Luis Camnitzer has been writing for about forty years—the same period of time that he has lived in the United States, having left Uruguay on a fellowship in 1964. Writing has been a way to, among other things, think through the sense of alienness with which he has lived for these decades. Writing “texts” has also been a natural parallel to his studio practice, which, during the same period, has often resorted to the use of words.

While the basic condition of estrangement has probably been a difficult experience for Camnitzer, it has also had the salutary effect of making everything open to question. The dual processes of composing words and thinking through artworks, meanwhile, has lent to both forms of production a characteristic epigrammatic quality—dense, suggestive, spare, and often packing a wry punch.

Camnitzer started out sending dispatches back to Montevideo (a city that has never stopped being home, at least in principle) every month or two, reporting on the scene he landed in in New York. The early pieces were interviews of figures he had previously admired from afar—Salvador Dalí, Claes Oldenburg, José Luis Cuevas, David Alfaro Siqueiros—and things he was puzzled by—Pop Art in particular, a phenomenon that “should have been invented on the periphery,” in Camnitzer’s view. His perspective is distinctly located in both time and place—formed in an urbane South American metropolis with close historical and cultural ties to Europe and to the Jewish Diaspora, and coming of age just as the modern period of brutal U.S. intervention into Latin American politics hit its stride with the 1954 CIA-orchestrated coup against Jacobo Árbenz in Guatemala.

The interviews have the spontaneous feeling of a conversation between artists, and the early pieces overall convey the sense of a young artist (and one from the boondocks) developing the idiosyncratic art history through which he is working out his own place in the picture. Writing for Marcha (then listed as one of the ten best periodicals in the world along
with *Le Monde* and the *New York Times*) was also a way to stay connected to the environment that he identified with, and that set the terms for his evolving views of the metropolis. Camnitzer the foreign correspondent kept up a steady stream of reports on things like black art in New York, hippie social theater, and the Living Theater. There was also an emerging set of more theoretical texts exploring how Latin America appeared in and from the “center” (“Contemporary Colonial Art,” “Latin American Art in NY,” “Torres García in NY”), opening a line of thought that has persisted in the decades since.

All this continued until 1973, not coincidentally the year that Uruguay suddenly stopped being the paragon of South American stability, democracy, and prosperity and entered a brutal eleven-year period under military dictatorship. Camnitzer, who had gone to New York for his career, suddenly found himself in the ambiguous position of being in exile without having left for political reasons. This theme, too, recurs in many subsequent texts, in an ongoing rumination about identity, otherness, belonging, and resistance.

In 1979, Camnitzer began writing for the Bogotá-based magazine *Arte en Colombia* (now *Art Nexus*), the first serious periodical covering Latin American art since the 1950s. In that magazine he continued to report from afar, and his articles increasingly became a primary source of information and reflection about the “center” for a younger generation of artists on that particular “periphery”—to use the language of the day.

What is noteworthy about both sets of articles is the intense, self-conscious, and perpetual sense of translation: Camnitzer translating New York into Uruguayan terms for himself; Camnitzer translating the systems and power structures of the “art world” into the political struggles against imperialism in Latin America; and, increasingly, Camnitzer translating canonical art history in order to turn the tables and affect how it is written.

Probably because of the combination of personal and continental situations, Camnitzer’s writings have always insisted on a political frame, which informs his approach to the questions that appear persistently in his work—art world systems versus an art of commitment; artistic genealogies and how they are consecrated; and, most insistently, the possibilities for artistic agency. He has developed his thinking on these, and other, themes in dozens of articles, essays, exhibition reviews, lectures, conference papers, and a couple of books, published or delivered in as many locations around the world.
Of course Camnitzer is not the only Latin American critic to take up such themes, and he is part of a long tradition. The interconnectedness of the regional with the international versus the strong impetus to resist the influence of the North, of Europe, and of capitalism; the tension between the desire for international recognition and reticence to accept, much less seek, the patronage of the hegemon; an analysis of modernism and its discourses as they might pertain to the Latin American context and its economic underdevelopment and colonial legacy; the continual annoyance at the U.S. inclination to read Latin American culture through folkloric and primitivist tropes; arguments about abstraction, muralism, and political currency; how to construct a continental history through the episodes of nationalism; the impact and example of the Cuban Revolution and of the cold war; the wave of military dictatorships; the debt crises and remedies of neoliberalism; regional and transregional trade pacts—these are the questions that have animated Latin American criticism for the better part of a century.

Meanwhile, a conscious social commitment and traditional allegiance among intellectuals to the Left, an increasing radicalization through the 1960s and 1970s, an emergent adaptation of postmodern discourse to inscribe the difference of the Latin American context, and a persistent attachment to the project of utopia, especially through the alignment of avant-garde art and revolutionary politics, comprise some crucial elements of a shared regional legacy. Throughout all this, the Latin American critical project has had a double task, namely, to narrate from its own perspectives, and to write against the stereotypes and reductions of mainstream accounts—to theorize positions from which art might be both autonomous from the formalisms of the “center” and integral to local needs and development. All of these are projects that Camnitzer shares with his predecessors and moves forward according to his own unique perspective from, we could say, both sides of the fence.

The trope of “translation” forms the first section of this volume, encompassing questions he asks while looking from “here” to “there,” and “there” to “here,” such as: What is Latin America, and who is asking the question? Who is the artist, there and here? The second section contains a selection of texts more historically than geographically organized that explore little-known moments, works, and events that make up the legacy that Camnitzer draws on and offers to his readers.

For readers already familiar with Camnitzer’s artwork, there may be a sense of familiarity in the tone of these texts. His approach is often epi-
grammatic rather than essayistic: arguments are not elaborated in cumulative fashion, but visited and revisited prismatically, working a lot like clues—precise and dense fragments that feed a process of speculation. In this, humor and surprise are crucial elements. The unexpected turn of an argument short-circuits habitual readings. One of the great strengths of the writing is its consistent willingness to operate against even the most influential of common assumptions. And Camnitzer’s playful and ironic approach to the expository and didactic modes effectively inverts the terms of the fight over, for example, who wields what power or control over whom.

There is one other general point worth making here, and that has to do with the purposefulness that underlies all of this writing. Early on, Camnitzer was preoccupied with ideas of “building a new culture,” and writing has been a principal way to accomplish that. Whether to advocate for a position at the table or for approaches that stake their own claims, these are texts written to make something happen. Insofar as this is a pedagogical project, it would also be worth noting, then, that Camnitzer has been a dedicated teacher since the 1960s, working with young artists in a variety of contexts including the university classroom and studio, Camnitzer’s own studio in Italy, the Viewing Program of the Drawing Center in New York, or, most recently, as curator of education for the Mercosur Bienal. Increasingly over the years, he has identified three interconnected elements of his cultural project: the pedagogical heart of his own career; conceptualism as a way of proposing problems to be solved; and art as a way of moving society forward in a process toward independence and justice.

Luis Camnitzer is now, ironically, a bona fide “international artist” after all those years of attacking from the margins. His inclusion in major exhibitions such as the Whitney Biennial and Documenta both signals changing fashions in what the art world is looking for and reflects the slow, steady recognition of a large body of significant work. With this volume, his accomplishments as critic, theoretician, and polemicist can come, equally, to the fore. But more, even, than its relationship to his artistic practice, we should probably place his writing in proximity to his decades of teaching. In this way we can get a sense of the generosity of his project overall, and of his commitment to working things out within, and on behalf of, a collective spirit.

Rachel Weiss
NOTES

1. *Marcha* was closed by the military soon thereafter.

2. I am referring here to Damián Carlos Bayón and Jorge Romero Brest’s *Ver y Estimar*, produced along with Marta Traba, Mário Pedrosa, Fernando García Esteban, Mathias Goeritz, and others in Buenos Aires, between 1948 and 1955.

3. As Camnitzer sees this, he is a link between the first politicized generation of art critics (Mário Pedrosa, Frederico Morais, and Marta Traba), which departed from the “poetic” model of art criticism, and the newer generation (Tíacio Esco-bar, Gerardo Mosquera), which approaches art history from the point of view of intellectual history. Within this configuration, he is the only one who is a practicing artist and who lives in the middle of hegemonic culture.
ON ART, ARTISTS, LATIN AMERICA, AND OTHER UTOPIAS
Part I

ON AND AGAINST TRANSLATION