm skeptical of the idea that the Archives maintain the iconicity of certain people because, as I witness, things happen that actually dissolves. People become so much more mundane when people are looking [they laugh]—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yes.

JOSH T. FRANCO: —at their grocery lists and sketchbooks, and—well, kind of simultaneously, the aura gets built but also dissolved at the same time. It's kind of a strange phenomenon. But I just say that to say that people, I'm sure, will be arguing against things that they find of yours that you leave behind. And—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Good.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yes, I think that's very good. Here's another way to think about the future too: I understand that your son's an artist.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOSH T. FRANCO: And I wonder how, you know—have you—it's also a question about pedagogy: Do you have a teacher-student relationship around art?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: With him?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yes.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah, he teaches me a lot. I mean, he's a very tough critic. He makes me feel the generation gap. He makes me—actually, he's very rigorous, which I'm not. So in that sense, yes, there is.

JOSH T. FRANCO: What are the markers of the generation gap?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: [Sighs.] That's difficult to pinpoint. Often he says, 'Well, that's something that was valid in the '70s or the '60s,' and today he feels it's not relevant, which is basically telling me, 'You are repeating yourself.' [They laugh.] So on that level, I feel limitations. [00:02:06] I feel limitations from my background, he is very much interested in working with children and shifting the power relations, putting power into their hands, which is something I never thought about. Although, it's a much broader approach than mine. I'm still working with the traditional public, in quotes, and he is going further. He's preparing the future in a way that I'm not, and that may be one symptom of this.

I often tell—this is unrelated to him, but—that the day I realized that I should be thinking about retirement was when a student asked me what music I like. And I said, 'Well, I like classical music, and what do you like?' And he said, at the time, 'Oh, I'm into hip-hop,' which I didn't have a clue, and I still don't have a clue what exactly it is. But I said, 'Classical music,' and it took like several seconds, and eventually he said, 'Oh, you mean The Beatles?' [They laugh.] So then, well, okay.

In classical music, basically, the only person I envy is Bach, and I thought that means that it's conceivable that the future culture won't deal with Bach or any other classical composer. [00:04:07] And then I thought, Why is that so terrible? I would feel sad about it, but there's no reason for a generation to decide that that's not a problem setting of any interest or relevance for that generation, and I have no right to criticize that or to disagree with that. I just may be sad about it, but that's a personal emotional reaction, and not a cultural one.

But that gave me really a feeling, Okay, there is a gap here. That I'm fighting ghosts that don't exist anymore for other people. And my way of teaching is unavoidably informed by those ghosts. I mean, I started teaching against the way I was taught, so that's a starting point of something, and the next generation is probably teaching against the way I taught. And that's a gap that cannot be—easily at least—be crossed, and I don't think I can cross.

JOSH T. FRANCO: You're not the only person your age, though. So, you know, the problems that you're still interested in are not ghosts for other people, I imagine.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: What does that mean, that I talk to people as old as I am?

JOSH T. FRANCO: That started—I was going with your—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: [Laughs.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: —implication. The other question that follows that is, there are people much younger than you who might care about those ghosts too.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah, some, but it's not anymore a given.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Right. And it was at one point?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah, statistically speaking.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Can you name some of those ghosts, so we have them on the record, those problems? [00:06:03]

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well, I cannot identify ghosts, but my view—in myself, my view of revolution has changed radically. Actually, one discussion with my son was about utopia. And I am a utopian of sorts, although flexible, but he pointed out that any utopian is authoritarian. And here, I found I'm deep, deep, deep anti-authoritarian. I'm basically—of an anarchist background. I always hasten to add ethical anarchism. And in that sense, there's a contradiction between anarchism and utopia even if it's utopian anarchism. It's an oxymoron because, based on our or my generation or my beliefs, I constructed the utopia, which therefore is constructed on an experience I already had and deduced from it and becomes a dogma to reach. And that's not the way of going. And that's something I hadn't thought about. I always thought utopia, you never

reach it. If you reach it, it wouldn't be utopia, but it would be incredibly boring. So it's like the horizon that keeps moving when you try to get there. That's how far I made it a relative term. But the idea that even that might be authoritarian hadn't occurred to me, and he pointed it out.

So there is a generational shift, [00:08:00] and my generation felt, Okay, you fight it, you win, and then it's done. It's like, the next day after revolution, everything is good. And today, the generation in a similar plight, what this younger friend once taught me, No, you go in and recede, you go in and recede, and it is constantly back and forth. So it's a much more dynamic—and with feedback—relation than in my scheme or schematic view.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Does it—it also seems to have something to do with scale. And Alex Santana—who's your, you know, liaison at Alex Gray Gallery—paraphrased something that stuck with her that you said about recognizing a transition in your life from thinking about large-scale political agency to understanding that things—real political change happens between two individuals on a small scale. Can you elaborate on that idea?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well, it's basically the difference between revolution and evolution. [They laugh.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Do you have an example when that's happened?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well, revolution basically failed.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yes.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Okay. All the examples haven't been overly successful. I always was interested in this institution building, and my entrance in education was through curricular design and change. And even when it succeeded, it lived very shortly, and after a couple of years, it fossilized and became a new academy. [00:10:02] So even in the more modest-scale, often, institution, those changes, when they're thought of in a static way, do not work. They only work if they're constantly reviewed and re-changed and readapted and you renew yourself. And that's an individual process, and that's a process that happens through dialogue and not through comparative monologues. So you have to keep the dialogue going, and the dialogue-going is easier when it's one-to-one than when it's with many people. And I experience that in personal life. If I am in a meeting with three, four people, I tend to be silent. And if it's just with one person, I'm talkative. So.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yes. Can you describe—so, that's one thing that I think was not so much in the Alberro conversations. The story about what happened in Montevideo is there, and how you changed that institution and the curriculum. And if you could describe that briefly, that will be great, but my question—when you came then to teach here at SUNY, did you—how did you approach the curriculum there?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: The school in Uruguay was very academic in a French Academy sense. There was a studio in France that was very popular by [André] Lhote, and a lot of Latin American artists went to study there. It was a sort of post-Cubist academic place. [00:12:01] That seemed to be the most up-to-date stuff in aesthetics of the '30s that was carried on in the '50s, as there was no changes. It was skill-oriented. I was very young. I was 16 when I entered art school and entered sculpture and learned to copy models, and that seemed off. So my generation changed that. It was very radical change. It was, like, applying things that Beuys then proclaimed 10 years later, we were doing then.

And then I left. I got to go and I came to the States, and went back five years or six years later and found that they were doing exactly the same as we have started. Same assignments. There was no change at all. That created a huge discussion and not a pleasant one, and basically we broke contact for over 40 years. And [only] now, we're resuming it.

But still, from that initial energy when I came to the States, I just followed that. And I was lucky that when I was hired at SUNY in Old Westbury, I could start the art department. So I started it based on the experience in Uruguay, and that got lost. It got lost not by the fault of the faculty, at the time at least, but after some years, we got pressure about how many credits and how many students we had to have, what courses. [00:14:07] I mean, I did some subterfuge, and I lowered the credit load. For courses that were four credits, I called three-credit courses so that I could accommodate more classes, which meant we were exploiting ourselves as faculty.

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.] It sounds like, yeah.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: But at least we were providing a better service to the students. We treated students who weren't even intending to be art majors—from the very beginning, we treated them as graduate students. And they had studios and worked on their own. It was based on tutorials. The students had individual conversations. It was problem-oriented, it wasn't skill-oriented, and it wasn't even—

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LUIS E. CAMNITZER: —market-oriented. We were concerned with forming good, creative citizens regardless if they would end up doing art or not. So today, 30 years after, 40 years after, it still sounds like the utopian. [They laugh.] I mean, I tell about it, and people say, 'Wow, when was that?' You know?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: But again, the institution killed it.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Did you consider your practice as a professor and your department development in relationship to other experiments like Black Mountain College, Bauhaus?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: At the time, I didn't know much about Black Mountain, but yeah, Bauhaus was influential. And there was another school in Germany in Kassel, which was also important. In fact, when I went to Germany in '57, I had a semiofficial passport to study curricula in Bauhaus and post-Bauhaus. And we were also very aware of [László] Moholy-Nagy in the United States and so on. But that was all. I mean, then later, I found out here about CalArts and Halifax and so on. So it's not that there was a total void, but the average of art schooling in the progressive area is still Bauhaus foundation course. [They laugh.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, yes. Is there any—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: So it's 100 years later.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Right. Yeah, what would be the new radical model? [00:02:00]

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: I don't think there's—

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's the—yeah.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: I don't think there's any institution doing it. There are alternatives. There are artist collectives that try to do it but—

JOSH T. FRANCO: I talked to Juan Sánchez on the phone on Tuesday about something unrelated, but I told him I was coming to do this, and I asked him if he—you know, what would he ask you. And it was about pedagogy, and he asked specifically the question—he would be—he's very curious about how many of your students stay in the art world, become capital-A artists, and how many don't because that's not a priority, you know—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Right.

JOSH T. FRANCO: —for you. [Laughs.]

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Not many.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Not many?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Not many.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. And if you have any anecdotes about particular students with—you know, who caught your interest over the years?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well, there's a funny story. One student came to me and said, 'I want to be an art major.' And I tended to dissuade people from doing that because it was condemning them to a really tough life. So I asked her—well, first of all, she said she was from Uruguay, so there was the first bonding step. So I said, 'Why do you want to be an art major?' She said, 'Well, I'm a single mother, I'm working as a waitress, and I need an academic diploma to get a better job, and art seems to be the easiest.' [They laugh.] So [laughs] normally, I would've kicked her out, and I didn't, out of chauvinism. You know, Oh, well, she's Uruguayan, okay. So I accepted her.

She has a museum show. She's one of the few that is actually—

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's amazing.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: —a professional practicing artist. [00:04:01]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Can you say her name?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: I prefer not to.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Okay. Fine, that's great. That's an interesting story.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah. So that taught me not to take anybody for granted actually.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. I have a question about Uruguayan artists. You know, it's always interesting and a nice thing when collections in the Archives connect in some way. And you connect to many people but just thinking you mentioned the Uruguayan artist. I know in our collection, we have Rimer Cardillo's papers and Naúl Ojeda, who are both artists from Uruguay. Do you know either or both of them?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: [Laughs.] Rimer was a student of mine in the first class I ever taught.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Really?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah. [Laughs.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, that's interesting.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: So he started printmaking with me. And Naúl, were friends. Actually, when I left, he took my studio.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, when you left Uruguay?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: In Uruguay, yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's fascinating. Wow.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: So it was—I've got close relation with both. I mean, we were not friends to the point of confiding intimate stuff to each other, but we were more than acquaintances, yes.

JOSH T. FRANCO: One of the things I find so valuable in Naúl's papers—he was so politically active in a very—in the very, like—I don't know—I don't want to call it traditional, but the way you think of when you think of activism. And so there's so many letters. He maintained correspondence with so many people. Those letters are really rich because it's—he's writing from Europe sometimes but largely from the US when he would—he was in DC for decades, writing from his experience here and then receiving letters from Uruguay. They're fascinating because of that real-life thing that archives do where people are talking about, you know, not having had meat for two weeks or, you know, people experiencing violence because of their political beliefs or perceived political beliefs. [00:06:13]

And I don't know, I guess the question is, you know, what do you think it means to put that material on the art historical record that's housed in this major US-based historical institution? Because, you know, along with everything related to his practice as an artist—his drawing, his woodcut templates, things like that—there are all these letters and all this other material that has to do with his, just, life outside of art. And you know, the—unlike a museum where you look at the art—no, that's not true. I'll take that back. But the Archives really—you know, there's no distinction between the practice and the life. That's what I find so interesting.

But, you know, are we creating a dead object out of it? Are we taking its power away by putting it in the Archives? [They laugh.] You're nodding your head yes.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No, you're not taking power away. I don't think there's any power in it. There's only power in it if there's material from which you can draw new conclusions and not just data about that particular case. So, I don't know. I mean, I think Naúl was a little bit younger than I was. I don't know how much, at least I perceived him as younger. But he is—we were all very political. I mean, the art school was an anarchist school. [00:08:00] It was by far the majority, ideologically. There were some communists, and that's it. At the time, schools were, for

some strange reason, ideologically [laughs] focused, so the law school was communist, architecture was Trotskyite and communist, and art was anarchist. I mean [they laugh] it was weird, looking back. At the time, we took it for granted, but—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. Whereas now, you go from studio to studio in an art school, and it's totally different politics from one to the other.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah. So I'm not surprised that Naúl was politically involved. He came in exile, I presume?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yes.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: I came before exile. Exile caught up with me. I had the luxury of leaving with a grant and not—then I couldn't go back. But I don't know, I think only if I want to know more about Naúl would I go through the letters.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, that's interesting—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: And maybe if I want to find out about what did that generation feel and do at the time, I would use his letters as an example. But that's like dead history to some extent.

JOSH T. FRANCO: To some extent. There are also—you know, one person who came to research those letters is an artist who creates—she doesn't only create—she goes into archives to unearth histories around the US-Mexico border, like most recently about the way that Mexican laborers were gassed. And then she has drawn connections between the architecture of the gassing to clean their bodies' chambers in the US to the architecture of what was used in Germany by the SS to gas the Jews. Which, it's not—she's not imagining this link. [00:10:07] There's documented [fact-finding -JF] parties. People were sent from Germany to learn here how to do it, and it was an actual exchange of technical information.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: I didn't know that.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Exactly. So in her act of unearthing that history, there's no way to hear her talk about her work or look at her work without feeling how you're, you know, implicated as a US subject in—I'm a Texan too, so it just is, like, you know, those might have been my ancestors, some of those men who were gassed when they were coming to labor to pick stuff. So I'm—you know, she—I think she's successful the way, you know, I think your work is successful in not simply being a static object but activating your consciousness of where you are in this situation.

But she came to look at Naúl's letters because I told her about them and not—and there it was—it was more about her finding another kind of companion in the voice of Naúl and the other people who wrote to him in the letters, in not being silent, basically. So it becomes part of her energy in a way. I mean, I think that's my hope for archives and why they're not dead. Anyway. You're provoking me, Luis. [They laugh.]

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Good.

JOSH T. FRANCO: This should not be about my thoughts at all, but—yeah. So that's that.

But I do—talking about returning and going back to Uruguay, you said something nice in a published conversation about going back for the light. And again, I am from West Texas, and we have very special light also, and people—that's what we think about our land as well. So can you describe that light?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Oh.

JOSH T. FRANCO: And what it means for you as—you know, it's visual too, so as an artist what has it meant for you to recharge there and to have it in your mind? [00:12:02]

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No, it's not as an artist. I think it's just as a living being. Particularly in November and April, which are the months I like to go—October, November—probably because of how the winds go or used to go. I don't know how long this will happen. There's a cleanliness in the air that makes me feel like there's no intermediate between objects and my eyes, that I can touch directly something by looking at it, which is a very strange experience. It's like, I'm very sensitive to mist, to pastel colors and so on, which bore me; they make me tired. And there suddenly, everything is vibrant, and it's not light that hurts. I mean, I have had sharp lights here, if you go to, I don't know, Georgia or wherever. But that's a very aggressive light—it hurts your

eyes, you have to shield your eye—and that one isn't.

I kept telling to my family that that's where the light is. And everybody made fun of me until they went, and said, 'Oh.' [They laugh.] And even in Uruguay when I mentioned it, people made fun of me. I mean, there's unavoidably nostalgia involved and myth-making and so on. I taught my children that Columbus left Montevideo and went to colonize Spain so that's history [laughs] according to me. [00:14:02]

But I found out recently through an Uruguayan friend who is an art historian that in the 19th century, painters that went to Europe to study, particularly in Paris and Italy, when they went back made the same comment. And those were landscape painters. So it's not me alone. [They laugh.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. I believe in site-specific light very much.

Let's see. Can you—I'm going to just jump around a bit. Well, I want to go back to the idea of copying also, because the reason you were motivated to change your first art school in Uruguay was because it was based on the—

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JOSH T. FRANCO: —tradition of copying and master and apprentice. It made me think of something that I do with my own practice, but—and I've also assigned students when I've taught—is, to copy—is, you know, I think I treat art history as a medium often for myself and if I teach. And I like to—something I do myself is that I read passages. So Donald Judd—who I know you're not a fan of, but is important in my own training and path—just handwriting, transcriptions of 'Specific Objects' or others of his essays. Or Gloria Anzaldúa is another thinker who I just like to write out by hand her words. I've copied her entire books before. Or I have students read their words and, like, be in their voice. And it just strikes me that in some way formulaically that's a very conventional, conservative method [laughs] of learning, but something about it feels very radical when I do it. So if I read Agnes Martin's oral history for instance, but I read it out loud, putting those words in my body changes a lot of things about, you know, her relationship to the Southwest as a white woman coming from not there to mine as a Chicano male body that grew up there and has indigenous ties and all these things. So I think I just want to push back a little on the idea that copying is inherently conservative.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: It depends. I mean, what you are describing, I would say, What's the problem behind doing that? And—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Okay? So the act of reading aloud somebody else's text is basically irrelevant. It's just that. [00:02:00] And what you develop there may be memorizing the text and may be polishing your elocution and enjoying hearing yourself and there are many things going on there. But the actual issue you are interested in is transposing one personality into another and having that other personality inhabit you and then let that ripple into your personality and affect it and evolve it. Okay? Which is a valid proposition if you're into those things.

But then comes the question: Is reading aloud, or copying the words or whatever, the best way of doing that? Or would it be better to go to the place where they lived and dress like them or use makeup or visit the stores and buy the same food they used to eat or inhale the dust of the place? Do you understand? I mean, I'm not saying that one is better than the other, but suddenly, if you place yourself in the problem that is addressing, you see a whole array of possibilities. And then you pick the one that is best, and not only best but is best suited to you, and combine that. And then it may be that reading aloud is the best one, it may be that copying Michelangelo is the best one. But not necessarily. So what's wrong from a pedagogical point of view is not asking you to copy, but not giving you any reasons to do that that are persuasive and generate other stuff. [00:04:05] The way it's taught is, Okay, you copy, the more faithful you do it, the better you are. And that was the pedagogy.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, that helps me think further about it. So when I have asked students to do it, I think what compels me to do that is—because they haven't figured out the problems they're interested in, so if they put other people's problems in their bodies by voice or in their hand, they can see like, Is that a problem I want to keep thinking about or am I not interested at all? That's interesting.

But the question then becomes, you know, When does—because power is always important, and I think people's well-being is important, but when does—you know, the problems I'm interested in because my ego is interested in them, when does it—is an artist always solving problems for themselves, or are they ever solving them on behalf of other people as well? That's where it becomes political, I guess. The group—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah. Well, both. But the big thing in art today is that the artist doesn't think about that. So there's a confusion that something that may be pure therapy should be respected and bought by other people, though it's a very intimate, ephemeral experience. And the title 'artist' seems to give you the right to call anything you do art. And that means today that it's marketable, for that reason. So if I make a scribble on a napkin, it's a scribble, and if Picasso does it, it's a Picasso. But my scribble may be actually nicer than his. [00:06:02]

But—so, there's nothing wrong with therapy art, and I'm very crude about that. What's wrong is feeling the need that that has to be exhibited. Once you exhibit it, you have a responsibility. That responsibility is that, Okay, this may be therapy, it may have solved my problems, but there's enough in here for somebody else to profit from it. Therefore, I will share it. And that's an ethical set of decisions that lands on the receiver, not on your ego. And that's all. I keep writing about my puzzlement that art schools don't have courses in ethics while medical schools do.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, interesting.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Okay? Now, the medical school does have ethics because presumably you interfere with the body of somebody else. But so does art. And not only with a body but with the mind, with the emotions, with everything else. So the ethical responsibility of an artist should be much above the ethics of a doctor.

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's fascinating. Yeah, the ethical—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: That's common sense. [Laughs.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: It's common sense. Do you have—can you name some artists, either past or present, who you consider ethically minded? Who do this well?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: I don't know from where the question comes. If it's a narrative answer, I would say no. [00:08:00] If it's a consistent view, maybe [László] Moholy-Nagy, I think, was a very consistent artist in that. I mean, I rather can tell you people, I think, are not consistent. Like Sierra.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Sierra?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah, Santiago Sierra, who—some works are very strong and I like a lot and are dealing with ethics and political awareness, and others are part of the problem and are exploitative and opportunistic and so on. His compass [laughs] is all over the place, which is a pity because when it's on target, it's really on target. I think Chris Burden may be another one that is all over the place. And this is where the ego interferes with your work, or the lack of perception of the ego.

JOSH T. FRANCO: This must—you know, this outlook must come into play when you are in conversation with your gallerist, who is Alex Gray now. So, you know, how—I mean, I know that you have such great respect for how he's built his enterprise, but can you—how do you talk about, you know—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well, see, he is—

JOSH T. FRANCO: How do you balance their concerns, which are markets—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No, actually—

JOSH T. FRANCO: —to a degree.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: —I think he's more rigorous than I am.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: There was one instance, and we had a piece, a team piece of The New York Graphic Workshop. [00:10:00] This was Liliana Porter and José Guillermo Castillo, for the

Information show. We had a piece that was done for that show. And it was a table, and it announced a *Mail Exhibition* of ours and then people had to fill envelopes with their address. Our hope was to bring MoMA into bankruptcy because they had to buy stamps for each envelope [they laugh] but we didn't succeed. In any case, what the receiver would then get in the mail was exactly the same poster, but instead of saying, 'The New York Workshop announces *Mail Exhibit #14*,' what they received is that 'New York Graphic Workshop announced,' so in the past.

Now, there was some collector who, a couple of years ago, wanted to buy that installation. And I didn't have any problem, and Liliana didn't have any problem, José had died some years before, and Alexander said, 'No, [they laugh] that was site-specific piece that existed for that purpose, and to redo it today would be unethical. '

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's fascinating.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: And he rather did not make money. So I mean, really, he is exceptional.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, it makes sense why you work together.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: How did you meet him? How did that relationship begin?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: [Laughs.] I was thirty years without a gallery by choice. [00:12:00] Very disappointed with my previous experience. And one day, Alex sent me an email that he would like to work with me, and he came recommended by Jane Farver, who was a really close friend. So I wasn't interested, but I couldn't just dismiss it, out of respect to Jane. And I kept postponing and mentioning to people, and people said, 'Oh, you should. It's time that you have a gallery.' But I wasn't persuaded. Even Gabo, my son, said, 'You have to do it for the family,' [they laugh] and then I said, 'No.'

And then one day at lunch with Alfredo Jaar, who's also a close friend—and his studio is in the same building—and he said, 'Well, at least go and see the gallery.' At the time, the gallery was on the 10th floor and was very small. They were not bigger than this, and they had good artists, and Alfredo said, 'This is perfect for you.' [Laughs.] So I went home and sent an email without saying that I had seen the gallery and told him, 'Okay, I'll come by next week.' So I went, and he received me—this is a story I tell over and over, so it's not very original anymore, but he received me in an overwhelming way. Like, he said to me, 'You don't know what this means to me, this is an amazing event, and I'm so moved that you're here,' on and on. [00:14:04] I mean, he was like, dumping buckets of honey over me. And I nearly left, and I didn't because of Jane.

So we went to the office, and in the office, again, he said, 'This is a historical moment, you don't know how important'—'No, I don't.' [They laugh.] I mean, by then, I was pissed. And then he said, 'Okay, my mom [laughs] in the '60s bought a portfolio produced by Pratt Graphic Art Center, and there was a piece of yours in it. And when I was born, she put that piece over my crib, and the first thing I saw when I opened my eyes was your'—

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LUIS E. CAMNITZER: —'piece and then I grew up with that.' I said, 'Oh, fuck!' [They laugh.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: 'You're in.'

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: And then he asked me what I was doing in the present, so I said that I was working on a piece called the *Last Words*, which is statements, the last statements of people executed in Texas, which are online. And I strung together all the sentences in which the word 'love' is used, so it's—look, I mean, from 300 people, it sounds like a demented statement. And so he read it all and started crying, literally. [So, I said, 'Well, what's next?' and he said, 'Oh, I don't know, I mean, we're in the flirting stage.' So I said, 'Well, I've no time for flirting.' 'Okay' and he went to his calendar and said, 'I've marked March here.' It was a total setup and three months later I had a show with that. And this is like 10 years ago. -LC]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. So it's been good, in other words, yes?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Amazing.

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's great.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: And I mean, he sells something, next day, I have a check and never a problem of anything. And I trust him, and sometimes he says, 'Oh, that piece, that doesn't stay with me.' I mean, he's very honest, and I accept his criticism. And, no, I mean, it was worth waiting 30 years to have such relation. [00:02:02]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Can you talk about the experience of a retrospective a little bit? Because—and I guess you—like you framed it when we started this conversation, it's some kind of ending in your mind—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: —it sounds like. So when did the conversation start to form the retrospective?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well, luckily, I didn't have to do much. I mean, I had many retrospectives, so that's not the issue. I will say, my first retrospective was my first exhibit in which I showed [laughs] everything I had. But this one originally was going to be in MUSAC [Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Castilla y León], it's a museum in León in Spain, and then the director resigned for political issues with the board and the city. So we dropped it, and the curator was going to be Octavio Zaya. And then Octavio said, 'Okay, let's offer it to Reina Sofía.' And he did and then it worked out. But from the beginning to end, it was like, five years. And so in those five years, Octavio did study of the work, made his decisions, some I wasn't particularly enthusiastic about, but it was his job, not mine, so I stayed out of it.

And then I was interested in one project, which my relation with MUSAC had started in a show, a group show. [00:04:06] I had a piece called *Perfect Crime*. The *Perfect Crime* was a teleidoscope. Do you know what that is?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-mm [negative].

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: It's like—I have one here. Can I unplug myself?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Sure, yeah, yeah.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: It's like a kaleidoscope.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, kaleidoscope?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah, but a teleidoscope, instead of having little pieces of paper moving, has a lens that breaks up reality. So when you move, you get different patterns, but they're based on what you actually see. Okay, the description is enough.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Okay.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: And so the *Perfect Crime* was because we set up tripods with one of them in front of a very dramatic painting, and when you look at it, this becomes a very decorative mosaic of stuff. So my dream was to do that with the *Guernica*. And the first meeting I had with Manolo, with the director [of the Peine Sofia -LC], I said, 'Look, I'm here, I don't care about the retrospective. What I want to do is this piece with the *Guernica*.' And the *Guernica* in the Reina Sofía is like, I don't know, it's the Shroud of Turin or [they laugh] the *Mona Lisa* or—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, the sacred object, yeah.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: So you're not allowed to do anything, it's totally sacred, and everybody at the museum already said, 'He will say no.' [00:06:00] And he says, 'Okay, how is that piece?' So I described it. He said, 'Okay.' [Laughs.] So—

JOSH T. FRANCO: So you got to do it.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Not quite.

JOSH T. FRANCO: No?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: [He only let me make a postcard -LC] But in any case, I was happy, Octavio was happy, and the show took its form. They had an architect studying the work and redesigning the rooms and then the installation team, and they said, 'Okay, we have two weeks to set it up.' And I said, 'I need a month at least,' and they didn't budge. So I said, 'Okay, it's their problem.' And that two weeks included Columbus Day and weekends, so net, there were eight days I think.

So I didn't know how they would do it, but they did it. And they made decisions that were actually not—I was skeptical about it, but all the decisions were right and then it looked terrific. And I must say it was good that they made their decisions, and that I was out of it. So basically, I didn't do much for this, and it was a terrific show, and I felt very good. How important it is, I don't know, but I know that if I had to choose any museum today of the mega museums, that was it. I felt the Reina Sofía was a much more interesting place than MoMA or Pompidou or Tate. Because of the director, he is quite amazing. So they did a terrific catalog. [00:08:01] I don't know if you saw it?

JOSH T. FRANCO: I did, yeah. I have it here, actually. It's beautiful.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: In one meeting I said, 'Oh, and what I would like is a brass plaque [on the cover' -LC].

JOSH T. FRANCO: The brass plate is great! Yes.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: I mean, knowing that it wouldn't happen, but I said it and they did it. Everything was done so lovingly and so efficiently that it was breathtaking.

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's great. What was it like the moment you walked in and saw it done?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: It was very impressive. I was very distant. I mean, this is not, 'Oh, I'm great.' No. It has nothing to do with that. The guy in charge of light kept on this—an electric crane [laughs] going through all the rooms over and over, adjusting the lighting. He said—I don't know if he said it, but it was like he's composing music, so he wanted to go from a certain kind of light to another light regardless of the show. It was a construction on its own. It was really amazing. And the team hanging was impeccable. So in the end, it was seamless, it was gentle on the public, it was fun. At no moment was it boring or tedious or imposing. And there was one room, which were *Assignments*. I don't know if you saw pictures—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: —of that?

JOSH T. FRANCO: I read the description of the *Assignments* where people do—yeah. They really messed it up? [Laughs.]

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well, it ended up with huge circles of scribbles. I mean, you couldn't read anymore, but thousands of people just went and contributed. And—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Can you describe it? The basic description, for the recording, of what it is?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well, it started like an empty—a huge, empty room with 20-odd brass plaques, each with a text giving an assignment, an assignment without a clear solution. Asking—I would have to read them; I don't know. But if, I mean, if there's three states—gas, solid, and liquid, speculate about what would happen if [the stay is liquid. -LC]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Is it in here? You know, it may help. There's the catalog.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well, I wouldn't know even where to—[long pause while looking through catalog].

Oh, by the way, this is *Perfect Crime*.

Okay: 'The form of a sphere is determined by the limit of the radius. If the radius has an infinite length, how is it possible that it continues to be a sphere?' Okay. So people would answer that. I mean, I have no idea what I would answer, so—

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.] Yeah, I don't know.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: So they were all open speculations like that. I tried to bring things into the absurd or—okay, here. [00:12:08] 'Suppose that matter exists in three states: solid, liquid, and gas. Speculate about the consequences of a liquid sky and explain the destiny of clouds.' So again, that's a very vague statement.

In any case, we—when I did it for the first time in The New School some years ago, and people had index cards, which would be pinned on the wall. In the Reina, they didn't want to do that

and then [. . . -LC] somebody suggested, 'How about if we just hang a pencil and let people write on the wall?' Which was fine with me. What we didn't foresee is that the cord of the pencil became the radius. And that slowly over time, it built a huge circle of scribbles, which became much more powerful than the plaques. Which was one of my dreams because with the index cards, I hoped eventually the whole room would be papered, and the plaques would disappear visually, and similarly this happened here. It never happened with the index cards where people are very reverent about art and don't like to vandalize. But here, it was, like, hoping people would become vandals.

JOSH T. FRANCO: It also forces a composition.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, in a very—you know, to the degree you have formal concerns, that fulfilled them really nicely.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: So that was great. And then there was a piece, I had never had it shown—I didn't have a clue if it would work—which was taking von Clausewitz, his *On War* text, which is still used at West Point, I think. [00:14:23] I took out sentences I felt were interesting and then the sentences were combined with objects. It was a mixture of antiwar and sarcasm, and a very complex thing. It was like 80 texts accompanied by Google Map locations of US military bases in Latin America and—

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LUIS E. CAMNITZER: —objects. It was an unpredictable piece, even if I had planned it out on paper, and it worked, so it was very nice.

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's great. You said the retrospective was an end of something?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well, I don't know if I can have a better show than that, and I'm really more interested in education anyway, so my energy is on educational issues and not on producing work. I'm now working on something I call the *Infinity Project*, which is like knitting, like Penelope, in which I'm going through the dictionary, and for each word, I look in Google Maps to see if there is a physical location. And if there is, I take that piece and put it as an illustration of the word, which means all the other words have to move. So it's a very tedious, long, thoughtless process, [they laugh] which I won't ever end because 'A' alone takes me about 300 pages. So.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. So you'll live forever?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Hmm?

JOSH T. FRANCO: You'll live forever now. [Laughs.]

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well, maybe, but it doesn't matter where I finish because the point is made in the first page. But it's a good interruption. I do something, get bored, then I stop, do that, get bored, then I go back to the other. So I'm never bored, which is really the point.

JOSH T. FRANCO: You know, the fact that you're using Google makes me think about the Internet and how—you know, the utopian visions for it at the beginning, what's happened to it since, what it's meant for pedagogy and for teaching. [00:02:03] And you've lived, you know, on both sides, a world without it and a world with, very fully on both sides. Can you—you know, that's—that experience is never going to be had again, of living on both sides of it.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: I'm not sure. I never forget my grandmother telling me, Oh [laughs] the trauma of cars. She was born in the 19th century. That lamp belonged to my grandfather. It started with gas. So.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, so maybe it wasn't such a radical shift. It was a new tool that entered?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah—no, I—I'm just reacting to you. You're saying it won't happen again?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: I think it will. I mean, someday it will—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, breaks certainly will, but the Internet—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Oh, the Internet?

JOSH T. FRANCO: —specifically.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So can you talk about, you know, maybe your own realizations of what it might mean for information, education?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Or your first time on the Internet.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No—yeah. One thing I'm finding in this Google Map project is that most of the addresses are commercial, so [laughs] neoliberalism took over even something that supposedly is objective. But yeah, I can see already all the treasons that are happening. Once you have an Internet and you have online courses, for instance, you would assume, okay, now, education finally will be free, accessible to everybody, and find its own true unhampered language. No.

JOSH T. FRANCO: No.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: It's still lectures. It makes it easier for faculty not to have to be in classrooms. [00:04:03] The methodology is exactly the same. The attitude of the student is a consumer attitude of, 'Okay, it's this product that I buy,' and there's no development unless there's profit attached from the institution point of view. So that didn't go very well. And whatever is free slowly will disappear anyway. So I'm not very optimistic.

JOSH T. FRANCO: I don't think many people are. We haven't talked about your curating much yet. And, you know, I think—well, and before we started recording, we were talking about Ana Mendieta, who I'm always eager to put on the record too since she can't put herself on it. So maybe that's a good curatorial project to think about first because she couldn't—I guess she was—you know, collaborated with you, consulted on artist lists?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well, there was this one instance in which I had a retrospective in Havana. [They laugh.] And in a room next to the exhibit room, they were discussing planning the first Havana Biennial. And then at some point, they asked me to join and give my thoughts about it, and it was actually very critical. They wanted to do the biennial—I don't know, had four months to do it or something, so I thought it was crazy. And then they asked me to select artists living in the US to participate in the biennial. [00:06:06] I felt it was too much of a responsibility for me, so I asked if it could be a team, and the team was, in fact, Ana and Carla Stellweg. So together, we selected people. That's how Juan Sánchez came into my life.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Right. I want to talk about Juan, but can you talk about—if you can recall, how did you set criteria? Because you were kind of in a rush, it sounds like, you know—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well, the criteria was people we liked [they laugh] and people who were willing to actually show in Cuba in a moment in which that wasn't very easy. So there was some political commitment of sorts.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Right, yeah, yeah. There must have—people must have said no?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: It's actually—no, I don't think anybody refused, actually.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, great. That's great. So do you—can you recall, I guess, the working relationship? So how—you know, between you and Carla Stellweg and Ana Mendieta, did you divide the labor in any certain way? Or was it all just, We met and we discussed?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No, well, suggestions, and I sort of implemented them. So it was very informal. But we were friends from before. I mean, with Carla, we were friends since 1970 or so, the time in which we were sort of fighting against what's now the Americas Society. [00:08:03] And with Ana, Ana was a student and lover of a friend of mine, which was Hans Breder in Iowa. And I showed there—I don't know what year—'76 or so, and met Ana there. And then when Ana came to New York and I was still married with Liliانا, we became sort of the parents of Ana [they laugh] in New York, until she got hooked up with Carl Andre. So. But it was a close, close

relation. Also when she was in Italy in The Academy of Rome, she came—I have a place in Italy and she came to visit [. . . -LC].

JOSH T. FRANCO: How did you all balance—or how—were you all conscious of the balance between US-based Cuban artists for the biennial and people who still lived in Cuba?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well, most of them are anti-Cuba, so we wouldn't—in that group, there weren't any Cuban Americans except Ana.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Okay. And then that brought you Juan? Ana put Juan Sánchez on?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: And then what?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Ana Mendieta put Juan Sánchez on your radar at that moment?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well, Ana was—Ana had been in Cuba for *Volumen Uno*, the big show that changed Cuban aesthetics. [00:10:00] And we actually coincided in Cuba. I went for the First Congress of Intellectuals, and she at the time was, for the Center of Cuban Studies, a tour guide for the people, travel groups organized by the Center. And so we coincided. She introduced me to several Cuban artists, and then together, we came up with the idea of inviting Cuban artists to my college. And also Ana was—I had hired her as an adjunct in my program. So with her, we selected Bedia, Rodríguez Brey, and Garciandía as candidates to come to my college.

And then miraculously that happened. That is, there were so many stars that had to get aligned. We got Ford Foundation to give money, we got the State Department to allow Cubans to come in, we got—the Ministry of Culture in Cuba authorized this, and we got ISA [Instituto Superior de Arte] to let—Bedia was teaching there and I think Garciandía too—have some semester free. I think—a week later, nothing would have worked. It was that moment, it worked, so. And that was with the help of Ana.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. [00:12:00] So, can you talk—I think that's—I was struck by reading—you mentioned the Americas Society, there's also the OAS, the Organization of American States. And I hadn't thought critically until I read something you said about the conduits artists used or were used by to come between Latin America and the US. And there's many artists who ended up in the Archives because they were brought by the OAS and then made their footprint here, like María Luisa Pacheco comes to mind, for instance. And—yeah, so I think—I mean, I don't know what the question is. You've already—you know. I guess if you can elaborate more on what the critique is. I mean, I think it could be assumed, but it would be nice to hear it elaborated.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Of the OAS?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: The critique was that the OAS was invented by the US to cement the Monroe Doctrine. And it was—it kicked out Cuba from the family of nations and the person in charge of art was a Cuban, Gómez-Sicre, who was very fanatic politically. And, I don't know, with my generation it was a given that it was a place that we were not interested [laughs] in having anything to do with.

So at some point, the Guggenheim came up, and the Guggenheim at the time had two-tier fellowships, one for the mainstream and one more to sponsor promising artists in the periphery or in Latin America at least. [00:14:04] So I think, I don't know where precisely, one critic in Uruguay who also was a teacher of mine had the idea I should present myself to the Guggenheim. And he was friends with the cultural attaché of the US in Uruguay, who was a very decent guy, that Kennedy left over. Purcell was his name, actually. And so I think that guy must have engineered—I mean, I was 20, 21 or so—I was way too young to get that.

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LUIS E. CAMNITZER: And I also had mixed feelings about it, and then I got it, surprisingly. In '61, I got it, and at that point, I had decided just in case—I signed all the declarations in favor of the Cuban Revolution. I got my hands on [they laugh] to clean my conscious. But it was one of those decisions that—where, with the OAS, it was clear. I mean, I never would have considered it. Here, it was more ambiguous, but it also was—in theory, was defined as giving you a year to do whatever you wanted without being accountable. So you could spend a year sitting on a bench and scratching yourself, and that was fine. And in fact one Argentinian artist spent all his money

on one big dinner. [They laugh.] And—

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's a huge dinner.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: A huge dinner, yeah. Well, a big scandal, and he declared it a work of art. Anyway, I then found out that in fact the Guggenheim had to clear the invitations of [laughs] Latin American artists with the State Department to avoid the embarrassment of giving a grant and then not having people come in. So I came, and I came six months, and then I went back because of many reasons, but one was the art school, we were working on the curriculum. And then in '64, I came back to finish the six months. And I'm here since then. [00:02:02]

[So then here, there was the Inter-American Foundation focused on Latin American artists, which was an interesting place because the board had Edward Albee and intellectuals like that, and a broad range politically. A mixed bag in a big range of politically, I mean from center to left and not from center to right. -LC]

And they had—I don't know what year—'67, I think it was—a symposium in Venezuela, which looking back was quite amazing, the people that were there, and mixing Latin Americans with US artists. But then the Inter-American Foundation became the Center for Inter-American Relations, and that board suddenly became problematic. There was Thomas Mann, Lincoln Gordon, all the diplomats that had engineered coups in Latin America. And the CEO of Time-Life, and Exxon and—I mean, all the enemies of the people were on that board.

And then they organized a show, and the curator was Stanton Catlin, who organized the joint show that had started at Yale of Latin American and US avant-garde art from early 20th century. That show was so biased in the sense that Latin American artists in the show seemed like, on purpose, in the dates placed later than the Americans, although they had work that sometimes preceded. Okay? [00:04:18] So that started a movement of boycott and trying to get rid of Catlin, and actually Catlin then resigned. I don't think because of that but more because he had an alcohol problem. And then came in van Weeren-Griek, who had been the director of the Jewish Museum. And for some reason, the boycott was reorganized, but not against him. He actually then resigned in support of our boycott, and we demanded the removal of support, which obviously wouldn't happen. But yeah, what prompted it was that the Center had organized a week for Latin American—which, prestigious galleries would show a Latin American artist. We felt that it was offensive, and it was ghetto-building.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Tokenizing, yes.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: So. And that is what produced the Latin American Museum and eventually MICLA, [Movimiento por la Independencia Cultural de Latinoamérica], which were two militant groups against the Center. And then the Center is switched to become Americas Society. And I think I'm the only person left that's still boycotting. [00:06:02] [They laugh.] But that's okay.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Were you around—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: In an odd way, I always have been friends of the directors of the galleries. So it's not with the technocrats, but it's with the higher-up.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Right. Are you keeping up with the current board peoples and the artists?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: I have no idea who is on the board, but José Guillermo was working there in literature, and we were close friends, and there was an Australian guy, I now forgot the name, who was a very nice guy. And Gabriela Rangel is a friend, and she's now in MALBA [Museum of Latin American Art of Buenos Aires] in Buenos Aires and wants to make a show of mine, but couldn't do it in New York. And the new one is Aimé, Aimé Iglesias.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Aimé Iglesias, yeah. [. . . -LC] Yes. But that—you know, I think that's one interesting thing about your career is how, let's see, you've, I don't know by choice or by accident, avoided the ghettoizing, the ethnicizing. And I feel kind of ambivalent about that because I think a lot of artists are happy to solve their problems through making themselves visible by their ethnicity first. So the idea of the US Latino, you know, that's come into formation recently.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well, there are two things here. One is that the whole notion of Hispanic and Latino and so on is the product of US racism. So. [00:08:05] When I'm asked about race in forms, I always write 'human.' I refuse to enter that game. That's on one hand. On the other, I don't

consider myself a US artist and refuse to be in shows that are labeled US artist. I am a Latin American artist, so I have ghettoized myself. I'm a regional artist. I'm not—I don't believe in universal artist, a universal language. I think that's basically an imperial construction. I believe in dialects, I don't believe in master languages. So I did not evade—I mean, if somebody says, 'Are you a Latino artist?' I would say, 'I guess so.' I mean, if that's the categories you want to organize, that's where I fit best. I'm not an Anglo artist by any means.

That sometimes creates other problems. Like I had the problem in college at some point in which I listed myself as Hispanic at the time. And the African-American faculty objected because being Jewish and German-born, claiming to be Hispanic, I was usurping a post that otherwise would go to a minority. I was very offended because—although the argument had some logic in it, there were two flaws. [00:10:13] One, [laughs] on a different level, they wanted me to resign my cultural [upbringing -LC] and basically my identity for the sake of a racist economic structure, which they were suffering. And the suffering part was important. But I had to now value: What's more? My culture or their plight? And that was a no-exit situation. I mean, I defended my culture. I often have to protest the labels. In a show, it says, 'Born in Germany, working in the US.' [They laugh.] And although—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Technically true, but not—right.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Everything else disappears from the map. Okay? That's where the oral history [they laugh]—the anecdotes become perilous, become dangerous. So.

But more lately, I have been—I'm working on a neighborhood project in Uruguay, and I realized that many of the neighborhoods I never have been in. So that brought up a different issue, which is, yes, I am a Latin American artist, but looking close at it, I only know maybe half of Latin America. And I certainly don't have contact with all ethnicities, so it becomes a little bit presumptuous to say I'm Latin American. [00:12:02] I'm more secure if I say I'm Uruguayan. And as an Uruguayan, I have to recognize that out of the 19 departments or provinces, I know two or three and never have been in the others. So, ultimately, I am a Montevideo artist. And then I realized a year or two years ago, because of this project, that out of the neighborhoods in Montevideo, I know two or three out of maybe 15, so I cannot really say—

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.]

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: —I am a Montevideo artist. I'm really an artist from Pocitos, which is my neighborhood in which I went to kindergarten, elementary school, high school, architectural school, and art school. They were all in that neighborhood, by accident. So I should have a passport [they laugh] from the neighborhood, and that's it. And then, to that concept, being away for 55 years, the public of that neighborhood [laughs] changed a lot. So even if I address the Pocitos audience, that audience isn't there anymore. So who am I? So I know more who I'm not [they laugh] than who I am. So that's a big—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Do you consider yourself a New Yorker?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No.

JOSH T. FRANCO: No?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: I consider myself lucky that I am in New York. It could be worse. [They laugh.] But no, I am still alien. With Bush the Second, I—after 40 years of green card, I took citizenship, but I did it in order to avoid family split. [00:14:08] That is, with that Bush, suddenly, the family unit didn't count anymore. You could be deported no matter—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Right, I remember that.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Okay. And that became dangerous. Until then, I was protected. 'Oh, my children are American, my wife is American,' and that was a protection. But now, I could be deported no matter what, or we could be on a plane kidnapped, and Americans on one side, non-Americans on the other. So there were many issues here of separation that would be solved by taking citizenship. So I did bite the bullet. It was quite traumatic.

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LUIS E. CAMNITZER: And I miss my green card because I was an alien resident, which is exactly what I am. I'm from somewhere else that landed here without losing the somewhere-else-ness.

And I had a document, I still have the card, and the passport erases that. So.

JOSH T. FRANCO: You're melted into the pot. [Laughs.]

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well, no. [Laughs.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Only on the paper.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: I'm hidden in the sauce, which is different. [They laugh.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, you know, in the US, the—I wonder how—I think people tend to either be seen or see themselves organized by country of origin. You know, there's like—Juan is Nuyorican-Puerto Rican, Ana is from Cuba. You know, I'm curious if you had much interaction with Chicano communities over the years? But being from Uruguay is such a minority of a minority, so I wonder how those, like, inter-Latino, Latin American distinctions in the US have—have they impacted you at all?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well, what's interesting is, when the college started, the Old Westbury—I entered the second year, so it was still in planning. And very quickly, there were many Puerto Ricans or Nuyoricans. And for me, it was natural to work together—we were all Latin American—and for them, it wasn't. Southern South America is Europe for them. And a little bit, after discussions, they gave in, but not fully. So that's on one end. [00:02:00] It's something you feel in Museo del Barrio also.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, I was going to ask about—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: And it's—

JOSH T. FRANCO: —Museo del Barrio.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: —still an active discussion. I showed there twice, and it was debated. Susana Torruella tried to break that down, and she was able to, but it wasn't a firm achievement. Anyway. There were a few Uruguayans here at least. I mean, there are many but not—they're mostly economic exiles, and the political exiles went to Sweden and Australia, not to the US. So some artists were here, and there are some I was close with. Fonseca, I was very close with.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Fonseca?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Gonzalo Fonseca. He was a Torres-García student but really the best of the group, a terrific guy, but he died. I cannot say there was a big, big group. The Latin American Museum and MICLA, brought together a lot of [Latin Americans -LC]. But many went back to their countries. So that was a moment of coalescence, of unexpected—unexpected because the political awareness of Latin Americans that came to the US wasn't very high. Well, it's not the first choice. So the people that came were rather conservative or apolitical.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Did you meet many Chicano artists in your career?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: I was friendly with Jiménez, who was one of my choices for the Havana Biennial.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Luis Jiménez, yes? [00:04:01]

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah. But not many, no.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. Well, how are you doing, Luis?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: In what sense?

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.] Like, you need a restroom break, or—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: I would like to go to pee, yes. [Laughs.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yes. Okay. We could take a break.

[Audio break.]

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Okay.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Okay, ready?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Okay, so I think I just want to dig into some of the, you know, relationships with other significant artists you've had. So maybe we can think about just your relationship with Liliana Porter, for instance. You know, how that developed—yeah. The story of when you met.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well, it developed into a divorce. [They laugh.] No, we met in '64. I was working at—doing my work at Pratt Graphic Center, which was an outpost of Pratt Institute in Manhattan dedicated to [printmaking -LC]. And she was on her way to Paris, stopped in New York, and came to see the place. Somebody had recommended it. She didn't speak English, so, you know, they called me to translate, and we became friends. And she stayed on and then we—there was—Luis Felipe Noé was my roommate actually. We had an apartment together. So we became a trio of friends, and then eventually we married. The relation was, like, 14 years. [00:06:03] I mean, it was long. And we worked together a lot with José Guillermo Castillo, who was from Venezuela, who had come to the US as director of the Venezuelan Pavilion at the World's Fair and then stayed on.

Together, we had met a dentist who was interested [they laugh] in printmaking, Julian Firestone, and he asked us to join into his studio—that he would learn printmaking from us and we would have his studio. And that's what created the New York Graphic Workshop, and then we had students there and worked as a group. It's there where we did the shift from sort of traditional printmaking into breaking the rules and becoming conceptual.

Then we—Liliana and I moved to New Jersey. I was teaching at Fairleigh Dickinson University. And then Old Westbury started. Fairleigh Dickinson was a very racist place. It only had, I think, 12 African-American students in 1200 or—I mean, a minimum percentage—and during the summers, they had a high school equivalency program for minorities that had a tough time living there. But in that process, I became friends with the teachers, some of them, and one of them was in the planning group of Old Westbury, so he invited me to be interviewed. [00:08:13] It was a long process, it doesn't matter. In any case, I was hired and offered to start the art program. It was a really interesting place for the first two, three years, and then it slowly went downhill.

And with Liliana, we kept working together, and by '79, we—'78, we separated. '78. It doesn't matter to go into the details, but it took a while till we reconnected. And now, we're close friends, and she is like an aunt to my children, so we're really very good.

JOSH T. FRANCO: With all the years of perspective, what do you see as connection points between your art practices? Or do you see connection points?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: In the group, while we were working as a group, I always defined that José was a diplomat, I was a preacher, and Liliana was a poet. [They laugh.] It was a great team.

JOSH T. FRANCO: What does the preacher bring that is not there?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Oh, I wrote sermons about—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh. [They laugh.] Have you ever done performance art, Luis?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Okay. That just seems, like—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: I never would—

JOSH T. FRANCO: —ripe for performance and—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: I am very shy and misanthropic. So. [They laugh.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: I know a lot of misanthropic performance artists. [00:10:02]

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Oh, yeah?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. It's the way to abuse us all for some of them, I think. Yeah. So—but no connection like—and I guess I mean, like, the problems. Do you have problems in common that

you're both trying to solve?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well, I think we're both influenced by Borges. We are both interested in, to some extent, what we call *arte boludo*. I mean, already in the '60s, we came up with that term. It was like 'dumb art,' so the art that is unexpressive and draws you in to project your own expression. So we had that in common, and there were moments in which I thought we should work collectively, but that didn't work, or it didn't happen rather.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. You have this phrase, 'I collect museums.' Can you say what that means?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Probably it's, again, 'Where's the power?' [Laughs.] And I just found last week the receipt of my first sale to MoMA. There was an Uruguayan printmaker living in the US, who at the time was probably the most famous woodcutter in the US, Antonio Frasconi. [00:12:02] He had come to Uruguay for a visit, and we met there, and he told me that if I came to the US, I should call him, and he would introduce me to people, and he did. He was an amazing person, he took me to MoMA and introduced me to Bill Lieberman, who was the curator of prints. And he made me show him prints—I mean, we were together—and Lieberman bought two prints of mine, which arbitrarily were \$50 each, but he only paid 25, because the museum only paid 50 percent of the price.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Because they say so? Okay.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well, it's a poor institution, and they need artists to subsidize the institutions. It's the policy still today. And I think there—although I felt, Okay, this is good for me, [laughs] I can claim I'm in the collection—but I think then, I started thinking about, 'Hmm, there's something wrong here, and I better collect museums myself rather than be collected.' And I started purposely trying to get into collections—as long as the name of the museum was in the title, I would donate or have somebody donate or ideally try to sell, but that wasn't happening. It was like the credit card theory, that the first credit card is very difficult to get when you don't have credit, but once one gives you a card, the others send the cards free. [00:14:00] So the museums started multiplying, and by now, I must have close to 50—I don't know, 45, 50. I don't pursue it actively anymore. So.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Does the American Art Museum have your work?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No, I don't think so. What is that?

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: American Art Museum?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Smithsonian American Art Museum.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Oh, Smithsonian?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No, I don't think so.

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: But they have to buy now. I won't—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Sure, yeah.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: I'm difficult to get. [They laugh.] It's a prestigious collection.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Well, because you built your power through the collecting.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Right.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yes, exactly. So what's your relationship been with MoMA since that first—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: With MoMA?

JOSH T. FRANCO: With MoMA, yeah.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: As an institution, I don't like it. Many of the curators are friends. I mean, by

now—

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LUIS E. CAMNITZER: —your generation is so formed by my generation, so they are a much better place than the Liebermans and people like that. So I like a lot—I like a lot of them actually, and we're good. [. . . -LC] I haven't seen the new MoMA yet, but from what I've read, it's—finally, they got it. [Laughs.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's great. I haven't been either yet, actually.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah. And no, so nice people there.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Have you worked with the New Museum?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No.

JOSH T. FRANCO: No. They just have such an emphasis on the education that—I mean, that's kind of surprising actually.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: They have what?

JOSH T. FRANCO: They have such an emphasis on education.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: On education.

JOSH T. FRANCO: It's so central.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah, I have no—

JOSH T. FRANCO: More than others.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: —connection with that.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. What have been some standout museum relationships that you've had, either for good or for bad?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well, I have a very good relation with the Museum of Modern Art in São Paulo, which has a really good educational group. They see the public as users and as basically handicapped in different degrees.

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.] In a good way, you're saying? In a—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No.

JOSH T. FRANCO: No?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No, I mean, in the sense, okay, you have in one extreme, the blind and the deaf and dumb, and in the other extreme, the ignorant. And in that range, there are infinite degrees of being handicapped. [00:02:03] So they see themselves as serving handicapped people, which changes the view from sophisticating the unprepared. So it's not the patronizing thing, but it's really a—before Bolsonaro, they would get funds from both the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Health and so on, and the educational team has to be fluent in sign language. So it's a very enlightened place. I like them a lot.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Well, they took the ethics into account.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, the ethics of art.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: And they also bought the *A Museum is a School*. [They laugh.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, great. Is that an editioned work?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah, but it's an open edition. I mean, you can either rent it for a year or buy it for very little money. It's—now you want the story of that, right? [Laughs.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yes, please.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Would you want a glass of water? I think I need—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Water sounds good, yeah. Let me pause.

[Tape stops, restarts.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: So you 're going to tell the story of, I guess, how *A Museum is a School* is acquired.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Okay. What happened, I was working—I don't know if you know about Biennial Mercosul? In—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Just tell us, for the—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Okay. That Mercosul has its own biennial, and in 2007, Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro was the chief curator, and he sort of created the term 'pedagogical curator' and invited me to be that. [00:04:16] And what was remarkable about it was that instead of having a show finished, packaged for presentation and then see how do you deal with it from an educational point of view, we planned the show from the very beginning with education in mind. So it's—he selected the artist, but the way we handled it is, we asked the artist to submit a paragraph in which they described their research, what problems they were solving. And in the show, we put that paragraph close to the work without interfering and asked the public to evaluate if the work was a good solution to the problem, and to get suggestions. And so suggestions were exhibited on the same wall with the statement. So we started a process of public educating the public in a continual way.

And then also, we—I made exercises, assignments for schools, in 50 schools in the—no, schools in 50 cities of the state of Rio Grande do Sul. Got them, and students worked on them. They were inspired by the work of the biennial but not reproducing the work. And then they connected what they did with the assignments with what they saw in the biennial. Anyway, it was successful to the point that the biennial was loved by the public as a pedagogical biennial. [00:06:08] It's not the title we gave it, but [people named it. -LC]

Because of that then the Iberê Camargo Foundation that just had opened a museum asked me to be the pedagogical curator of the museum. That worked through Skype and emails. And at some point, there was a show of Latin American Constructivism, and I suggested to mix the work and the show with *Assignments*—that is, with works that were ambiguous, that on first take you didn't know if they were part of the show or if it was an exercise. And on the second take, you would realize that it wasn't, and there would be [appropriate -LC] signage. But the director and the curator of the show didn't like the idea, and at some point, the director said, 'This is a museum, not a school.' So I got very upset and eventually resigned. But I went home—and I mean, that happened face-to-face—and I took [a picture of -LC] the façade of the museum and put that sentence. The full sentence is: 'The museum is a school, the artist learns to communicate, and the public learns to make connections.' And that became the new façade and I sent it to him. That was my revenge, but in the process, I realized that it was actually a nice piece for me.

So shortly after, I had the show that was being planned in Museo del Barrio of the Daros Collection. [00:08:15] I asked Deborah Cullen, who was the curator, 'What about if we put that on the façade of the museum?' And she liked the idea, and we did it, and it's still there actually.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: When they installed it, they said seven months guarantee, [laughs] and now 11 years later, it's still holding up, so it was pretty good.

In any case, the idea of the project was that the design—first of all, the font of the text had to be the official font used by the institution, and not my choice. Second, that the designer used by the museum decided how to present it, and that the museum had to produce a postcard with the text that was an institutional postcard and not an art piece postcard. And that it wouldn't be listed as a work by Luis Camnitzer; it just would have my copyright. And that in effect was a contract between the institution and the public in which it announced what the museum is about, so that the public could decide. In case that was not being done, they could sue the museum for fraudulent advertising. And I am out of the picture, so it's not my work of art. Okay?

So that's the piece. [00:10:01]

JOSH T. FRANCO: But what's interesting is some of the success of it—whether, you know, it's fulfilling the mission—is up to the audience themselves.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: So, you know, it could be the fault of them not setting up things right, but it could be your fault for not making the connections as well. You're—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: It could be your own laziness of looking—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: I agree.

JOSH T. FRANCO: —and thinking.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: I am hoping that some—

JOSH T. FRANCO: I mean, I think about—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: —public will sue.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yes, yeah, yeah. [They laugh.] Well, but it also opens up the possibility for a museum indicting its audience for, 'Well, you're—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: For not doing it.

JOSH T. FRANCO: —not thinking critically enough,' which I—that's the most refreshing part to me is because it is—everything is so set up for passive, passivity. And yeah, you know, some things you're responsible for. [Laughs.]

You know, categories are useful to a degree and then useless, but over time, you know, these categories of relational art, social practice art, have become formulated and turned into departments and formalized. Have you seen your work brought into those, put in relation to those? We can talk about relational art first, I guess.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: There's a—well, let's say social practice, which is a bit broader. I have a little bit of doubt about that, in terms that it's not really solving a couple of issues. One, it ends up servicing more the artist than the public, and artists use it for their own promotion, and I think that is an oxymoronic situation. And the other is that mostly what I see is enhanced social service, which means filling a gap that social service should be doing and not art, and not really adding anything to making meanings; it doesn't make new meanings. [00:12:26] And therefore for me, it's debatable if it's art at all. I think art should only be considered art if something happens that hasn't happened before and only can happen because of the presence of whatever; action or object, it doesn't matter. But there should be a learning experience and not just a confirmation experience or transmitting information. And that's where I find relational art and social practice a little bit lagging behind.

JOSH T. FRANCO: You know, it also kind of invokes art that relies on juxtaposition to point out social injustice, so that it puts two things side by side to make a social injustice—something visible but doesn't always cross the line into making something new. It just is like—points out a problem we all already know, and okay, yes, yes, you just reminded me of how I'm affected by racism every day, thank you.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah, or it's just advertising.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Or it's just [laughs] advertising, yeah. But now so—there's probably more to say about social practice, but I said 'juxtaposition' and reminded myself of a work that I really appreciate of yours, the one with *Spiral Jetty* next to—what is it next? [00:14:04] Now, I'm forgetting.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: It's [the mark of -LC] a platoon in Vietnam.

JOSH T. FRANCO: And yeah, the—you know, it's like—so let's think about what the—what the new meaning is that comes out of that, because it—that is this the base—the base strategy is here

are two things that are happening simultaneously. But it's also not—it wasn't an easy observation. It wasn't an obvious observation. I think that's the start of it.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No, actually, the [laughs]—I mean, the first association was the obvious one. Both are land art of sorts, and one is done in a destructive way by the Army in a weird—leaving a souvenir, an unwanted souvenir, by deforesting a forest in the shape of [the emblem of the - LC] platoon—

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LUIS E. CAMNITZER: —that only can be seen from a helicopter, so it's really an inside joke in the worst sense. And then leaving the *Spiral Jetty* is an ego expression as far as I'm concerned. So what called my attention was how the same hidden ideology was shared by an art-ignorant group invading a country and an artist trying to become prominent. After putting them together eventually, I realized that [laughs] they were produced the same month and year, which made it actually creepy beyond—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Very creepy, yes. [They laugh.] Yeah, yeah, yeah.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: But it wasn't immediately obvious to me. I mean, I somewhere connected the dates after doing it.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. And just to—the ideology, to spell it out, is that it's about leaving one's mark but also leaving one's mark as—it's domination over land for sure, physically, but also culture in the more abstract way. Is that the only kind of moment you've meditated on Smithson very much? Or has he been in your thinking in other places?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah. I never saw Smithson as a major artist. I like the mirrors planted in the field. I think that's very poetic and evokes a lot of stuff. And in that sense, I consider him a one-piece artist like Méret Oppenheim with the fur cup. I mean, she is more complex than that, but that's a known icon. [00:02:00] But I—in that sense, I say Donald Judd is more [laughs] interesting than Smithson. It's just a problematic I'm not particularly interested in. But—so no, I think Smithson is a very uneven artist. I mean, he has a lot of—in the retrospective, you see a lot of weakness.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Just a point of interest is that Smithson—we have 6,000 collections in the Archives; Robert Smithson's papers are the second or third most requested.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Oh, yeah?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Isn't that—it's very—it's a little bit cultish, it's very interesting, but—well, now, I just want to think about land art too because you knew Ana Mendieta and thinking about how she made her mark on land in relation to those other land artists. It's kind of a fascinating thing to me. So I'm thinking about the *Rupestrian* series, for instance.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: It's funny, but I like much more her *Siluetas*. The Jaruco pieces, I never liked too much to be honest. And then the latest ones, which is also clay things, at the time, I didn't like at all. And actually, she sent me photographs to see if I could get her into a gallery in Switzerland, who was not impressed with them. And now, I saw—because of the MoMA show, I saw a reproduction of one, and it's pretty nice, so [they laugh] that's all. Yes, I don't know if I just was dense and didn't get it at the time, or if I got used to it and tamed into it. [00:04:02] I don't know. But her pieces—actually, the pieces she did while she was with Hans Breder, I think, are still the strongest.

JOSH T. FRANCO: And which ones are those?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Oh, like, the fire outlines and—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yes, yeah, those are very nice. Do you remember the last time you spoke with her?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: I don't know if it's absolutely the last time, but it was close to—she was complaining about having to go to her apartment to shower. So. So I don't know. I don't think I spoke to her after she married. So the last time, or what remained in my mind, was her complaining about two things, about the phone bills that were clear proofs that he [Carl Andre - JF] had lovers, and his obsessive not wanting any trace of her in the apartment.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: So she had to go. She had an apartment on Sullivan Street, had to go back for that. Now, I mean she wasn't an easy person to live with, so I am sure they had a good fight, but—and they probably were both drunk. But I was surprised when she married because everything until then was against it. I felt that one weakness of Ana was that she wanted to be successful. [00:06:06] And I always suspected that being with Carl was a step, and the irony is that Carl looked exactly like Hans. I mean, it was like a double, and we used to kid her on this. [They laugh.] He's like the Hans of the East Coast. [They laugh.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: She had a type.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: She was also so connected to A.I.R. [Artists in Residence] Gallery, which makes me wonder too if she had investments in feminism, and how that's been important to her?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well, and *HERESIES* magazine, she also—yeah. No, it's true.

JOSH T. FRANCO: In some sense, you know, feminism is an attempt to solve very real problems. [They laugh.] So, you know—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Maybe Latin Americanism too, I don't know. [Laughs.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yes, yeah. So I don't—so maybe you don't have much to say about feminism as a political movement, but, you know—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No, I also don't want to gossip about Ana. [Laughs.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Well, yeah, sure. It doesn't have to be about Ana. I actually was trying to move away from the gossipy aspect, you know.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No, I think all those—all those things, once they become fad, have a faddish aspect, they also become open to be used as stepping-stones. It's unavoidable.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. You do have this kind of, like—you know, your relationship to movements is interesting, or it's interesting to track them through your practice because you do somehow maintain an outsidership to them. [00:08:08] So Pop art, you know, you can see the strategic kind of commonalities. And really it's by your own doing because you are prolific in your writing and speaking that you've managed to both say, Yes, okay, some strategies are in common, but I'm outside it for these reasons. And that seems to have served you fine too, you know? And I just—you know, what would be the interesting way to think about this? If there's a hierarchy of these -isms and movements, you know, which ones are the furthest out from you and which ones are the closest?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well, conceptualism for me is—but in part it's because conceptualism—and that's where I differentiate it from Conceptual art. For me, conceptualism is a strategy that is open-ended in terms of what's being produced, while Conceptual art is more stylish and therefore limited. And there's also a deeper problem with Conceptual art that—or with many of the American Conceptual artists—in which there's a search for a hidden essence of art, and the object is being peeled away to get to that essence, and that's a spiritualist, for me a little bit obscurantist, process. And conceptualism being a strategy, it's open to political action and therefore much more opportunistic, in quotation marks, of what's being used and for what. [00:10:04] And I find that more interesting and closer to what I'm interested in.

But there is an issue with both conceptualism and Conceptual that I find more important than any other -ism. While the -isms in the 20th century were focusing on partial parts of art and trying to expand them into the whole notion of art—like Cubism took a fragment of perception and blew it up to be a whole artistic movement—in the Conceptual and conceptualist approaches, it gives predominance to problem-formulation, and therefore, it also changed our view of art history, at least mine. And I look at everything, 'Is this an interesting problem, is it well solved, can it be solved better?' And therefore it acts as a filter of what is interesting today and what's not, and allows you to identify the power of icons used negatively. And icons in general—I mean, icons in terms of power or location—really leave the public out of it. It's an object you approach through adoration and not by continuing it. There's no way you can evolve from the *Mona Lisa* or from *Guernica* for that matter, which I don't find a great painting to begin

with.

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.] *Guernica* or *Mona Lisa*?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Either.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Either. [They laugh.]

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: I mean, the *Mona Lisa* is very well done but I'm—I mean, it would look nice there, it would fit the color of the sofa. [They laugh.] So. [00:12:10] And that's a different way of looking at art than before the '60s. And a richer way, I think. More rigorous and richer.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. It's—you know, I'm just thinking to ask—the priority is identifying a problem and solving a problem. But what happens to beauty? Or how does beauty—because you do—I mean, some of their pieces are seductively beautiful the way epoxy is laid on something, or the way, you know, there's—yeah.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: I'm not interested in beauty. [They laugh.] No, I—beauty, I mean, I wrote about it. For me, beauty is one of the definitions of mediocrity. It's based on averaging, on eliminating all the accidental and quirky parts, and only keeping repetitious regularity and reaffirming it. And therefore, it's very comfortable.

JOSH T. FRANCO: So I'm thinking about *El Mirador*, for instance, which is at the Alexander Gray now. When I—Alex Santana pointed out to me the light bulb that's full of the pigments, and I probably even said it, you know, my reaction to that particular object within the larger room was, 'That's beautiful.' I found that to be quite beautiful. And, you know, you're using pigment in a nontraditional way, but it is still pigment, very much an artist's ingredient. [00:14:01] And yeah, you know, so—but you're defining beauty as something very strictly defined to symmetry and balance, whereas I might be using it in a, like, 'I just like looking at that' kind of way. Maybe pleasure in looking and beauty are different things for you.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah. I think it is. No, I did a piece, which is called *Jane Doe*, in which I took—well, I was after a portrait and biography of Jane Doe. So I went to Google and took all the images that appear under Jane Doe, which are hair-raising. I mean, they're mutilated faces and some are plaster casts and all racial—

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LUIS E. CAMNITZER: —diversity and not a single image you would consider pleasing or beautiful. And then I morphed them, and I morphed them in equal proportions, taking image one and merging with image two, and image three merging with image four, and so on, and then the first couple merging with second couple.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Brackets, yeah.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: So that at the very end, they all were present in the same amount; no face could take over. In the process of doing it, the image emerging became more and more beautiful. It was like magic. I mean, it was—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Because there's no reason as—yeah, because it could've become more horrific.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: What happens is that in the process, you are reaffirming regularity, and the deviations become softer and softer until they disappear. At the very end, the image is like an iconic, virginal woman. I mean, very beautiful. So I was very impressed with myself. [They laugh.] Then I found out that a cousin, I think, of Darwin had made something similar in the 19th century with photographs and had come to the same conclusion of sorts but used it for racial predominance or something. I mean, a really negative application. But that made it very clear where beauty is. It's really in the affirmation of what you know and discarding what you don't know, and therefore, you have a very lazy position in front of the image. [00:02:03] So I don't predetermine the aesthetics of any piece I make. Or I prepackage it, like I decide, Okay, the box is typical, and whatever object I want, I put it in in the title. I don't have design anything or compose or the assignments of plaque and whatever happens happens, so that there's no—it's packaging basically. The packaging should help whatever you're doing and not be separate from it.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. So potentially, a problem you've solved in a work of art, you could go

back and solve it again with different—or it would be a different problem then?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well, no, problems usually have many many solutions and you pick the best one. And if you're lucky, it is the best one.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, yeah. [They laugh.] I want to go back to conceptualism too and think of it. Something clicked. I think, you know, with Joseph Kosuth and the piece that we—the chair thing that we all know. Yeah, the problem seems internal to itself, which has something to do with why that work can be an icon, I think? Maybe? I don't know, that doesn't make sense, but—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well, the—a lot of stuff I think about now is with hindsight. [00:04:11] Hindsight [ph], hindsight? I never know how you pronounce it. Hindsight [ph] or hindsight?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Hindsight if you're looking back, yeah.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Hindsight, okay. So it's not that I thought it at the time. But when I worked with tautology, which I did in the '60s, I tried to see, How do you break out of it that it—it's like a tautology with exits. If you considered tautology as a jail, you either are locked into it or you have options to evade it. And I think I always tried to see how I get out of it while Kosuth always thought of it, How do you stay in it?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yes.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: And in that sense, a closed tautology, which is a rigorous definition, I find anti-public. Something my wife once called, 'This is autistic,' which is a good definition. So it's really disregarding the viewer instead of communicating it. And icons tend to do that. They call for adoration and acceptance and not for dialogue or going beyond it. And I—lately, I have had a paper at the School of Visual Arts about icons and memes, in which I find memes much more interesting because there's a built-in interactivity. [00:06:04] Even if the result may not be remarkable in terms of the canon, in terms of how you—the freedom you give to the viewer is something, I think, that should be worked on. So we should work more on meme art, and raise the level, than keep the icon in its place. Icons should be demolished.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. This—you know, I'm thinking in terms of, you know, where I—as somebody who's trained as an art historian and been trained by textbooks especially, you know, you could—I want to go and look at my—you know, the basic textbooks, the big Gardner's or Janson. The works there, you know, they're iconic. Like, Kosuth is always the example of conceptualism, Judd is always the Minimalism, which is another very closed kind of set of meanings. You know, it's because I wonder about, like, you know, why—because like, your work I came to so late, like no one showed it to me. Because I think the way that education especially in the introductory level happens is that, you know, you feed students the easy things, which means—maybe not easy but the closed, the iconic things, the things that are set up for them to adore. And yeah, I think that's—so it gives you a new—it just gives me a lens to look at art now. Like, you know, Is this artwork that would end up in a textbook? And that tells you something about whether it's an open or closed work of art for instance. And also whether it's susceptible to being an -ism or not—to being the stand-in for an -ism or not. [00:08:00] So, yeah, I think that's just what's fascinating about your work then, is that it—that's why it resists. That's why at the end of the day, you can't—whether it has something in common with conceptualism or Minimalism, that, you know, you could point to, at the end of the day it's not. Which is why it didn't end up in my textbooks [laughs] even though you were there the whole time in the same museums in the same time.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well, I didn't have a force promoting me behind me. [Laughs.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: There's also of course that, yeah, yeah.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No, that's actually very important. I never understood the big brouhaha around Jasper Johns. I mean, he has some pieces I like, two or three, but as a painter, I don't think he is such a big deal. I think if he would've been born and worked in Uruguay, nobody would know him. So, for me, he is a typical provincial artist that just worked in the right province. And he is not a canonic reference. Okay? Like Duchamp would be, or Picasso in certain ways, certainly. But ultimately, all that is a competitive view of art, and it's there really where its end, its—the effect in anonymity that matters. [00:10:00]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Do you have a relationship with the people who collect your work? So like, the people who buy it from Alexander Gray for instance, do they reach out? Do you care about

reaching to them?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well, I met a couple now at the dinner of the opening. But that's a separate breed of people for me. I mean, if there's a need to have something, I think that's their problem, it's not my problem.

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.] Yeah, yeah. So you're not concerned with how people present things in their homes? Or—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No. Should I?

JOSH T. FRANCO: No. I—no. [Laughs.] I guess because that's a question of reputation and ego, and you're not interested in those things.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No, I've never thought about it. I mean, it's not that I decided that I don't care. I never thought about it.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. No. I asked because that's a whole other branch, you know, we—it's not only artists that we're concerned with at the Archives; we collect papers of collectors and art historians and everyone who shaped the American art world from some angle. So we learn a lot about collectors' relationships to artists and then the—I mean, the range of how they relate to the artist is, you know, totally different from person to person. And vice versa, the artist to them. Yeah. Yeah. Maybe we've reached a stopping point for today.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Okay, it's up to you. [They laugh.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: It's up to me. Well, I'll ask: Are you up for a session two tomorrow?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah, sure.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Okay, great. I'll ask you one more question. Well, no, I'll save that for the end because it's—I think you can—but one, okay, I'll give you my problem first as an art historian that I'm interested, and an art—I'm an artist also. [00:12:06] I make—yeah, like I said, I use art history as the medium. But my problem lately, and I think you might have something to say to it, is: I'm just curious about the compulsion to make marks, the human compulsion to make marks. And my—you know, that seems like a worthwhile problem for me—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: So, our—

JOSH T. FRANCO: —anyway, to solve.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: —canine aspect.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Canine?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: [Laughs.] Yes.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Do dogs make marks?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Of course, each time they pee, they—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, that's true.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: That's what it's about. [Laugh.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. My friend pointed out to me [they laugh]—a friend pointed out that, you know, most ancient rock art, the binder for the pigment is animal fat, which is also, you know, a precious nutrient. So to use it—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: They had to decide—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, it's a—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: —'Do I eat or'—

JOSH T. FRANCO: —sacrifice.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: That's interesting. Yeah, yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: And that's what I mean, you know, that's one facet of the problem that I'm interested in, is—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah, but I would think that at the time the cave paintings were done, it wasn't about an ego expression but some communal need.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Right. So what was the need, and why does it persist, you know? I think that's what I'm very interested in.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: I think it was close with the evolution of capitalism. So the more the individual was being extolled, the more you want to leave marks to pad that dynamic. And if it's being rewarded, even better. But I don't know. [00:14:05] I mean, my art-making is not a product of neurotic obsession or anguish or anything like that. It's purely an accident, and that's what I do better at. I mean, I could've been anything else.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I know you've said you were interested in chemistry.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: And architecture.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well, I actually was interested in chemistry. I was not interested in architecture.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: And I don't know, I—when I was 16, I—or earlier—no, it's difficult to say.

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LUIS E. CAMNITZER: I started art there. But I was interested in photography early on and the darkroom, the work of the darkroom I think led—I had a good chemistry teacher in middle school. So all that seemed to lead me into—maybe it was really alchemy what I was after, which is closer to art basically. So I don't know. But architecture, my grandfather was an architect and he—I never met him. He died before I was born, but he was a really interesting guy, and I miss that I didn't meet him. He designed that, the first [laughs]—that cabinet.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, beautiful.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: And he was rich enough [laughs] not to have to practice. But in any case, it seemed like a given in the family that I would become an architect, all that. And their theory was that if you are in a party and talk to people, you could identify immediately if the person is a doctor or a lawyer. But you would not be able to identify an architect because the cultural scope was much broader, which was an interesting definition, but it wasn't enough for me to [laughs] become an architect. And I don't know if I told Alberro that, how architecture came into the picture?

JOSH T. FRANCO: No.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: When I was 16, I think? [00:02:02] It's difficult to say. We called it high school, but in the US, it would be middle school, I guess. But at that point, you were to decide what profession you wanted to study, so that between 16 and 18, you would start towards being an architect or a doctor or whatever. And I still was into chemistry, and our teachers were not professional teachers, but they were professionals who taught. So we had an architect teaching math, who wasn't even my teacher, who was known for being eccentric, and he would assign—the first day of class, he would tell the students that they had to, as homework, study the cover, the spine, and the back cover of the math book.

JOSH T. FRANCO: As the physicality of it?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah. And of course nobody took it seriously and then we're shocked when the next class, the guy would ask them. [Laughs.] So he was not very popular, but he was the guy in charge of discussing architecture. And I wasn't interested in going, but a classmate of mine insisted I should go with him to the lecture, and so I finally went. It was a really shitty day. There was an enormous storm, and the guy was late, like 10 minutes. We were all sitting, waiting for him, and suddenly, the door opens violently, and the guy comes in dripping in a raincoat and a hat, and while he walked in, he took off his coat, and he threw the hat on the

desk and said, 'That's architecture.' [00:04:15] [They laugh.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: The hat on the desk?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: 'I just redesigned the space,' and blah, blah, blah. And that did it. So, Wow! [They laugh.] So I registered for architecture, and went as far as fourth year, a year short of becoming an architect. And there, I had some exams left, which I didn't like, but I was—the architecture school is a landmark Modernist school, a really nice building in Uruguay, and the classrooms and studios are on two floors surrounding a well-designed garden with a pond and a little amphitheater, steps and grass, and I was looking and sort of admiring again. Suddenly, I realized that the architect carefully had put flagstones as paths to walk, and that whole thing had paths in the grass that were the actual walking of the people that ignored the flagstone. And then I said, 'What am I doing here?' [They laugh.] What I should be doing is help people design their own dwellings and not design for them. And that was a profession that didn't exist, but that helped me forget about architecture. So. [00:06:10] So there was my exit. The hat was my entry, and the path was my exit. [They laugh.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: That brings to mind the Situationists, and I don't know—do you have any—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Oh, I have great respect for them, especially for [Guy] de Bord, but I encountered them late. So I think the first stuff, I saw in '71 or so, which was late. But I would have liked to see them earlier.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, the idea of meandering, the *dérive* and the—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. And is your wife an artist?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: She is now an artist. She [they laugh]—no, she retired. Actually, I retired, but she retired, and she retired in '99. But when we met, she was the academic vice president of the college, and I was the chair of the faculty, so we started working [laughs] together. And her Ph.D. is in African studies, focused on Malawi. A very useful [they laugh] topic.

JOSH T. FRANCO: What disciplines? Like—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well, social studies.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Social studies, yeah.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah, and politics. And then she couldn't get a job because that field was for African Americans and Africans, and she is a white from Boston, so she ended up in this—in a sociology department in a private college that closed. [00:08:09] And then she was hired in our college as assistant to the vice president, and became vice president. But then, after she retired, she didn't know what to do, and she has a really good eye in photography, so I pushed her into that. She's now doing basically self-published books on topics that she researches with her other skills and are—she is now struggling with Dr. James Barry, who was a woman in the late 18th century and 19th century who in order to study medicine had to feign being a man, and then stayed a man—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Whoa.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: —until he, she died, they died. And sort of like contemporary to Florence Nightingale, but Barry ended up being the head of military medical services for Britain and South Africa and Jamaica and all over the world, and introduced Cesarean operations and—I mean, an incredible character. It's interesting, but her first take was a woman that being oppressed had to feign to be a man. And today, she had to review the whole thing, but one of my sons who is very much into gender—[. . . -LC] pointed out that Barry was trans and not a woman disguised. [00:10:29]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Because—the evidence being, choosing to remain?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah. And carefully hiding her—the femininity. I mean, actually, the autopsy revealed that there was a woman. It's a very complicated and complex thing, and she's now struggling with how to do it. But then it's a combination of a fictitious dialogue in which Barry was raped at age 14 or so and had a daughter. So she started having the daughter—[they were raised a little bit like sisters for the honor of the family and then she got lost and never was

contacted. There's very little known about the whole thing, especially about the daughter. So the first approach was the daughter talking to the disappeared mother. But that kind of dialogue is now being challenged by my son [laughs], so that's one.

Another one was about Matilda, who—Matilda of Canossa, who was a duchess in the 11th century who introduced the legal code in Italy. [00:12:01] She was a friend of the Pope and had guerilla warfare against her cousin, who was Henry IV, and beat him. And another forgotten—and so that was easier. She established sort of an interview on her deathbed. And there's only one or two sentences per image. The image is abstract but evocative of what's happening. In Matilda's case, she actually went to all the places in Italy where Matilda was active, she was in contact with a very small group of scholars specialized in Matilda and finally, they organized an exhibition of her work in one of Matilda's castles.

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's great.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: —Matilda. So that's work not aimed at galleries, but it's art. It's real art.

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's a practice.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. When did you get married?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: '79.

JOSH T. FRANCO: '79. Oh, it's been a long time. And you have one son?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: We have two.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Two sons.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: One is the artist, who is the youngest. Well, we have four actually, four children. She had two children from a previous marriage, and ours together, one in Los Angeles who we just visited, who was the one that raised issues, and Gabo who is the artist. -LC]

JOSH T. FRANCO: He's named after Naum Gabo?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Gabo is legally Gabriel, but Gabo is after García Márquez who was—his nickname was Gabo. The other one is Miguel, who is a writer. [00:14:03] He worked on reality shows for Sony and then gave it up, which was a pity in terms of money, and decided to go back to school, get a master's in creative writing and is now waiting for a Nobel Prize. [They laugh.] Bypassing publication if possible. [They laugh.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. What is your wife's name?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Selby.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Selby. Yes.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: And she's my first critic, actually.

JOSH T. FRANCO: In what sense?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Hmm?

JOSH T. FRANCO: What do you mean, in what sense? The first one to see—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Oh, whatever I do, just show her and she—and then Gabo is the second. [They laugh.] It's a miracle I do anything. [They laugh.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Nice. I think this is a good place to end for today.

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LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Okay.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Is there anything you're burning to—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No, no—

JOSH T. FRANCO: —speak today?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: —nothing. I mean, I wasn't burning for anything I did.

JOSH T. FRANCO: I know. Thank you. [They laugh.] You know, I think it's—you know, I wonder how you look back on it in time just the—I get this perspective that I know no one else has. It's a privilege of, like, hearing all the stories, and sometimes it's very direct connections. Like, I just did Juan's oral history, and so now I'm doing yours and hearing—getting to have this view of this whole world very much from the inside, from people who know each other and are involved. And I just—I mean, I think it's just incredibly valuable and important and [they laugh]—not only for preservation because of ego but because of the seeds that they are for other ideas and for other—you know?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well, if they are, sure.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. So I think from that perspective it's—I don't think—I know I don't have a hagiographic approach at all. I don't—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No, no, of course not, or I would've kicked you out already.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. [Laughs.]

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: But no, I find—I mean, lately, I'm invited a lot to give lectures, and the introductions are incredibly painful. I mean, in part given how old I am, the bio is very long and in spite of myself, I don't know. But then the people start pointing out this and that and try to synthesize 80-odd years, and I find it such a waste of time. I mean, it's—basically what they're doing is trying to justify themselves for having invited me, which is totally unrelated to why I am there and what I'm going to do. So it's a waste of time. And they could—if they need to justify themselves, just give leaflet and then save the effort and the embarrassment. And ultimately, either I say something interesting in terms of challenging beliefs or helping evolve thinking, or I don't. And that's totally unrelated to anecdotes of my past and distracting from what I'm not saying. I may say a totally idiotic thing and just because the anecdotes claim that they're important, then the idiocy is important; that just doesn't make sense. And it's noise and it should really—here is an idea or a challenge and it works, great. And it doesn't matter if I am totally unknown or not, you know?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: So that is the contaminations, my cultural contaminations that I find very very negative and harming. And I think it's very important that your oral history takes that into account and tries to really point out the generative part of this and minimize the other one.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. I think—you know, I think we're of—that fits with my—yeah, so, you know, of course I represent an institution, and there's something about Luis Camnitzer, the name and the track record, that makes it, makes—it motivates us to reach out. [00:04:05] But the other half is that—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah, but I'm not even aware of that part. I mean, I'm puzzled that you came to me. Okay?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Well, okay.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: So—

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's fine. I mean—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: But fine, that's their problem.

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.] Well, it's also secondary anyway. So that's to my point is that—but there's many artists who, you know, have all the right museums in their list, for instance, many, many, many. But there's—you know, I'm one person and that we could only—I have a certain amount of time in the day. And I only do two or three of these a year, of oral histories, so I make my final choices by—not by the reputation of the person but by who I think is going to do the most to change the art historical record that we are. Because as an art historian, you know, I love my discipline, but loving a discipline means you're very critical of it as well. I decided I

would be an art historian when I was 16, so it's like all of—well, you know, most of who I am. It's always been part of my identity. And there's so many parts about it that I hate, you know, that are—but then there's so many—so.

And now I'm in this strange position of, you know, power to change one of the most important records of it. So I go for the people who are going to be company in changing and being critical of what it is and hopefully helpful in what it could be in the future. So I think that's why it's working out so far. [Laughs.]

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Okay, good. [They laugh.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: I hope you think so too. So tomorrow, I'll come with some interesting questions and maybe some more kind of devices. Maybe we can look, you know, at the catalog and talk about some particular pieces. Another reason we do it in the home is to see, like, objects, so we might think about like, you know, asking you about your collection here and why some of these pieces and what they mean. [00:06:01] And it's a nice way to get in.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Okay.

JOSH T. FRANCO: So we'll pick up tomorrow?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah, sure.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Great.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: I mean—

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JOSH T. FRANCO: Okay. This is Josh T. Franco for the Archives of American Art. It's January 17th. I'm here in the home of Luis Camnitzer in Great Neck, New York, for the second day of Luis's oral history. So thanks again, Luis, for doing this.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Okay. [They laugh.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. So I want to—not necessarily for biography, but I want to think about childhood because, you know, we spend a lot of years as children. But I wonder if it would be interesting to think about problems that you recognized when you were a child that you're still working on.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: At what age do you cut off childhood?

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's it. So let's think, you know, from birth until 14, 15 years old maybe.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well, I—I don't think so. I mean, I started getting involved in art stuff when I was 14 roughly. Or if you count photography, it's 13, but that wasn't. It was—I mean, I had tried to make nice pictures, but it wasn't art. But when I was 14, there was—I was at the YMCA, and the YMCA had a cultural program for—it was very holistic, sort of. It was literally body and mind. So there were clubs in different directions, and I was in two. I was in a photography club and a cultural club. And the cultural club, for some reason, we decided to make arts and crafts competition. [00:02:06] At the last moment, nobody had brought anything, so the three people involved, we decided to make it ourselves. I remembered that in grade school, I made elephant heads with toothpicks as the teeth or as what you call them. So I made one of those and then I made my hand and I made something else.

And there was a guy that was in charge of art for children, teaching them. He came sort of as a jury and was very taken by my pieces and said I should really do sculpture and eventually go to art school. But it was all based on skill. I mean, I wasn't that skillful anyway. But the first task he gave me was to make a head for—of a writer, of Zorrilla de San Martín, an Uruguayan writer of end of the 19th century. He brought me plastiline, like a big chunk—I remember it must have been like five pounds or something—in a hideous color. It was purplish brown and sort of disgusting. So I did it, and then he said I should study sculpture with a guy that taught sculpture for adults in the YMCA, and I passed over to there. [00:04:05] He was a sculptor specialized in cemetery stuff, and I learned some there. And then I went to art school and was accepted because we were only four applicants for sculpture. My drawings were awful. I never knew how

to draw really. And had I applied for painting, I wouldn't have been accepted. Then—so eventually, by the time I was 17, I figured this is not about copying sculpture; it's something else. And then I really started being involved in art.

But what was funny about the history is that that guy that brought the plasteline, who was a very sweet, loving, dedicated guy, was the son of a family that owned a rubber company. For some reason, my parents met his parents at some point and found out—and I found this out maybe 10 years ago, I mean, really late. My mother told me, she died at age 99. It turns out that this guy had brought the plasteline to the factory and used the mill used for rubber to mix the plasteline. He had gone to a store and bought tons of little packages of different colors, and the hideous color was a product of the mix. The family was furious because they had to spend days cleaning the mill machine. [00:06:03]

But the other thing I found out [laughs] was that the guy was actually an outpatient of a psychiatric clinic, and they found out that he was very good with children, so they recommended him as a volunteer to work at the YMCA with children. Basically, I'm an artist because of the insanity of somebody else, which I think is very fitting. [They laugh.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. So it was his therapy, then?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: It was therapy for him.

JOSH T. FRANCO: For him.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: And that unloaded another artist into the artist pool. [They laugh.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: I mean, it must have been a very particular and particularly safe kind of mental state for them to allow that.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Oh, he may have been bipolar—I have no idea. At the time, you didn't have all the labels you have now, and he was very calm, actually a very sweet guy. I remember him perfectly. I would recognize him on the street if I would—if he would be alive. I mean, he probably would be 120 by now. [They laugh.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, that's fascinating. Going a bit further back into how your family ended up in Uruguay, you know, it's the same reason so many artists ended up in the US or in Latin America. So the—you know, what happened in Germany really shaped American art in a very direct way.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well, the whole culture, yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: The whole culture, yes.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: It's an exile culture, yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Did your family talk much about how the—you know, the experience of leaving and coming to Uruguay?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Oh, yeah, a lot.

JOSH T. FRANCO: You were made very aware of where you came from?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well, originally, they wanted to come to the US, and the US was very anti-Semitic at the time and wouldn't allow Jews to come freely. And the process—although there was some friend willing to give affidavits, the process was too long. Actually, I recently found letters from 1940, which were already—my parents were—we were in Uruguay, so it was too late and too expensive to even deal with it. [00:08:32] But that also was accidental. One time, a friend of my mother knew the Uruguayan consul and introduced them, so that's how we went to Uruguay, [they laugh] which was lucky. I mean, I'm happy I grew up in Uruguay and not in the States actually.

JOSH T. FRANCO: And why is that?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well, it gives me a much broader view, a much less provincial view of the world. It helps me think there's a kind of ingenuity of poverty, which, when you don't have something that you need, you make up other solutions or you start connecting things that normally would not be connected. And that shaped my thinking. [And if I don't have a hammer

to put a nail in the wall, I'm not stumped. I use a stone or the heel of my shoe. I make up for the absence and that is very useful. -LC]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative], Chicanos call that *rasquachismo*.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: What?

JOSH T. FRANCO: *Rasquachismo*, *rasquache*.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: I don't know that word.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh. It's a, yeah, very border-town kind of term. Yeah. Did you have siblings? Do you have siblings?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No.

JOSH T. FRANCO: No. Only child. [00:10:00] And what did your parents do in Uruguay? Did they do the same thing they did in Germany?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No, in Germany, my father was the heir and basically by then a CEO of a branch of a fashion business, sort of like Lord & Taylor or Bonwit Teller. At least those were the examples he gave me to describe. There were five stores in different cities, and his father, my grandfather, married into the families that had started the business in Hamburg, and they had the branch in Lübeck. So that's where I was born. And then eventually, the property was forced-sold to a non-Jew, and my grandparents didn't want to leave. They were in their 60s, and they were upper bourgeoisie in Lübeck. Lübeck was an independent city, a *Hansa* city, so it was less involved in dogmatic Nazi ideology. They felt secure, which was wrong, and they died in a concentration camp. So it was a hard separation.

And I remember us finding out in '41, '42—through Red Cross letters—that my grandparents had died. And that was the only time I saw my father cry, actually. I don't remember the year exactly. [00:12:00] But, so, from being an affluent upper middle class, my father ended up first being a milkman and then a mason and then eventually, he was able to buy a little stationery store, a bookstore, and that was the profession. My mother worked there too, and at a point I worked a little, as a kid. And then he got some restitution money from Germany and that allowed him to then sell the store and be retired. But.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yesterday, you described yourself as misanthropic.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Were you misanthropic as a child?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No. I didn't even know what the word was. [They laugh.] No, but I was an only child, which was not easy. So a lot of stuff between my parents went through me. And not in a bad, intended way, but I felt the burden. It was like an inverted triangle. [They laugh.] So I would have liked to have a sibling, and they wanted but couldn't do it on their own, because of the work.

My grandmother who spent the war in Germany—she was non-Jewish, she converted when she married my grandfather, that's my mother's mother—and an aunt, they both survived the war in Germany and came immediately after to Uruguay, '45 or so. [00:14:11] And from what I know—is, at that point, my mother raised the possibility of having another child, which would have needed my grandmother to be helping, and she didn't want to. I don't know the details, but that created a distance between them. Not for me. She was a great grandmother. But for them, so. Now, in those times, those things weren't shared very much.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. That stuck with me, the misanthropic comment because it seems sort of intentioned with a practice that has a lot of concern for political—

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JOSH T. FRANCO: —issues for other people's well-being.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: So I wonder—you know, I think I want to know more about—I think for the

record, it would be nice to hear more about what that means [they laugh] to be misanthropic but be politically—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No, it means—

JOSH T. FRANCO: —thoughtful.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: —split personality in which—I don't know, there's an ideal level, which I address in work and in politics and thinking of improving society and then there is an everyday contact, in which I say, What am I doing here for this idiot who [laughs] I don't want to talk to? So it's—I don't know. [They laugh.] There are many conflicts in that, and in everything, I mean. It's—on one hand, I like hearing compliments; on the other, I don't believe them and reject them and feel embarrassed and unfair. So it's this wish of affirmation of myself and negation of myself at the same time, and that creates awkward, awkward situations [they laugh] within me.

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's interesting. And also maybe, you know, the stand-out—I don't think I want to start going through this in detail yet, but the—you know, what does it mean for Luis Camnitzer to make a self-portrait, and the series of *Selfportraits* here that are, you know, simply your name, and, you know, the year is 1968 and then it goes through the early 1970s.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: And then I got bored.

JOSH T. FRANCO: And then you got bored. [They laugh.] You're not On Kawara. You didn't keep going.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No, right. [00:02:00]

JOSH T. FRANCO: But what motivated you to make this, to make the *Selfportraits*?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Oh, I was intrigued by the persistence of the name while [laughs] what's being named keeps changing. So what is and what is not, it was that. And it was a tongue-in-cheek piece also. But naming is something that always intrigued me until now. It was a way of appropriation, so I—by naming something, I make it mine. If I name it Dog, the dog is identified as my dog, not as a dog, as this thing to dogs owned by other people. And so it is with children. So actually children should have the right to name themselves rather than be named.

And last week, somehow, we discussed with my older son, Miguel, whom we named Miguel on purpose in Spanish. It's Miguel Carlos. But he doesn't have any traits that would make him recognizable as Hispanic, and he doesn't even speak Spanish. So, for some reason, the conversation came up that that caused him trouble, that people still ask him, 'Hmm, you don't look like a Miguel.'

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.]

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: I mean, in this racist society where ethnicity and race are, like, repackaged in so surreal ways, it led him to have to explain at length, 'Well, my father's Uruguayan, although he was born in Germany,' on and on. [00:04:11] And it became very cumbersome, not to the point of resenting having been called Miguel, but he called our attention of what we did to him by naming. And I wasn't aware of that, that I hadn't thought about the implications. For me, it was maintaining a cultural lineage, but it was my decision and it was for my benefit, and I did not think about what consequences it might have, and it did. And so [laughs] I mean, he is 40, and I have to apologize to him for what I did, and explained that only now do I realize fully the power of naming. And some time ago already, I felt that the basic of reactionary education is based on learning names of things that somebody else named, and we don't learn to name things, which is strange. I mean [laughs]—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Until you reach a certain level of expertise, and then you become the namer.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah, but you should have—first of all, you should be made aware of that the power is not in your hands, and that you may need an expertise to acquire the power, which was a phrase I never heard in school, okay?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: So that's one. The other, it's bizarre that everything is named. Actually in one class, I asked my students, 'Okay, let's find something that's unnamed and name it.' [00:06:10] And we finally—it was really an interesting class, it went into all directions. But we

finally decided it would be this—the eyes, I guess, of scissors, the space that—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, yeah.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: And then they came up with names of it, but it is named.

JOSH T. FRANCO: What is it?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: It is the eyes of the scissors or whatever. I don't remember now. Actually, I looked in different languages, it has different associations, and they are all—it's not a name in itself, but it's taking another name and adapt it, like 'eyes,' you know?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: But who did it? I'm always fascinated, who managed to create that word and make it stick? How did that happen? So there you have collective power at least, or collective acceptance. But—so.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Was your name Luis when you were born in Germany?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No, that's another thing.

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.] Yeah.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: My birth certificate says Ludwig. And then when I was probably around two, my mother decided that I don't look like a Ludwig, which was a name picked after a friend of my father, but that I looked like Peter. So from then on, I was called Peter, and still whoever is alive of that circle would still call me Peter. And then it turned out that the short version of Ludwig is Lutz, so at some point, I just adopted Luis with other children I was playing with. [00:08:18] So by the time I got into grade school, I was Luis, and that stayed my name. So it was a mix of environment and my decision of having that name. And it's so ingrained that if, still today, somebody puts an 'O' in to make it Louis, I have like a violent gut reaction. I get very angry and say, 'No, it's Luis.' [They laugh.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: You know, also, the *Selfportrait* brings up—I mean, the ownership is interesting. Your audience is—you know, you're also giving your name away here. So if somebody were to buy this or even just look at it, they come to own your name in a way.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: I haven't thought of them that way, but they cannot do much with it.

JOSH T. FRANCO: No, true. [They laugh.] And then there's the other—yeah, I recall the *Selfportrait*, the adoration one, let me see. This one, 'To Luis Camnitzer from Luis Camnitzer with admiration and affection.' This piece, which is a photo of you, I take it?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah, which I took.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, yeah. Can you speak a little about this one and what it means to put your photo rather than your name?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well, it's a form of tautology if you want, but it's a closed circle in which I'm everything. [00:10:04] I'm the creator, the public, the admirer, the fan.

JOSH T. FRANCO: And do you still own this piece?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Hmm?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Do you still—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Do I own it? Yeah, I think so. I'm not sure. All my work is in the gallery, so I don't have to think about it.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. [They laugh.] And with other language pieces—thinking about, you know, German, English, Spanish—do you always use English, like the ones where you create the rooms?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No, many works are in both. They have two versions.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, yeah. It depends on where you install them?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Whenever I can. I mean, some are untranslatable, so I'm stuck, but the boxes, for instance, it's understood that there's a Spanish version and an English version. *The Living Room* is Spanish version and English version. So there are many that are two originals.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Do you feel an affinity with other artists who use text as image, like Mel Bochner or Barbara Kruger? Do you see your work in—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Do I feel what?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Do you feel an affinity with those artists?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well, I mean, I feel some affinity with Lawrence Weiner. Barbara Kruger never—first of all, I felt she came too late, and I don't know if you can really fight advertising with advertising. I mean, she uses advertising language, and I don't know if an artist can be strong enough to deconstruct that package. [00:12:03] So at the end, it ends up being her trademark, and it's part of the trademark culture. Within that, there are some sentences that I find good, I mean, they are like, a generation after me, so it's difficult to see how much they went further than we did. Some of the statements of Jenny Holzer, I appreciate a lot, and I'm so sorry how her work degenerated into techno-presentations that become stronger than the text. And so they become—that is, she fell into the spectacle. And the modest works where she just would put a little plaque somewhere with the text—I felt were very strong and very, very close to what I was doing with my stickers.

So I think some of that stuff was already done in Latin America. If not developed into a style, at least the statements were there. And Cildo Meireles, for instance, and the Coke bottles is a precedent for all of that. Also in terms of appropriating circulation devices that are in place from industry and make them work for him. He did that more efficiently than any of the subsequent examples.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Are you the same generation as Lawrence Weiner? Are you around the same age?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah. I'm a little bit earlier I think. [00:14:01] I think when I started with sentences, he was still painting. His descriptive sentences are from '68 and mine are from '66. So. That doesn't make a generational difference [they laugh] but—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Right, yeah. Have you ever spoken with Lawrence Weiner?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah. Actually, I had him in school talking to my students, and we were on panels together. A very nice guy. I understand he's sick now. I saw him two or three times in my life. It's not that we had a close connection.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Do you—how do you—because you use handwriting sometimes and typography other times, what drives that decision?

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LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Whatever I feel fits best for a particular problem. [They laugh.] I mean, it's a packaging issue. Like, in the *Torture* series, I used my handwriting where I felt there should be—I should be present. I should be part of it. Not an important part because the pieces work between the text and the image, not in the text and not in the image. So, it's two trivial things put together to see, and the space in between, something stronger happens. But I felt it was important that I would be there.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Through your handwriting?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah, through my handwriting.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. Yeah, have you—what do you think about—you know, handwriting—like, students are not taught cursive anymore. Do you think handwriting is being devalued?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah, definitely, but it's more than that. I think there's an ideology behind it. And I'm not saying that personal handwriting is ideologically better. I would say actually maybe worse. But it was clear, for instance, when I was growing up that friends of mine who went to private school learned this hybrid between cursive and capital lettering, which is very difficult, Catholic schools in Uruguay. And here, I think it's standard writing. While in public school, we were more like the British cursive handwriting, which slowly becomes a direct expression, like a

bodily expression of an individual. [00:02:11] And that leads to the signature, which—for us, the signature is a personal trace, and here, the signature and the name-writing are pretty much the same. So your signatures transform your name to somebody else, while in my tradition, the signature is more an expressionistic act of leaving a mark.

JOSH T. FRANCO: It doesn't have to be legible.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Right. It should not be fake-able [ph]. [They laugh.] So. And there, I cannot tell you that my signature is better than yours, because if I think about it, it's—I mean, there are many things like that, like measurements. Although my mind is metric, and I still try to decode inches and feet; I mean, they're totally alien to me. I have to translate them into metric and then re-put them into feet and inches to capture a space. But if you tell me it's so many inches long, I don't know. I get that data, but don't know what to do with it.

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.]

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: And yet, the fact that an inch is basically the development of your thumb, or a foot is a foot, or the yard is a distance from your nose to the end of your extended arm—or at least, it was Henry—I don't know, Henry IV or V—is much more persuasive than artificially taking a piece of geography and cutting it into pieces, okay? [00:04:15] But the going metric, it has that advantage that every 10 units, you change, but you maintain the spatial vision. So I am ideologically more sympathetic to an organic measuring system, and I'm rationally more sympathetic to a metric system.

I always was puzzled, and I don't think anybody wrote about it, what happened in Puerto Rico particularly when the Americans took over and forced the inch system over the metric system? And I'm puzzled that nobody interviewed people that did such a transition, to find out, What did it do to the conceptual space in those people? Well, space is different according to how you measure it. So when you are forced to leave one standard to go into the other, it's not just the change of language or of measurement, it's a change of your whole surrounding. And I don't have any good answer for that, but I'm very puzzled.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Well, it's like switching from Spanish to English. You know, it's a different—or from any language to another language, there's different—I mean, that's not so drastic, but with some languages, there's drastic cosmologies.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah, with language, I actually enjoy it. I think everybody should be multilingual. [00:06:00] Because it allows you to observe one language from the other one, and challenge, and challenge your thinking in them. So that I find okay. But to live in one space system and suddenly have to adjust your whole organism to function in the other system is very awkward.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. Hmm. That must be in the state records somewhere.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Okay, if you find it let me know.

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.] They're in DC somewhere, I bet. You know, I was looking at your work too and thinking about how the body is often invoked but not made present as an object. It's through language. So like, the rooms that describe the dining table and the—and you've described another place as a—you're watching people in that room: They walk on the rug, but they walk around the table. And I—you know, is that—I mean, you know, positively, it's because you are concerned with language and how it works. But is there any negative—is there any—do you have a positive motivation for keeping the body out?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No. It's not something I have thought about. I mean, I think I live more in my head than in my body, so it may be a defect of me as an individual. [They laugh.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: I don't know if it's a defect, but it's an interesting thing. I was thinking about this in relationship to Ana Mendieta's work too, which is so in the body. It's like she thinks she is her—everything she does is her body first it seems. And, you know, that would be—like, imagining that, that exhibition of your work and her work makes, like, all the possible comments about bodies—[00:08:07]

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah, well, that's true.

JOSH T. FRANCO: —[laughs] that one came make I think. Yeah, I think I just—I think this is where

I just want to provoke more too. So this is my question yesterday about, 'Have you ever done performance art?'—also kind of question.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No, I didn't. [They laugh.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: No, of course not, but I think if—you know, as much as we could find a root of that, I'm interested in—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: It took me ages to be reasonably comfortable in talking to the public. Or, I mean, the worst nightmare for me was giving oral exams. No, it may be actually an issue of distancing from the ego. If I focus on the body, I tend—I would centralize everything in me, in my physicality. And maybe in that sense, I'm more platonic, I'm more—I don't know. I think it's also a better communication system not to focus on your body. Actually, my wife buys my clothing, whatever I wear. [They laugh.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: You really don't want to think about it.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No. Yesterday, we had a big discussion because I had a hole in a sweater, and I didn't look in the mirror [laughs] to check that.

JOSH T. FRANCO: I have a hole in this sweater, but I like it.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Okay.

JOSH T. FRANCO: I like decay. [Laughs.] So, I really want to push, you know, this, the body thing. So besides Mendietta, are there other artists who do use the body who you find interesting? Who would be somebody? [00:10:02]

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well, Carolee Schneemann, I would say. There's a difference between masochistic use like Chris Burden or to some extent Acconci. But Carolee used the body as something else. It was more like a weapon, which made it more interesting. I mean, it was her, but there was a distance between her and her, which made it very powerful. I would have to think more about that.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Can you—you mentioned Alfredo Jaar yesterday.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Can you maybe just talk about when you first met him, what his work has meant to you over the years?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: When did I meet him? I think I met him when I had the show of the *Cubans* in my college, and he came to that. We also were in a show together at the Alternative Museum, in which he had a typewriter, which was a very good piece. And then we stayed in touch, and he had the idea of having our show. It was him, Cildo Meireles, and me in Austin, in the Blanton. The Blanton or whatever it was called before. [00:12:07] But he felt very strongly about the three generations being shown together, which was very nice. It was a very nice show. In a lot of stuff, we are totally in agreement, especially in terms of pedagogical things. Aesthetically, although we pursue the same aims, he is more in the Barbara Kruger camp than—and I'm in the opposite one. In part out of laziness and part of being cheap, I try to make things as cheaply and simple as possible, and ideally as available in production to anybody else. And he uses the language of the establishment, in terms of market and industry, to talk back. I think it's a valid position. It doesn't fit my ways of being, and I don't know how effective it is in cultural terms. I mean, obviously, effective [laughs] in his career, but—so that's where we part, I think, in extremely friendly ways.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, yeah. Are you measuring effectiveness there by the gauge of how it activates the viewer?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Or does it activate the viewer? [00:14:00]

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Look, deep down, I never discussed this in depth with him, and I should probably. But you can—the question is, Are you being co-opted in the process and telling the viewer, 'Look, all the system also can do good things,' and therefore you're weakening your fight against the system? Or are you undermining the system? Now, I think he and I'm sure Barbara

Kruger feel that they are undermining the system, and I'm not sure that they are. I'm not saying they are not, but I'm not sure. But as a strategy, it's not one I would use. That's all I can say.

JOSH T. FRANCO: You know, it's—does the—

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JOSH T. FRANCO: —analogy of a grain of sand in an oyster offer anything at all? Because it's an irritant, it's something that shouldn't be there, it's something that messes up the system.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah, I think—

JOSH T. FRANCO: But it's very beautiful.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: —that's what they would want to happen. But I don't know if it does. I think—I don't know if it does, but ultimately the oyster makes a pearl. [Laughs.] And it's not you who benefit from the pearl. It's not the oyster either but—

JOSH T. FRANCO: No, exactly. [They laugh.]

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: But whoever owns the oyster does. So—yeah. And that's the problem with art. I mean it's a fascination about art, but I think that's why art is so addictive for the artist, because it's a Sisyphus activity. You never manage. You only—you move the wall a little bit forward, but the wall is still there, and there's no way of breaking it, but somehow the wall, even if you break it, it reconstructs itself with whatever you did. So, all of Dadaism is in museums and very expensive. Okay?

I don't know—we were in a show. We organized a show—Jane Farver, Rachel Weiss, and me—which was *Global Conceptualism*, and we had this conundrum that there was a lot of ephemeral stuff designed to be flyers to disappear in the street and so on. And here, we were putting them carefully in cases and made them into icons. And we were totally aware of that, and the choice was, What do we do? Do we leave them ephemeral and to be destroyed, or do we keep them for history, and therefore automatically iconize them? [00:02:09] The in-between solution, which we didn't do for lack of money, would be to make—and copyrights and so on—to reproduce them and have a second ephemeral life. And we couldn't do that. Also, Peter Wollen was the curator for the US and would have been sympathetic to do that, but we couldn't. [. . . -LC]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. I sense that all the time in our collection, in our work, because I collect—I end up collecting a lot of Fluxus material, for instance, that is very, like—you know, very much never wanted to be collected or preserved, and sometimes in itself is making a joke about what I'm doing to it, you know, from its past. And yeah, I mean, that's just to say you're right. [Laughs.] It's a tension that will never go away. It just—once you break any part of it, it just crops up again.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: But in that, the system keeps absorbing. I compare it to developing a virus to infect it, and in fact, what we're helping is to make a vaccine against that same virus. Now, the addiction part in art is that therefore you have to invent a new virus.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yeah. [They laugh.]

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Even knowing that the life will be very short, and so you keep going, you keep developing viruses, although you know it won't last. [00:04:04]

JOSH T. FRANCO: But hopefully someone writes you a check when they kill it. [They laugh.] Did you have any interaction with Fluxus or any of the artists?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Not as such. In '68, I organized an international seminar, artist seminar, at Farleigh Dickinson University. It was something going on every year. I had Emmett Williams there and Allan Kaprow and Ay-O, and Alison Knowles came, Charlotte Moorman and Nam June Paik. So all those people came and either lived there for six weeks, like Emmett, or came just for short performances. It was a friendly relation. But not more than that.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Can you recall some of the performances?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Allan Kaprow did a performance of changing tires—I don't know what the name was—the car had to stop at each gas station on the way and rotate the tires. And Emmett did readings of poems, some of which he wrote there, and Nam June Paik and Charlotte gave the

fried eggs performance. John Giorno was there and did the performance with dry ice. Max Neuhaus did—and now I—he had a—both had a telephone piece. [00:06:05] John had—he would call in and then would record a little piece of a phrase and made it into a loop. And Max did something similar, but I don't remember; it's too long ago. And who else was there? Marta Minujín did the first version of the telephone booth, and Aquiles Lanza, an Argentinian composer, also worked. It really was a memorable event that's not recorded anywhere. [They laugh.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Now we have some part of it, at least.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Do you remember students' reactions to the work? They must have been involved in some.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: It was in the summer, so there weren't many students. What there was was the high school equivalency program, which then allowed me to go to the other college. [Laughs.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: So really, it was more of a retreat, then?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. That sounds great.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah. That's how actually I ended up in Farleigh Dickinson. They invited me as a resident in '65, and there, I shared a studio with Hans Breder, and that's where we became friends. Hans, at that time, was an Abstract Expressionist, and I was a normal Expressionist.

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.]

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: I mean, huge woodcuts and—but the seminar in itself was Op art. So the son of Vasarely was there, Garcia-Rossi, all Op artists. And Francis Celentano, a guy who disappeared but had been in the MoMA show, I think. So we were the outliers there. Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: You mentioned that some of your works, you know, people reproduced them for the whatever museum, you know, contracts them, buys them. So, you know, Sol LeWitt's practice a similar in that people execute his drawings based on instructions.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah, but in Sol LeWitt, basically it's free labor. You [they laugh]—so it's—

JOSH T. FRANCO: And your works are much less laborious, I guess.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Look, I'm not—this is more complex, but most of the work I do is not interactive like that. And I don't expect the work to be completed or made by the public in that sense, not at least according to a preestablished plan. So when I—I don't know if you looked at the thing I gave you yesterday about Southwestern?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, I didn't look through that yet, no.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Okay. There, it's a totally open-ended thing. People can do whatever they want, and most of the stuff they do is unpredictable to me. And that's the difference, I think. In Sol LeWitt, it is predictable because the rules of his game lead to something. It's not an open game; it's a closed game. And the same happened, with similar stuff like the—what were they called?—the French group of Yvaral, Leparc and so on. [00:10:13] They worked with the public, but the public really finished a preestablished set of rules or just played with what whatever was available.

So when I involve the public, say for the *Assignments*, which are both unpredictable in how they looked and then visually it's more interesting [. . . -LC]. There are other pieces in which I have phrases and then people can take the copy and stamp my signature with a rubber stamp on it and take the finished work home. But that's still my piece. No change introduced by the viewer. In the *Assignments* thing at Reina Sofía, now when I repeat it, it's probably predictable because I know what can happen, and the radius of the cord for the pencil is a rule that predetermines form. But I saw a young woman in Reina Sofía. She didn't know who I was and that I was watching. One of the *Assignments* is a big rectangle done with tape, which was empty, and you are supposed to look at it and come up with arguments about the existence or nonexistence of God according to what you see in that rectangle. [00:12:07] And so there was a big circle full of

scribbles around it, and this young woman came, and there was no room to draw anymore, so what she did was, with her finger, rubbed it against the graphite on the wall and then used that to write outside of the circle. And she wrote Nietzsche. And [laughs]—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Wow.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: —that was so perfect, and it was so—I mean, I wish I filmed that.

JOSH T. FRANCO: It's such an exertion of will, but using the matter.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah. No, no, it took off—I mean, it became her piece. The whole thing became her piece by doing that. And that was perfect. So that's really my ideal of the effect of the work. The work totally disappeared in that.

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's something to think about for a long time. [They laugh.] So maybe we'll look at some of the works from Reina Sofía now, from the retrospective. So I brought the catalog, and we talked about *Selfportrait*. Oh, here's one in Spanish, *Biblioteca. The Room*. But I like this one because it—I mean, you can tell some of my own biases here. I like the—I like bodies [they laugh] and I like the kind of bloodiness in both. So this is *Leftovers* from 1970. Can you just start by describing what it's composed of? And then we can talk—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Oh, there are boxes, one by two by two feet or—no, that—no, one by one by two. And they are bandaged in bloody bandage, which is fake blood. [00:14:03] It's a dye. Originally there were 200 of them. It was one big wall, which I showed at Paula Cooper. It was an homage to all the ones, all the people that died in different invasions the US performed in Latin America. But it's an ambiguous piece. A lot of people read it like the wall of laments, and actually it was also shown in the Yeshiva Museum and they interpreted from the Holocaust point of view. So it's open. And each box has—labeled with stencil, with box stencil letters, *LEFTOVER*—

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LUIS E. CAMNITZER: —and numbered. But the numbers are—not in sequence, but the setup is random.

JOSH T. FRANCO: It brings up the question of the relationship between art and war.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well, more than that, it's between art and politics. And at the time, I thought, Okay, after this and work related to that, I am done with personal artwork. And—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Personal, in the sense—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Expressing myself. And really need to find ways of creating visual effects that activate, politically, people. And that proved really difficult. [They laugh.] So my level of production dropped very much, and I became very dissatisfied with myself and frustrated that my creativity wasn't up to the level I demanded. So I went into other things like language and semiotics and—I don't know, whatever. But looking back, I feel that the piece is somewhat spectacular and literal. So it's not a piece I would do today. I find it relatively limited.

JOSH T. FRANCO: I mean, language is still pretty prominent. The word 'leftover' has a lot of meaning, and it's repeated and repeated. So, I mean, I can see it as more of a bridge than something very different. [00:02:03]

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: But it does not generate very creative evocations, let's put it that way.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Very visceral ones, though.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOSH T. FRANCO: But do you—so you showed that at Paula Cooper first?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Do you remember the receptions, Paula's thoughts about it, or any of the people who saw it?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Lucy Lippard did a little review, and that was it. And nothing was sold, and shortly after, the secretary of Paula called me to say I should look for another gallery. [They

laugh.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Her records are at the Archives. I wonder—there must be a file.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: In what?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Her records are in the Archives.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Oh, yeah?

JOSH T. FRANCO: From that time, yeah.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well, I don't think she would mention me. [They laugh.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: I'm going to go look.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No, it was actually interesting because I didn't mind being fired because if I don't sell, why should she keep me? But I did resent that she didn't call me—

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JOSH T. FRANCO: Hello, testing, okay. We're back. That was strange.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: But we don't know where it stopped.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, no, I watched it. I saw it. I saw the screen go. It was just a second ago. So you were talking about the secretary called you and not Paula, and then the Blanton.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah, so I resented that it was the secretary who called me and not her. About the fact of being fired, but the distance put in the act. I only saw her again 40 years later in the Blanton when there was a simultaneous show of Park Place, which was her first gallery, and the New York Graphic Workshop, which was a weird [laughs] coincidence, but there were different curators. I mean, it was an accidental overlap. She was leafing through catalogs, and I was passing, and in that moment, she looks up and says, 'Oh, hi, Luis!' And came and gave me a kiss, and that [they laugh] evaporated the whole resentment I was—

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JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, okay. So where were we, Luis? I think we were—you made up with Paula Cooper. I don't remember, but I know I wanted to ask you with this piece anyway.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah, go ahead.

JOSH T. FRANCO: So this piece we're looking at is *This is a Mirror, You are a Written Sentence*. And I'm curious about it particularly, but I'm also just curious about how you came to use this frame.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: The format?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, the frame, because the frame is such a—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Okay, the sentence is—actually was my first conceptualist piece ever. I had gotten bored with woodcutting. I was working already with, like, four by eight or six by seven feet, and I had to print on bedsheets, I couldn't find bigger papers. But it was a very automatic kind of work and no risk involved. I had a crisis and stopped basically for a couple of months, and then I went into describing visual situations. And the first thought was, 'This is a mirror, you are written sentence.' I still like it. I mean, I like the shifting around of the position of the viewer. And then it came back, I don't know, five years later or whatever, and I made it in the box.

One of the things I had been working on before was the concept of a dictionary, but a dictionary in which it would be an image-word dictionary, where the image would suggest meanings. I wanted to sort of empower the viewer to add meanings or change them. So that was the origin, and at some point, the boxes became like the reference pieces for the dictionary. It became a container of images with the text underneath. The format came through a discussion with José Guillermo, the other member in the New York Graphic Workshop who was extremely lucid in terms of form. I mean, he was lucid in general [they laugh] but he had very good formal analysis ability. Actually the group functioned very well in our group criticisms, and he always had the

final touch on how something should be presented. And he suggested I find a format that could be predesigned so that I just put that. So together, we designed this box.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Are the dimensions significant in any way?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No, they're roughly—I mean, they're constant, but they're roughly the same.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. Constant except for the piece, 'The content'—what is it?—'The content decides the form'?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah, right.

JOSH T. FRANCO: So what happened with that? I mean, you're playing with your own form.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well, the form crushed the glass. [Laughs.] [00:04:00]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. Do you see any connection? Are you—would you consider yourself to be writing poetry with these?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No. I abhor poetry.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, say more about that. [They laugh.] What does poetry not do? What is abhorrent?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well [they laugh]—no, [laughs] abhor is not the right word. But I don't have access to traditional poetry, I would say. I don't enjoy it, I don't—I find it stilted most of the time, it's like, looking for the poetic by locking it out, so it sets itself up to fail. And there are very few people that escape that. I haven't read enough to tell you particular names. Probably E. E. Cummings is one. Borges has some poetry, although he's not considered a poet. Antonio Machado has some, Nicolás Guillén has some. I don't like Neruda. So, a lot of stuff, I find sentimental and corny and antipoetic. And the poetic, I am interested in, the elusive mystery ultimately.

I'm very interested in ignorance. Okay? I think ignorance is underrated. [Laughs.] And we are so knowledge-based, believing that we're set—we solve the riddle of the universe and forget that the riddle of the universe is in the field of ignorance, not in the field of knowledge. [00:06:11] I think my main attachment to art is that it allows me to explore what I don't know, even if I won't end up knowing. But just the traveling in that huge territory, I find fascinating. And then the small area of knowledge, it's like a base that gives me some security and protection, but I know it's just that. It's like a trampoline from which you jump into the real world, which is ignorance. So I am distrusting certitude. I'm distrusting any absolute statement. I like rupture, I like interstices, I like, I don't know, going out of the structure into what we don't know. And I think utopian thinking is probably related to that.

I don't know how I ended up [laughs] in that statement about poetry. I think poetry tries to capture that, but by building a closed structure to do that, it declares that it won't be able to do it. It's like declaring failure before even entering, and that's also a problem with any other craft. If you use a craft to find out something, what you find out is only what the craft will allow you to find out. [00:08:04] So, for me, the craft is the last step to give form but not the lens through which you look at things. Okay? The traditional painter divides the universe in what's paintable and what's not paintable and only focus on what's paintable and ignores [laughs] the huge rest, and I think you should look at the whole thing and then decide, Okay, a stick with hair is probably not the best tool to deal with this.

I used to tell my students that I can teach them hypothetically how to use a microscope and maybe even build one and be perfect at it, but the only thing I will achieve is that they never look at the stars.

JOSH T. FRANCO: The only thing they will achieve—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: —with that is that they never will see the stars.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh. Yes, that sends me into a place of ignorance.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Hmm?

JOSH T. FRANCO: That line.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. This one, I saw this one in—you know, at Alexander Gray, the gallery. And it's *Una...Que Cubre La Palabra Que La Nombra*, one that covers the world.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: The word that names it.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. Is this a comment on painting as a—I mean—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No.

JOSH T. FRANCO: —you're not interested in medium, but this one sticks out to me.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: There were several different objects. [00:10:00] Like, of the robe coming out. It's more about the mystery of names that try to capture something and don't.

JOSH T. FRANCO: And how is it that this dripping—it is Latex or is it paint?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: That's epoxy with—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Epoxy.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: —printing ink.

JOSH T. FRANCO: So how is it that that matter, that material—I mean, I think it's just hard in art context, standing in a gallery looking at something like that, to not think that it—to not take it as a comment on medium, which is a very boring question compared to all the other questions it raises, but it's present, it's there. So, you know—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well—

JOSH T. FRANCO: I thought of Lynda Benglis, for instance.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah, I hadn't thought of Lynda Benglis, [they laugh] but I understand why. No, it's literally that. It's a name that you don't know what the name is, and you would have to actually name it yourself in order to make sense.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. It's just—I mean, I just am struck. You know, why not ink? Why not—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well—

JOSH T. FRANCO: —an ink stain? Or—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: —there's another one with a cord the word, and there's another one that only is black. There is—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Ah, so it's the collective?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: —a plaque in which it's a rectangle and it's cut and folded over the word, so it's just a rectangle. There are different versions, but it's always covering the actual words that would tell you what it is.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Ah, yeah. So that's kind of where play comes in, then; your choice of materials is—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: It's irrelevant.

JOSH T. FRANCO: —more—yeah, it's irrelevant, you have to have something?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. [00:12:00] And also this along with *Rainbow Statement*, you know, they stand out to me in your work because they're colorful, and I wonder how you, you know, choose —of course everything—you know, this is also a color, and all the black-and-white things are colors but they seem, like, striking. You know, they stand out, the things that have a rainbow color, reds and blues. Do you have any particularly strong feelings about—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No.

JOSH T. FRANCO: —color? Yeah. [They laugh.]

Oh, Ray Johnson is someone who recurs a lot in the Archives also. And this one, yeah, it's an homage, it's not a universal question. It's—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No, that's a team work in certain ways. Yeah, I have that box here. In the back are—all these names are written in the back. And he did it for me to make a box. I lived in Locust Valley for some years, and he lived about five blocks away from where I lived. We had the same mailman—

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.]

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: —so the mailman would carry back and forth stuff between us, and would come and say, 'Oh, today, I have a good one.' [They laugh.] So he became sort of an art critic, [laughs] between both of us.

JOSH T. FRANCO: It must be fun to be Ray Johnson's mailman. So what were your conversations like with him?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Oh, surreal. [They laugh.] Very nice. He was really a wonderful, affectionate, nice person. [00:14:02] He would one day call, 'Did you read about that woman that opened an egg and there was a snake in it?' [They laugh.] Things like that. Or 'I'll be in the stairs of the Friends academy' or something, 'Why don't we sit there for a while?' So I would drive and sit there. But there was never a serious, theoretical discussion. And one day, he invited me to see—he had gotten a grant and bought a Xerox machine, and so he was very excited. I still can't understand his suicide. It was—

JOSH T. FRANCO: I don't think anyone can, yeah. He shows up—you know, it's one—

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JOSH T. FRANCO: —of those—those figures are interesting, the figures who died in traumatic, you know, ways. Like Mendieta, again. Because it's kind of by the force of their absence, they show up, I think, in disproportionate amounts in a way in people's memories. And because—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well, I—

JOSH T. FRANCO: —he was a mail artist.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: I mean, he chose to swim into death. I don't know—Ana I think was killed. I don't think it was suicide.

JOSH T. FRANCO: No. Yeah, not suicide but just traumatic, sudden, and unexpected. But also because very literally because he was a mail—you know, he used the mail so much. He shows up in everybody's papers [laughs] because he sent them things. Did you talk with him about correspondence?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah. Did I what?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Talk with him about network, using the mail systems and networking?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No. When we started our mail exhibits we didn't know about him. And we met—there was a school in Oyster Bay, [Brad] Fiedel's school, which was a private, high-end, I don't know if it was a boarding school or not. It ended very badly because they went bankrupt, and although they knew they went bankrupt, they kept still cashing tuition checks. [Laughs.] It was pretty bad. But they were interested in art, and they made in their house or mansion a little show of Latin American art, and we—we were invited for dinner, and I don't know what year that was, but Ray was there. [00:02:04] That's where I met him. It could have been '66 or '67, I don't know. No, not that—well, around that.

It was interesting that when I came to Old Westbury, the son, who at the time I met was only 14, became a student. He became a student of mine. He wanted to work with the synthesizer, and the guy in charge of music, Nabokov's brother, didn't believe in synthesizers, so wouldn't sponsor an independent study. [. . . Brad -LC] came to me, and I sponsored it. He also was a brilliant student in a class of mine. Then he became a famous composer in movies. Did a lot I

don't remember now the titles, but he's highly respected composer.

Anyway, Ray then stayed in touch through mail, and then when we moved to Locust Valley, we became even closer.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Were there other people around there, around Locust Valley, that—was there a really good artist community there?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No, there wasn't an artist community. Another person—but I never met him—that lived in the area was Lippold. Do you know—

JOSH T. FRANCO: No, who's Lippold?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Oh, Lippold was a sculptor of the '50s who did sort of accumulations of—cosmic accumulation. There's one in Lincoln Center, sort of like a big hanging—I don't know if it's still there, but it used to be. He was highly respected in his time.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, so you—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: But I never met him. So.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Do you still make these?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Not really, but I gave myself permission to [laughs] continue. I mean, I consider it an open-ended project.

JOSH T. FRANCO: And what is this one printed?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: That—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Is this a print? Casa—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No, no, it's a piece of aluminum cut.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh. We have not talked about Magritte.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Oh, I have great respect for him. Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: So this piece here is clearly referencing him. *This is not a pipe. This is not information about a pipe. This is not a work of art. This is not a work by Magritte.* And that's an actual pipe, yes?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah, but it's painted over.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, you painted over the pipe?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: With the colors it was?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. [Laughs.] Do you remember them—when that piece occurred to you?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: All those boxes are from '71 to '74 or so. But in general, I was and am still fascinated by it. [00:06:04] Somehow the idea that objects are covered by their own image. I'm intrigued that you never can touch anything, that if you do this, you're actually not touching the table, but you're touching some molecules of air that are in between and are like a skin. And visually, it's the same thing, so you never reach the object, there's always a shell of some kind. So I did a lot of stuff in which I carefully painted the object exactly like the object that's in it. So it's an image over that, so you never get to the real thing. And that's one of them.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Platonic, again, which came up yesterday.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah, maybe. [Laughs.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, but it's a—you know, the act of painting the thing, you know, in the colors and forms true to what it already looks like. Is it therapeutic? Is that a therapeutic practice?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No, I never—when I painted, I painted for different reasons. I have no connection to painting. In fact, I never had. The first time I painted something was when I worked with Salvador Dalí, and he had to leave, so he left me in charge of painting a piano with bricks.

JOSH T. FRANCO: A brick pattern on the piano?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah. And actually, yeah, there's a phone receiver in there, which he painted.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, yeah?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: So those bricks are painted by him. [00:08:03] Do you see it in the first shelf on the right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: I think—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Okay. [Microphone rustles.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Here, I'll go for it. I'll take mine off. [Removes microphone.] This phone?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, oh, the bricks. Yeah. But I don't see bricks. I see the phone receiver.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: On the top. [Microphone rustles.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: It's white with red?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Right, I'm coming. [Microphone rustles.] Oh, boy, this—

JOSH T. FRANCO: You can also walk with it. You can come—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No, but I'm—now I got caught. Okay. [Removes microphone.] Oh, yeah, I think, I didn't see that.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh!

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Okay, so these are painted by him. Actually, it's peeling off.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: So it was—the magazine—

[They return to microphones.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: So we just looked at the telephone receiver with the bricks painted by Dalí, which are the same as the bricks he asked you to paint on the piano. [00:10:10]

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah. He was interested—basically in what turned out to be holography. But there was a magazine called *Venture* magazine, which was owned by *Look* magazine, and was a travel magazine. They had the patent, I guess, for a photographic device that did Xography, X-O-graphy. It was basically like the postcards which shift images when you move, so it was the plastic ribs that would push into focus the different ways the image printed underneath. A camera would travel 180 degrees and then decompose the image into vertical bars, and the plastic would allow you to see three-dimensionally without using glasses. And that, they would put on the cover. [. . . -LC] They commissioned him to set up a situation that would then be photographed that way and make a cover for *Venture*.

His project was this piano, a toy piano painted with bricks, a telephone painted with bricks—well, also an articulated model for art, a mannequin sitting at the piano. And from the piano, a water pump would pump water up, and next to it would be his elephant on the big sapphire. So roughly, that was a piece in front of a watercolor of helicopters flying all over the place, which was hideous. He started it and then he had to go back or wanted to go back to Spain and left me in charge of finishing the project. My task was to paint bricks without ever having painted [they laugh]—well, a strange introduction to the craft. The whole project then collapsed because one of the vice presidents came in to inspect what we were doing, or at the time what I was doing,

and was shocked to find that the piano was a toy piano, and that Dalí hadn't made it with his own hands, and that everything was, like, prefabricated. It was not his understanding of the project. So he canceled it, and the whole thing never [laughs]—

JOSH T. FRANCO: So it never came—it never was published?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Never came to be.

JOSH T. FRANCO: How did you—were you working for the magazine, or did—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No.

JOSH T. FRANCO: How did you meet Dalí?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: When I was in Pratt, he came with his entourage, telling the director that he wanted to—how did he put it?—well, he wanted to have—he had a plate, a copper plate with an image. [00:14:00] It was a Virgin Mary, and he wanted to have flies coming out from the forehead of the Virgin Mary and fly into space. At Pratt, they were so focused on printmaking that they said, 'Well, how can we do an edition?' It didn't go anywhere, and they decided it was a language problem. Dalí would mix French with English, Spanish, and Catalan all together. So finally, they called me to help translate, and I realized that he didn't want to print or that it was unrelated to printmaking, that what he wanted is to find a varnish that would take—

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LUIS E. CAMNITZER: —lenticular patterns that would reproduce in some ways what I just described of the Xography. So I made that clear, and he was very impressed that I understood, not the language but the concept. And then we talked a lot. I actually interviewed him for a magazine [laughs] in Uruguay, and he was very sweet, very nice guy. Then I asked him if I could print that plate as a souvenir, and he said, 'Sure.' And so I did, and then I asked him if after I printed if he would sign it. And he said, 'Yes, just bring it to the hotel, and I'll sign it.' So I left it in the hotel, [. . . -LC] and I didn't hear from him.

The following year, I called him to call to make him accountable. [Laughs.] And he said, 'Oh, no, I sold that.' [They laugh.] I said, 'Well, but that was mine.' 'Yeah, I'm sorry, but anyway, I was trying to figure out how can I make contact with you because I would like you to help me in the research about this three-dimensional viewing without glasses.' So, 'Okay.' I became sort of a scientific translator for him, and we went to labs in different places, and I would explain what he wanted [laughs] in understandable language. It was very interesting.

JOSH T. FRANCO: What years was this going on?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: It was '65.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And what were the other—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: '64, '65, yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: What were the other kinds of projects?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: With him?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, that he was—that you would investigate for him.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well, no, he wanted to find if grating glass for scientific purposes could be used for this. He was looking for some surface, lenticular surface that would do the trick, and that led him to make contact with lots of people that were very interesting. Like Gerald Oster was a guy exploring moiré patterns, but moiré patterns not for their own sake but as enlarging devices. The moiré would pick up a small part. And Béla Julesz, with whom I became friends actually, he was the head of perception in Bell Labs in Murray Hill and a brilliant guy who when he had his 40th birthday was depressed because he realized he wouldn't get the Nobel Prize anymore. [They laugh]. Well, getting old. And we went to—Columbia had a secret lab where they had developed FM.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Radio?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Radio.

JOSH T. FRANCO: How did you discover it if it was secret?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: It had been secret but—you know?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: So I don't know, we went to lots of places, and I had to translate. That was a project. Then, eventually, this came up, and then *Venture* moved floors. They called me that I should pick up the stuff, so I did and then I wrote to him—he didn't answer—telling him I had some stuff. When I saw him again, he said, 'Well, I don't want the stuff.' I had married Liliana in the meantime. He said, 'I owe you a wedding gift, so keep it.' So that, and they also had the watercolor too, which was a huge, horrible thing—

JOSH T. FRANCO: The helicopter—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Hmm?

JOSH T. FRANCO: The helicopter watercolor?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.]

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Then a publisher asked him to make a series of portraits of Spanish celebrities, like El Greco, Cervantes, and so on. And he asked them to have me make the plates for that, and then print the edition. So those were the products.

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's fascinating, this piece of history. Have you ever worked with assistants?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: With what?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Have you ever had an assistant—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No.

JOSH T. FRANCO: —in that way? No.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: I'm not good in delegating.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative], yeah. Can I ask about this piece on the wall here?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah, it's Ed McGowin. He's an American artist who taught in Old Westbury and we were friends, exchanged work.

JOSH T. FRANCO: And it's—is it galvanized steel?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: It's galvanized something, yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Aluminum, maybe? Well, some galvanized metal in the shape of a hat with a floating chocolate cake painted inside.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Which roughly has the shape of the hat.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, yeah, right. [They laugh.] Who were some of the other faculty at Westbury that you worked with?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: [Well, we had Mac Adams who has just retired now. [00:06:00] We were very few full-time people. In art history for a while, we had Benjamin Buchloh. Chris Griffin, who never became visible as an artist really, but was a terrific teacher. We were never more than three or four full-time people, but all multidisciplinary. One was as much a sculptor as a painter and also did airbrushing, so you could fit different roles. I could fit in sculpture and printmaking, and Chris could do ceramics and painting and drawing, and so on.

And then we had adjuncts. I devised a rotary system, and didn't want them, if possible, to teach for more than a year or two, figuring that it gave them a line in their biography to find a better job. There were a lot of interesting people. Ana was one, Houston Conwill was another one, César Paternosto. When Benjamin left, Eugenie Tsai came, Jean Fisher was there for a while, Helen Molesworth. Catherine Bernard, who is still there, I think she's tenured now. The problem

was tenure system is that once you have tenure, you get stuck, [they laugh] so it's problematic.
-LC] [00:08:09]

JOSH T. FRANCO: I always find it interesting, you know, from university to university, it changes the relationship between art practice and art history, down to, like, curriculum requirements, where they're physically located. It sounds like it was very small and close at Old Westbury. And then how did you—you know, what message were the students given about the relationship between studio art and art history?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: It was difficult but most art historians—all of them, actually—all of them were very rigid in terms of chronology, and I always asked them to teach from today backwards and everybody said, 'I can't do it.' They were trained to do it in a different direction. Judith Barry also was a faculty, by the way, at some point. I didn't observe enough to fully answer your question. I mean, I was more concerned about how they related to the students and would give advice. It was open admissions, and it was a college geared to, explicitly, students who had been bypassed by traditional education. So when Benjamin came, he had real trouble [laughs] communicating, and I kept telling him, 'Listen, this is social service; it's not academic.' [00:10:10] Which was fine. I mean, politically, he was fine. He made an effort, but as soon as he could, he went to MIT [they laugh] and Barnard and I don't know what else.

Although I wanted it, there wasn't much interface with what happened in art history and what happened in studio. And I would have liked that people would explore in the studio problems that were raised in art history, but it didn't work.

JOSH T. FRANCO: This is a very technical question, but I think they're interesting. So if someone had declared an art studio major, was there a component—were they required to take a certain number of art history courses and vice versa?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah. Not only that, I also—in the advising process, I had—look, the college was deteriorating after the first three years, I would say. And at some point, I figured the only answer here is to have a college within a college. So I identified people and courses that I trusted and pushed them in my advising. I didn't want people to become art machines but good citizens. And I wanted them to have a broad culture, so they had to take sociology courses, they had to take psychology courses, they had to take a lot of other stuff with people I trusted. Art history was a requirement. I don't remember, probably two—at least two semesters, or maybe more. [00:12:06]

JOSH T. FRANCO: And did the art history majors have to take studio?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No, we didn't have art history majors because there was only one art historian.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, oh, right. Yeah.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: And we didn't even have a BFA. We had only a BA.

JOSH T. FRANCO: And it just was in Art?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, on paper.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: And that's why I had to bring courses down to three credits, because we only could have 45 credits in art for a BA, while you could have 90 credits for art in a BFA. But since we didn't have a BFA, the only way I could cover the curriculum the way I felt was decent was by reducing [laughs] the credit amount and multiplying the courses. And more or less, we did it.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Do you think, by making all those changes as you went, did you get near designing what you would think of as the ideal art school?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Did I get what?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Did you get near to the design from what you would call an ideal art school?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No, not in—not in logistics, but it was a right direction.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, I think that—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: You know, people would come and say, 'Okay, I want to paint portraits.' And we started challenging, 'Why? Why do you want that? Who told you?.' You know, which could have been an aunt or somebody. And tried to dig. We assumed that all those first statements were like shields covering some hidden need, so we had to go and find the need. [00:14:00] And the point was to find a level in which if they didn't deal with it, they would be deeply unhappy. Sometimes, the portraitist really was into psychology and not in to portrait painting. Once that was identified, then, is it needed that you do art for this? And if so, what shape would it take? And it could be anything. It didn't have to be a portrait painted. Or somebody wanted landscape. Most of the people came with very traditional conceptions of art. So landscape could end up being choreography in the garden or in landscaping and not necessarily producing a painting. And then according to what happened, we would either offer or refer—

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LUIS E. CAMNITZER: —to skill programs. If we didn't have it, we had arrangements with other schools in the area. All that was good, until pressure came. Now, when they leave, they have to find a job, so they better have video skills or computer skills. So suddenly, skill programs crept in.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, graphic design, I'm sure.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. Did you share your work with students? Were they aware of your art?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: I tried not to. I tried not to. I tried that the whole department didn't have faculty shows, because the danger is that either students adopt the language or they tried to psych you out. But that also—at some point, we had to give in.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Let's—I would like to talk about this piece here, that's *A Model and Surrealist Sculpture, Etching By Picasso*. I mean, what is—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: 'What the hell is it?'

JOSH T. FRANCO: What the hell is it? [They laugh.]

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well, I took, you know, those little devices with a wheel that measure maps and it tells you how much you did. [00:02:07] With that device, I went over Picasso's etching, over all the lines, and at the end, it gave me the length of the line if it would be one line. Then I took a cord or a thread in that length and wrapped it into a spiral and put some glue so it kept the shape, and that's it. So basically, it's Picasso's drawing in one line.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Why did you choose to do that with Picasso?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: I always was attached to the *Suite Vollard*, probably for the wrong reasons, and that one seemed like a good one for me. I mean, I didn't want one with crosshatching [they laugh] because the measuring would be very obnoxious, but that one seemed easy. I mean, I could have taken a Matisse drawing too, but I never had much love for Matisse. I mean, I respect him but—and then I had some love for Picasso, but I don't anymore.

JOSH T. FRANCO: What happened?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: I think I got tired. I mean, nothing to do with his biography, which is detestable. But no, just aesthetically, I'm not learning from it anymore.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Have you had the opposite experience with any artist, who for a long time you didn't think about and then they became interesting later?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No, I don't think so. But that's my limitation.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Well, yeah, our interests are our interests.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. [00:04:00] I would have to think about it. I mean, I shouldn't be absolute about it.

JOSH T. FRANCO: I wonder if [laughs]—this is, again, just me. I am fascinated in your non-fascination with Judd. [They laugh.] I just think that's very—[laughs] because I've spent so much time with that man's work and spaces.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well, it may mean that I didn't spend enough time with him. [Laughs.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: I mean, I have found that it's very sad—the work is very sad in museums, and it's not at all the way to experience it, but when you either get to 101 Spring Street here in New York, his building, or if you can go to Marfa, to Texas—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah, well, I'm—

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: I was going to Marfa once and then I had to cancel and didn't end up going.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, that's—yeah.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: It also may be temperament. I like Artschwager a lot also.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, yeah?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah. I think he's one of the more important [U.S. -LC] figures. But there's a mixture in Artschwager of—it's like dead furniture, which is what I like best, which is dumb in certain ways. It's like, very muted, and at the same time very openly mysterious. It's an odd balance, which is very complex, and I really like it a lot. Judd lacks something to engage me. [00:06:07] You know, it's a mental construction, it's okay, but I can't go beyond that. It's like—what's her name, now?

JOSH T. FRANCO: A Minimalist?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No, she's a German artist that—Darboven.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh yeah. Hanne Darboven?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah. I understand her point, but it's not revealing anything I didn't know. And I think with Judd, I would put them in a parallel—

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's interesting.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: —situation. So it's not that I dismiss them, it's just not—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Well, I hope you can make it to Marfa sometime. It's like he put an alphabet on the landscape in a way, and it's, like, a way you end up reading. And it's the landscape where I grew up, so it's very shocking to me to see it, still. It's like something—you know, it's like a book you're very familiar with and then somebody lays on top of it a different alphabet, and all of a sudden, it's something else and something very shocking. So, you know, I hope you can make it.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Okay.

JOSH T. FRANCO: But I think Artschwager is so—you know, and he—in his papers at the Archives, there are these—not our oral history but just speaking—you know, typed scripts of talks he gave. And he was so expansive in thinking about art history. He spends—one of my favorite documents is him just talking about the significance of cave art and thinking about artists in that very long line of the cave artists to him and today. [00:08:07] He also opens one talk with the line, you know, 'I'm 75 years old, so I know absolutely everything now.' [They laugh.]

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well, that sounds like him.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Very funny, yeah. Did you ever know him? Did you meet him?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yes.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, yeah?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: The dentist that helped us organize [laughs] as a group Artschwager was a patient of his, and Artschwager built the water tray we used to wet the paper. [They laugh.] And then when I was with Marian Goodman, I met him there. I also showed him in the gallery in the

school with a piece, and then he was in a jury of the New York Council on the Arts and was instrumental in getting me a grant, which was unexpected. I had applied to printmaking and sculpture, and sculpture was an afterthought. It was the boxes; I mean, it wasn't even real sculpture, and I was sure if I get it, I get it as a printmaker. Well, it doesn't matter. Anyway, I got it in sculpture [they laugh] and he was on the jury in sculpture. He was a very nice guy.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, that's great. Do you remember any other conversations with him about his work or your work?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No, no. But I liked a lot—and actually, I wanted to show but then we couldn't get it—when I was working in The Drawing Center, the drawings of different points of view. I don't remember what they're called. There's a booklet with them. Do you know what I'm referring to? [00:10:04]

JOSH T. FRANCO: No, it's not coming to me.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Suddenly, the ashtray is huge, and the room changes position and then it's a door that becomes huge, so it's like he merges with different points in space, and that's something I feel very close to. But the drawings were dispersed, and different owners, and it became very difficult to gather it, so we couldn't do it.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Can you talk about your role at The Drawing Center? Because you worked here for a number of years.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah, I worked there six years or so. When Catherine de Zegher was the director, we were friends from before, so she sort of bent my arm to take care of the viewing program. For some reason, to be in charge of the viewing program made me a curator. But basically what I did was to first of all go over the archive. Artists could send their work at the time in CDs and slides—mostly slides, actually—to be accepted into the archive, to have a review with the curator, and hopefully to be selected for what was called selection shows, which were between two and four a year. [00:12:00]

I divided people those that I would not care about at all, people that I felt were not there yet but needed a discussion, and people that were there and needed a discussion or I wanted to know more about them. And then slowly, from the patterns that emerged from the work, I would make topics around which the selection show would function. And the people that were in the category of both being worth potentially to show and wanted to discuss could come any time they wanted. So some people, I saw eight times or so. We were in hour-long discussions sometimes. In dialogues, which were very good.

One thing I wanted, but that didn't work I don't know, Catherine wasn't hot about the idea—I wanted to make an archive of *Assignments* drawn from the work that was there, have it open so that teachers would give and have a living situation of reference for curricula. So I kept track, but the archive never took over. [00:14:01] It was nice, and I still meet people. I must have seen, I don't know, hundreds of people. I saw about eight people, eight artists a week during six years. I mean, it wasn't 52 weeks but still an enormous amount. So a lot of people greet me, and I have [they laugh] not a clue, which is very awkward because the hour was very intense with the exchange and sometimes very intimate. So people think that they left a huge mark. [Laughs.] And on some level they did, but I have bad memory for faces. If I see the work, I tend to recognize it, but the person not. But it was great. I think it was quite unique. Before—

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LUIS E. CAMNITZER: —I did it, I think it was more formal and perfunctory somehow. But during my years, it really was an intense, like, postgraduate review. And I learned a lot in that because I was faced mostly with problems I never would pose to myself and suddenly I had to confront, and that was really great. And then when Catherine—when we left, we both left because of the Twin Towers thing. The board didn't back her on criticizing Pataki. I don't know if you know that story.

JOSH T. FRANCO: No, tell it.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: But anyway, Littman came and took her place and slowly the reviewing program was phased out. And I think it's a big loss. So.

JOSH T. FRANCO: What was the 9/11 controversy?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: The 9/11 thing was that in the new towers they built, they were including an art space, and The Drawing Center was selected to do that. So we were supposed, eventually, to move, and actually Catherine had selected a Finnish architect—I think he was Finnish—to make it and some—but families of the victims were concerned about the politics of our shows. They had seen some selection shows that were biased against Bush and against the war. [00:02:02] They contacted the *New York Post* and the *Daily News*, which ended up doing cover stories, against The Drawing Center to the point that Pataki came out saying, 'Well, if The Drawing Center doesn't know how to behave, they should not go on sacred ground.' Catherine came out with a declaration, 'If there's going to be censorship, we're not going.' [Laughs.] And there, the board of The Drawing Center, instead of backing her up, said, 'Well, it's not so radical,' and—so. So that became a very intense discussion, and at some point, we decided to resign. I don't know what else was between the board and her. It may be there were more things, but it became politically untenable.

So I stayed on a little, because there were projects that I had to finish. Like, there was a show of Eleanore Mikus that Eleanore insisted that I finish to curate it. And from the board, actually—the president of the board asked me to stay till they hired a new person. So I stayed on some months more and then left.

JOSH T. FRANCO: You said when you were, you know, organizing the artists—the entries to—you know, along with your interests, the topics would emerge.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Do you remember some of those topics?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah. One was non-declarative art, which was about dumb art—

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.]

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: —but they didn't let me use the title 'dumb.' [00:04:04] One was *Realistic Means*, which was a show—I realized at some points that there were a lot of very skillful realist artists that, in fact, were conceptual and were using realism as a vehicle for the concept. And these artists were not accepted by the Conceptual crowd because they looked academic, they were not accepted by the academics because they were Conceptual, so they were falling through the crack. That was actually a very nice show. I had a show of—unrelated to the viewing program—of Chago. Chago was a cartoonist for the Cuban Revolution while they were in the hills, and then became a draftsman for *Granma*.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, there are some of—I think there's some of his material at the Cuban Heritage Collection in Miami.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah?

JOSH T. FRANCO: I remember that Chago—I remember them showing us those graphics.

LUIS CAMNITZER: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh!

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: And he was a very good artist besides that, and very influential for the generations afterwards. That was the first or only exhibition of Chago in the US, done in conjunction with—what's her name?—with the curator from Cuba. And Chago's wife came, the widow, and it was very good. [00:06:05] Then there was a drawing exhibit of Ferrari, his letters of the '60s.

And Eleanore Mikus was a very nice story but she came unannounced without having an appointment, showed up so that I see her work. So this older lady [laughs] whom I didn't take seriously just out of ageism, I tried to convince her that she was in the wrong place and moment and wrong procedure. And she said, 'Well, I don't have a gallery'—which was one requirement —'I'm here, I have pictures, why don't you just look at them?' So she forced me to look at them, and I couldn't just be rude, although my misanthropy [they laugh] was kicking in, and she—so I opened the file and saw pictures that I recognized. [Microphone rustles.] Oh, I messed it up.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Got it.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: So it turned out that I had seen some of those pieces in 1964 in Pace

Gallery, one of the first shows I saw when I came, and they stayed in my mind. They were contemporary or preceding Robert Ryman in that paint—I don't know if you know her work?

JOSH T. FRANCO: I don't.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: The Blanton has several pieces of hers. There was some connection there. [00:08:02] So [laughs] it was really odd that 40 years later, I would still have that in my mind. So I told her, 'Listen, this is what's going on here. I'm not the person to take care of this. I will show it to Catherine.' And so we agreed we would make a show in the Drawing Room, which was a small one, with drawings of the '60s. And that was it. And then Catherine, who had left—I mean, who resigned—but then I was called by the acting director that they needed to fill the big room, and would I be willing to curate a big show? I said, 'Okay, but we have to discuss it with Eleanore. I don't want to go to Ithaca and spend a week there sifting through her work. I mean, it was too cumbersome. Eleanore said, 'Oh, don't worry. I'll just put everything in a truck and [laughs] bring it to The Drawing Center.' So we did it, and she brought like, I don't know, 300 pieces. We went over it on the spot, 'Yes, no, yes, no,' and had a terrific show. [Laughs.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: All because she walked in with just hutzpah?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well, we had a little bit of tension, she wanted a retrospective, and I wanted the '60s, which were the more important work, so we found a compromise.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Do you remember some of the names of the conceptualists who used realism? [00:10:00]

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well, one is Renato Orara, who at that time was Renato Ortega. He changed his name. I have catalogs upstairs. If you want, we can look at them.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, well, it's good to know those exist too. Yeah, and they would be all at The Drawing Center's records as well, I imagine?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's good too. And then there was something else about The Drawing Center I wanted to ask. Yeah, I asked you about the topics. I don't remember. [Laughs.]

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Oh, it may come back.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, it may. Let's see. Luis, what's interesting in this experience is that most people doing the oral history, there's always a deep eagerness to put themselves on the record, so usually they drive the oral histories, kind of very, like, on the background. You don't seem to have that compulsion. [They laugh.]

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No. [They laugh.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: So, you know, it's a very interesting experience. But I do want to challenge you a little bit, like if there's—is there—do you—is there any nugget of information that you feel compelled that you want to have exist after, you know—in 100 years?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No.

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's so interesting! [They laugh.] Very interesting.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No, actually, I had this fight with the gallery about archive, and that I should have it organized and sell it or give it or whatever or have a foundation. I mean, all this crap. [00:12:09]

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.]

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: What I did do is—the research for the book on Cuban art, I merged with Rachel Weiss who also had hers—and we sold it to the University in Miami.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, so the Cuban—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Where you saw Chago, yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: —Heritage Collection. Yes, yes, a very nice collection.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: But that made sense because of people interested in Cuban art. It's totally disorganized. It's going to be a nightmare for them to go through, but that's their problem.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, that's what processing archivists are for. Yeah.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah. But that's useful. I mean, it's useful if anybody is interested in Cuba. But on my end, I don't know. I don't see the importance. So.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, well, [laughs] I don't know what it would take to convince you, but I think we all see the importance. And I—you know, I—that's another thing Alexander Gray is so good about, the legacies and caring for them. So, you know, Joan Semmel's papers are with us also. Some other artists, and Betty Parsons.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No, the only legacy I'm interested is leaving enough money so that the children can work on what they like to work and don't have to work on survival. So that's my only function. [They laugh.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, I just think this piece is beautiful: *Sun*, from 1975-78. Is this on brass?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah, that's on brass.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Etched into it?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: It was a drawing, which actually somebody bought for MoMA. And that's etched in brass. [00:14:06] That's available actually, if you want to buy it.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, yeah?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: [Laughs.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Archivists don't make enough. [Laughs.] Oh, you know this idea, this—this is another thing. The pairing of photograph and handwriting, you know, it's another thing that puts you in a group with some other people just as far as formal formulas. I don't know if you know Kathy Vargas's work?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No.

JOSH T. FRANCO: She's a Texas-based artist who does this but also with a higher profile. He did the *Rich and the Poor* series, and now I'm forgetting his name. Oh, no.

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JOSH T. FRANCO: I mean, it'll come to me, but I think we've talked about this to a degree. But the—you know, it's just—when you see artists, multiple artists from different places and different, you know, priorities, come to the same form, it makes it striking for some reason, in the same formula. So it just makes me want to dig into that, into the why. And we talked about handwriting and the series already to a degree, but it also seems to be about scale because these works are always pretty small, and they're, like, things you can hold in your own hand as well, and it leads to thinking about intimacy. So maybe that's the question, you know, like if we were to put these next to one of your room installations, one consumes the viewer and one the viewer can imagine, you know, totally encapsulating themselves in their own hands. Do you think about that difference, of intimacy—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah, I think—

JOSH T. FRANCO: —with an object?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: —why I don't—I don't put it in terms of intimacy, although it is obviously behind it. I think that it's a perfect scale for the presentation of whatever you do. Some require big, some require small, and if you don't hit the right proportion, there's a problem in a negative sense. That is, either it's inflated, and therefore *pffft* [makes raspberry sound]. I have, like, a set of corporations, which you saw, I think, in the catalog. One is calling for projects, big-scale projects of small ideas, which [laughs] I think defines a lot of spectacular stuff, which is basically silly one-liners. [00:02:22] And I'm not leaving myself out of that. I mean, I also work with one-liners, which I regret. But if you maintain the scale, at least it becomes potable. It becomes non-obtrusive, non-offensive. But a lot of art is way beyond what it needs in scale, or it doesn't reach the scale it actually needs to become what it is. And that is not easy to measure in this

sensitivity.

I always mention Magritte for a different reason I think Magritte is really not a very good painter, and he's not very bad either, and if his paintings would be more skillful or better, they would be calendar-slick art, and if they would be less well painted than they are, they would be just attempts. They wouldn't make it. He found the perfect borderline between [laughs] good and bad, an amazing feat. It's a much bigger feat than being a skillful *Mona Lisa* painter. So I find those things very interesting, and they're not—also not discussed in art school as far as I know, and it should be, but it's also an ethical point. [00:04:02] It's an ethical point about the respect you have to show for an idea and present it according to its own needs and not your needs. So there's an abuse of power in the presentation.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Well, it's about economic ethics as well, right? Because you don't—if you use too much material in that idea that didn't require that much material, you're wasting canvas or metal or whatever.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Right. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's interesting. The different scales in your practice too, they remind [laughs] you of the fact that you are the preacher and your triumvirate with the print workshop. You know, in religion, the scale—you know, all scales play a purpose. There's the giant scales of the cathedrals and the rooms you walk into, and then there's the scales of the prayer books you hold or the saint statues that you hold, the votive candle that you hold. And not that I'm saying you're religious in any sort of way. [They laugh.] I mean, I think everyone knows that. But it's interesting that, you know—yeah, that sensitivity is interesting, and that fact that you've used the whole range of scales throughout your career and haven't just chosen one and stuck with. But I think that it goes back to: Every problem has a different solution.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well, I don't believe in public art for instance.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: [Laughs.] You are forcing people to look at it. [They laugh.] It becomes unavoidable, so I—it's very problematic.

JOSH T. FRANCO: When did you come to that? When did you have that realization for yourself?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Oh, ages ago. I think a Mexican muralist actually was—may have been the trigger. Because the message, the explicit message, is humanist, progressive, and pro-people and then it's presented in the most fascist, [laughs] totalitarian way possible. [00:06:21] So it's always dangerous. It gives you mixed messages where the narrative is an excuse for a perceptual invasion. And if you look at it from that point that Mexico I'm sort of reluctant to make the point. But [they laugh] then you apply it to architecture as well, and then you suddenly realize that a lot of architecture is so heavily symbolic that you don't exist; only the symbol exists. And therefore, it's continually an indoctrination through the usage of space that I find dangerous, pedagogically dangerous.

JOSH T. FRANCO: You said the Mexican muralism and the totalitarian nature, is it—what I think you're saying is because it's in spaces that people have to walk into to do things that they have to do to keep their life moving.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah. I mean, the caricature of that is the *Tilted Arc* of Serra, which he still doesn't understand the point apparently.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. We have all that legal paperwork in the Archives too.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Oh, okay. [They laugh.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: It's very interesting.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Oh, good. [They laugh.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, what was that moment like? You were—you know, you were around when it was happening, I imagine. You're aware of it when it was happening.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Oh, yeah, but for me, it was clear that it was a travesty that never should have happened. [00:08:06] It's a monument to himself, it's not a contribution to anything.

There's a big sculpture of his in Hamburg that has graffiti on it [laughs] and I thought, Oh, wow, great! [They laugh.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: One of the most interesting things I've seen in the last few years that I realized is—the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, they have a piece of the Berlin Wall installed on their campus, which is like—that's fascinating to me. I still don't know how to think about that.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: [Laughs.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: You know, it's—I mean, I think—I mean, I don't even think—is it a good novelty? Like, do they advertise? I don't even know that that—in a brochure about the school, is that going to do them any job? Is that going to help?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Oh, it's a piece of history. But I mean, that's a big conundrum, what do you do with all that junk?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: I think you should keep it. I think all the discussions about Confederate monuments and so on, they show either who you still are or at least who you were, so taking it away is like erasing tracks, and, no, people should be confronted with it. Maybe there should be the possibility of changing plaques with the times and explanations. But I think all the Saddam Hussein monuments should have been kept.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Someone asked me once if we—they didn't really ask, they were making a recommendation that we should go through the Archives, and everywhere that the n-word appeared, we should—[00:10:02]

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Cross it out?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Like, blacken it. And I just thought—that was my reaction is, But then we forget what that was. Yeah. Yeah, it doesn't seem the right way. Has there ever been an example of public art you've appreciated?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No, only if it's ephemeral. I mean, some gardens if you want. But speaking of this, in my dictionary piece I'm working on, I'm using the Webster's of 1972, and under 'admirer,' it says—the example it's giving: 'A man admiring a woman.' [They laugh.] That's it. I mean, that's it in terms of gender. There's no acceptance of a woman admiring [laughs]—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Or man and a man or—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: —a man, or man to man. So it's funny. And [they laugh] I think it describes what it was not that long ago.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Right. Well, it's the connection to the forgetting and the—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No, it's like crossing out the N.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, yeah, yeah, I see it. [They laugh.] I think an interesting object to think about with public art is some of Claes Oldenburg's drawings of public art. And I don't know if they were always intended to actually be realized or if he was doing the drawing—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No, I think they weren't actually because at least some were impossible. My favorite is a cube blocking the streets.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, [laughs] right.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: But I mean, I like him, I respect him a lot actually, but in terms of public sculpture, I enjoy them if I see them once every so often. But if I imagine I have to go to work each day and see that thing there, that's like listening to a piece of music every day over and over. [00:12:07] I mean, it imprints in a bad way. It shifts your neurons into a pattern from which you cannot go away. In music, it's more noticeable because you keep playing the music [laughs] even if you don't want to. And with an image, it's less powerful, but it's still—somewhere it must have the same effect.

JOSH T. FRANCO: And I live in Washington, DC, where I see [laughs] the—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: You live in a mausoleum anyway.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yes, every day, this vertical thing. Yeah, a strange place. So I'll ask you a question that it's maybe superstitious, we'll see what you think, but I like to ask people: Who are the other people in the room? And obviously there are no other bodies in the room, but in the sense of who—you know, whose voices are always with you?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: I'll put it differently. I would put it: Who in history would you like to have met? [Laughs.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, yeah, that's a great—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Okay?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yes.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah, but Simón Rodríguez is a guy. I will tell you. I will go to the bathroom first.

[Tape stops, restarts.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Ready?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Ready.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Okay. So we were going—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: We should turn that.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, sure.

[Tape stops, restarts.]

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: The sun was hitting—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Right, yeah, yeah. So you were going to tell us which historical figures.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well, Simón Rodríguez was the tutor of Simón Bolívar, and he lived from 1780 or so till 1850. [00:14:05] And he eventually had to leave Venezuela—it wasn't Venezuela yet—because he was suspect of belonging to some groups that were against Spanish rule. So he went to Jamaica and worked with children and learned English in the process, so it was an example of dialogical education. And then went to Philadelphia, or Baltimore, and worked at a print shop and learned about typography. And then he went—

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LUIS E. CAMNITZER: —to Paris, and in Paris, he was in the salon of the aunt of Gauguin, who was Peruvian, and re-met Bolívar. Then they decided to go to Rome, walking mostly, [laughs] and in Rome, they went up one of the hills, and from there, Bolívar proclaimed that he would fight for the independence of Latin America. And that oath was witnessed by Simón Rodríguez, and that made Rodríguez famous. He's known as the witness of Simón Bolívar, which is ironic. Then when Bolívar went back and fought and sort of betrayed Miranda, Rodríguez became his educational ambassador, first to Bolivia where he tried to change the educational system, and then they parted ways. He never went back to Venezuela. He went to Chile, to Ecuador. And he was extremely anticlerical, so much that his children were named Squash, Carrot, Corn [they laugh] not to use the book of Saints. And in Bolivia, he tried to give money to families in exchange for the children going to school. He was—do you know at Pestalozzi? [00:02:03]

JOSH T. FRANCO: No.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Pestalozzi was the father of progressive education, a Swiss guy in the early 19th century influenced by Rousseau, and so was Rodríguez. Rodríguez and Pestalozzi were on the same level, only Pestalozzi is famous. Well, he was European, and Simón Rodríguez, nobody knows. But Rodríguez, besides that he was anticolonial, Latin Americanist, anti-racist, he had all the progressive traits of today. Because of his learning in the print shop, he also worked on layout of pages and broke down the pages—and I will show you later—the design, so that it becomes a mixture of diagram and calligram following the flow of thinking rather than the flow of

reading. [. . . -LC] He wrote a lot of aphorisms, like, 'If we don't invent, we fail,' which is the most classic statement of his. Another one is, 'Education's first task is to deal with things, and the second task is deal with those who own them.' [They laugh.] And all this is between 1820 and 1840.

So, for me, he is the true origin of Latin America conceptualism and the true origin of progressive education in Latin America, sort of preceding Paulo Freire, who I don't know if he knew him, but there's a direct linkage. And still, the guy only now is starting to be known. Okay? [00:04:26] I did lots of works, artworks on him, that are not in the catalog, and I'm totally obsessed with him. I mean, he is just an amazing guy. And I now found, a couple of years ago, that in Mexico, there's a group of *Rodriguistas* who are following the research, are coming up with documents that were unknown before. And so it's a little, like, mafia—

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.] Yeah.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: —and I'm a member, officially a member of it.

JOSH T. FRANCO: It makes a lot of sense. I see all those connections, down to the printmaking.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah. And then in the book on Latin America conceptualism, I have a chapter on him, so you can—if you have the book, you can follow it there. It's said that while he was in Bolivia, he was at odds with Sucre, who was in part serving the oligarchy in Bolivia and opposing his plans. It's said that he invited him for dinner in his house and served the food in hospital bassinets. [00:06:00] And [they laugh] that isn't true, but when that rumor came to Rodríguez's ears, he loved it and started recirculating the rumor as if it was true. So that kind of a guy, I think [laughs]—

JOSH T. FRANCO: A Conceptual move, yeah.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: I would like to have coffee with him.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, that's very nice. Oh. Anyone else?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No, that does it.

JOSH T. FRANCO: That does it. Great. [They laugh.] There are a couple of other people whose names have come to mind, and I'm just thinking about other artists from Latin America who came to New York, and I wonder if you have connections. So, Carmen Herrera?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No, I never met her.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Never met her. Or Fanny Sanín?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: I've never met her either.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. Or Rafael Ferrer?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yes. Actually, we are very friendly.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, yeah?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah. We met rather late, I would say shortly before he had the retrospective in El Barrio. I think that the Conceptual art book in Amazon has one review, and I think he is the one that wrote it. [They laugh.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's great. What kind of things do you talk about with him?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Oh, I always had great respect and envy. He was first and only Latin American artist that exhibited in Castelli, and we all wanted to be in Castelli. [Laughs.] So we talked about that. I think a lot of work he did afterwards, I don't find interesting, even if he claims that it's done in jest, but that's a perilous borderline. [They laugh.] [00:08:08] But his early conceptualist work I think is very important.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, I agree. His work at the Whitney in the '70s also. But that brings up, you know, downtown New York in the '60s and '70s, and I'm always interested in hearing about that scene.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah, but I never moved in circles, really. Like, with Nam June Paik, the time we met was extremely friendly, he was not known yet. I think in '67, I included him in a show I did about serial objects. Did I? It doesn't matter. I mean, he was an unknown figure. Charlotte was better known because of the scandals, who also was a delightful and modest person. But for Nam June Paik, Uruguay was an example of an exotic country, and for me Korea, [they laugh] so we had this exchange of affection for that. But then when he became famous, I receded. And I find myself doing that instinctively.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, you receded? You made the choice?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah. And I don't—I think I cannot handle the danger of contamination. [00:10:01] [They laugh.] I mean, I'm negative in my description about that. I think it's a flaw, I should be mature enough not to have, but I think that's what happened. But he was really a sweet and nice guy, worth being a friend with, and somehow, I felt fame became an obstacle.

JOSH T. FRANCO: What is it about fame? Because in one sense, it could be argued that, you know, the more—well, you've said—you know, the problems that you set up are very localized. Yesterday, we talked about down to the neighborhood you grew up in, so I get it to that degree. And I guess it's just—is it the misanthropy just rearing its head again?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Maybe it comes from the same root, yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. So what do you wish for an exhibition, then, whenever, you know, one comes around?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Ultimately, at this point, that it sells so that the children have money. I mean, they're—now they're both in fragile situations. Gabo is teaching in Columbia, but it's a term appointment. It's over after this semester and then he's on the street, and it's very difficult for him to find a job because it's diversity that counts, so he always reaches the last interview level with the last two or three finalists and then that's it. And Miguel is really a brilliant writer but hasn't published yet and has faith enough in the writing so that he gave up his well-paying job. [00:12:06] And so I'm concerned about what if—I mean, he's not going to live from a book, or from books, even if they are very good. So I want to make sure that's my legacy in certain ways, and my concern. Everything else, I really don't care much about it. On the other hand, if I get a bad review, I will be pissed. Okay? So—

JOSH T. FRANCO: So you don't want fame, but you don't want [laughs]—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: So it's not that I don't have vanity. In certain ways, I fight the vanity I have as much as I can by putting it to context. Okay? It's like, ownership. I'm realizing I have a lot of things, but I don't have them. I'm sort of renting them [they laugh] and what happens afterwards? So I'm not buying things anymore. There's no point in collecting, because what happens afterward? I'm worried that the library, which is quite big—the normal destiny is Gabo, my son who is art-oriented, but he doesn't have space for it, so what is going to happen, you know?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Right.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: So I use Kindle a lot. [They laugh.] It saves real estate. So those things become more and more relative and unimportant. I warn you. I mean, you are not there yet, [laughs] but it will happen.

JOSH T. FRANCO: No, I'm not personally there, but I come close to it so much because of my job. And someone called me the Happy Reaper. [They laugh.] Because they think I can—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: I should make you a visiting card.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, you should. [They laugh.]

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: 'Josh Franco, Visiting Reaper.' [00:14:00]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. [They laugh.] Yeah. I end up laughing about death all the time and, yeah, I don't know what that'll mean when I'm actually there. If it'll still be a shock or if it'll be softened, we'll see. But anyway. What kind of art does Gabriel make?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Oh, you should look him up online.

JOSH T. FRANCO: I will. Camnitzer, is it?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Gabo Camnitzer. It deals—let me see. Well, he graduated, he did his master's in Sweden, and one piece he did there was for a student show: He locked the bathrooms and put a potty in the middle of the gallery, so [they laugh] people had to do that. He —

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LUIS E. CAMNITZER: —covered the [walls of the -LC] gallery in several places, actually. I mean, he did that piece several times with plasterboard walls, which were colored, but the last one would be white. And then he had hard rock groups—he's also a musician—perform and become violent against the walls and start breaking the walls, and then the public would join and demolish the plasterboard, so all the colors started making the debris. It's one of his nicest pieces. In New York—some months ago, not long ago—he, together with a Spanish architect—they both were in the Whitney program, met there—and they replicated an experiment that was done in the '50s, I think, in Yale, of psychologists having children perform certain tasks in recognition of shapes and color in a dome. They reconstructed the dome and put adults in the dome and children doing the study—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, nice.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: —which was very nice. And, I don't know, then he had children make abstract shapes about evil, and actually—yeah, that's the catalog. He did that in Sweden and then in the Queens Museum in that biennial last year. [00:02:04] They had big pieces of fabric in the shapes of that, that the public could fold and open.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Wow.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: So it's always somehow also related to power. He's very good and very rigorous, very—he did in Norway a piece on camouflage, which was adolescents from migrant families in Norway dealing with assimilation, taking camouflage as an origin but then expanding it into culture in general.

JOSH T. FRANCO: What's the Norwegian camouflage?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No, no, camouflage in general. I mean, picking up on the military camouflage tradition, but here, they dressed up with line patterns and merged into the urban landscape.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh. [Laughs.] That's funny. Do you see any younger artists that you think are carrying forward your questions in any particular way?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well, I—yeah. I think Macchi, an Argentinian artist. I don't know if you know him.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-mm [negative]. Just goes by Macchi?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: I don't know his first name in this moment, M-A-C-C-H-I. He's really good. [00:04:00] [. . . -LC] I think it's generational that things that my generation thought about are now picked up by the following generation, so it's coincidental. Tom Friedman I like a lot, for instance, and he does pieces that are pieces I did in the '80s. But it's not a matter—I mean, he doesn't know them, I'm sure. And it doesn't matter. I think actually that's a function of anonymity, which I think is great that things that my generation did slowly permeated the way the following generation see things. They pick up on that, not individually or as individuals, but they continue the research, and that's great. There is a Chilean guy, Humberto Maturana. Did you ever hear of that—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-mm [negative].

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: —name? He and [Francisco] Varela, they're two Chilean—they're biologists, and they worked on what they called, or Maturana called, autopoietic systems, which are systems that generate themselves in their own sustainability. And it's, like, basically a basis for emergence when the group becomes a new individual in which the individuals are just components. So it's like a colony of bacteria that has its own dynamics regardless what the individual bacteria do inside. [00:06:02] And increasingly, I feel that's the model in which we

live. That we are just bacteria, and the colony is really what matters, and the colony will take some disruptions as positive and ignore those that are considered negative. So in that configuration, the artist is a disruptor but not necessarily a leader [they laugh] and then we tend to confuse [laugh] both things, and we better stop that.

JOSH T. FRANCO: That seem to be—that describes the leaders of all the giant tech companies. They were disruptors and very good at that, but maybe they should not have—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Bad leaders.

JOSH T. FRANCO: —become leaders of such large groups of people. Is it just a matter of scale? Because if they were a smaller group, individual agency would have a bigger impact.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: A bigger impact, right.

JOSH T. FRANCO: So it's just a matter of how many humans there are in concentrated spaces now, I guess. But those artists, they show—they're biologists, but they show in art venues?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No, no, no. They are biologists that somehow became connected with cybernetics of the second degree. So it's—an intellectual group, not of artists but that deal with the interface of biology and knowledge. But they are biologists.

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's interesting. What are the places that extend invitations to you in the recent years to give talks or to do studio visits?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Universities, mostly.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, yeah. Is it because a faculty member there is—you know, do they try to make connections with the program that they have going on? [00:08:05]

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: It depends. I—sometimes at symposia and—I don't know. I don't know why they come up with it. I guess they'll read something. A lot of stuff is online and some stuff is on YouTube, so it's like a self-feeding machine. It's like the credit card system I described before.

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.] Yeah, once you get—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: And what I noted increasingly is that they ask for keynote presentations, so I assume that's based on age that there's—like, the older you are.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, yesterday, we talked about your activity at Southwestern University, but we weren't recording, so that would be a good thing to describe, I think, because it's an interesting project.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well, that was—let me see. This was—oh, that started in Honduras, actually. In Honduras, there was an art school, which closed since, and they were organizing multiple—well, they invited, I don't know, three or four artists to send them a project via email to be done by the students. What I did is I sent my signature, which is like the emblem of individual creativity and ultimately what gives value to whatever you do, and told them that they can recycle or destroy or do whatever they wanted with it. [00:10:07] But that they had to—with whatever piece they came up with, to write essays on several topics, which I laid down, which are mostly related to copyright, the meaning of copyright, who owns the copyright. And in this situation, if I'm the author of the piece, I laid down the rules, or if they are the author of the piece because they made it, and who is exploiting who? Are they benefiting from the presumable knowledge there might be about me or are they taking me down and creating their own fame? And so on, and so on. I don't remember now the points, but if you read it—it's very organized in that.

And then the condition is that that produces an exhibition, all those pieces, and that there is a catalog of those pieces, including the contract, or the equivalent of the contract. And that was then done again in Uruguay, in the—it's just called the Contemporary Art Space, which was in a former jail. And what was funny and nice is that in order to get students to do it, they decided to go to the art school with which I had [laughs] a conflict for the last 40 years.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, right.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: So they forced me to actually go at some point to the school, which was a creepy experience, but it was an old house converted to art school that hasn't changed in all

these decades. [00:12:09] I mean, the same smell, the same sculptures, it was like a time tunnel, just new people, very nice people. Nice enough so that now we're in friendly terms, and actually I will help work on a change [laughs] of curriculum.

JOSH T. FRANCO: And they were aware—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: So it's like—

JOSH T. FRANCO: —of your history, yes?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yes. Well, if they weren't, I made clear that they knew about it. So now that circle is closing in a very nice way, and I'm happy about that. And then it was at Southwestern and then it was in Granada in Spain. And I think that's it.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, and how did—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: And the pieces are really nice. So it's—

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's great.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: It's like, one piece in Granada, a woman has a photograph of herself smoking, and the smoke, instead of making circles, makes my signature, which [laughs] slowly disappears.

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.] That's nice.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: And, yeah, really good stuff.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. She made that digitally, I imagine?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. That's great. I keep wanting to ask you, what else do you need to say? You don't have a need! [They laugh.]

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: I'm fulfilling your needs here. [Laughs.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. Can you describe this piece a little? I just think—*El Mirador*, it's—you know, when did you first create—oh, in 1996 was the first year you—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: —created it? But I—you know, it stands out because I just got to see it a few days ago. [00:14:03] But also, I mean, you know, there's no language involved in it. There are the magazines.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah, but nobody can read them.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, but you can't read them, and—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: And not even when they were readable. [They laugh.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: But it just stands out as some kind of a—and it's not a space you can walk into like your other spatial—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Right, the—

JOSH T. FRANCO: —installations. It seems to be unique in a lot of ways.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well, the story is, Mari Carmen Ramírez was the curator for the—or one of the curators for the São Paulo Biennial of '96, and invited me to do something. And the first project is actually the one I proposed, where the bottles—

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LUIS E. CAMNITZER: —or something related to the bottles of the landscape, the essay on landscape, which was in there. I don't know if you saw bottles with pigment saying 'sky.'

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: And she felt that was—I guess ultimately, she didn't say so, but it wasn't spectacular enough for a biennial [they laugh] so she said, 'Well, think of something else.' And then I thought of this, and this is connected to a series of prison projects that I've been working on since the Venice Biennial, since '86, '88, in which I address the blurry separation between a political prisoner hallucinating into freedom and the artist hallucinating into originality, [they laugh] and how both fail and remain imprisoned within their given structure and cannot escape it. So the reading is always dual.

And in *Mirador*, what I did is a space which is like an operation, a surgical operation space, over lit and glaring and very sterile, in which everything is orderly, but it maintains an order determined by the hallucinations of the inmate, let's call it, in which it makes sense, and it doesn't make sense. [00:02:04] It's on the borderline between possible and impossible. There are objects that are half there, half not, a bottle that's emerging from the floor, a bulb that is not emitting light but only color, a bed that is out of glass and couldn't be, but it's also trying to escape the room by being partially there. Dirt on the floor that is actually hair of a dog I had but rolled into cylinders, so it's orderly dirt. And all that is inaccessible to the viewer who only can go around like a guard inspecting if everything is clean and in order, and that's the involvement and nothing more. But there's no possibility of entering.

That space in the original version is surrounded by a corridor that's pitch black, and you don't see anything except what you can see through the line of vision. In the gallery, that became impractical, so we struck sort of a compromise.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, the wall, the temporary wall, is there, yeah. I think it works.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah, I think so too.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, yeah. What strikes me is, this is the—it's like you made a room out of a Magritte painting. I mean half—the bottle half submerged and the glass bed—they're all this kind of Surrealist jokes.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Yeah, I don't deny being influence by Magritte I actually wrote once about him: is the Magritte system. [00:04:01] For me, it's a system more than actual paintings. It's a way of connecting different orders, which I think is his contribution. And that language is one way of making order and imaging another. In 1920, he made sketches. I don't know if you know them?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-mm [negative].

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Which are just laying this out and are wonderful. They're really—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Where are those?

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: —interesting. They appeared in a magazine, and somewhere, I actually got a copy of—an original copy of that, of the magazine.[. . . -LC] But any serious book about him would include that. They're very simple schematic drawings and meanings.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. I mean, yeah, it's—oh, you—there is another quote of yours in the Alberro book because I felt like, you know, you're looking into someone's mind in this, someone trapped in their own mind like a dream. But you also said you don't believe in dreams, and it was a throwaway comment but it made me want—yeah, do you know what you mean by that or what would you—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No, I don't remember saying it. [They laugh.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. I think you were just saying that you don't believe in dreams superstitiously and that they predict things or—

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Oh, yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: —but in the context of Surrealism and the kind of imagery in this, it became interesting.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Well, I think what happens in a dream is that your brain is free of respecting any given order, so it makes its own consistency in the dream. But I tend to forget my dreams.

[00:06:01] It's very rare that I'll remember one.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, I don't know that I have more questions. [They laugh.] So there's nothing? Last chance, put it on the record.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: No, I'm fine.

JOSH T. FRANCO: We've put plenty on too.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Hmm?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Well, we've put plenty on also.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: [Laughs.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Well, thanks so much, Luis.

LUIS E. CAMNITZER: Oh, it was a pleasure.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Good, I'm glad.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]