

## REVIEWS

"Four Corners" / "Cuatro Esquinas".  
"AMANAPLANACANALPANAMA".  
"The Book of Walls" / "El libro de los muros".

The titles tell us, even before we see the exhibits of José Morales (at El Museo del Barrio in New York) and Luis Camnitzer (both at El Museo del Barrio and at the Carla Stellweg Gallery), that the shows will speak of and be made from, borders, boundaries and limits, that this tension will wed them, that the module will both multiply and constrain them. The titles also announce the historical crimes under the guise of law that are central to both men's work - the shows present themselves as acts translated into the visual language of text and image, text-rendered image, and image used as text. Camnitzer's palindromic AMANAPLANACANALPANAMA is inscribed on the floor of El Museo del Barrio like some metallic scar, some spelled-out river that the viewer must leap over, some elongated gravestone whose inscription is repeated in the mirror that stands underneath the bottle-construction that hints of shipwreck, failure, "running aground." The work is echoed by Morales' canvas "Santa Barbara in the Barrio," which literally lifts the wounded body lying on the pathetic hopscotch-grid off the asphalt, with a cut-out saint. The canvas is pistol-whipped by yellow pigment - the violent mark of the artist responding to violence.

# The Island Contained The Continent Divided

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ANTONIO MARTORELL

Through the juxtaposition of a ground-installation and painted ground hung on the wall, a journey of museographic skillfulness is laid out by

Fátima Bercht, who thus establishes an unexpected dialog between these two artists, who are, at first glance, so apparently unlike and even opposite.... For, the austerity and restraint of the small objects distributed across the walls and floor, and hanging from the ceiling, like the discreet points and lines of a pictorial text uttered in hushed tones, are as characteristic of Camnitzer's show at El Museo del Barrio, as they are of his work at the Carla Stellweg Gallery. Morales' recognizable signature, on the other hand, is the exuberance of swaths and stains, the large format, the spilling off walls, the all-encompassing embrace of chromatic and textural sonority, emotive gesture and daring line. Furthermore, Camnitzer's found object



Luis Camnitzer. *El Muro de las Intimaciones*.

or text (transformed or constructed), is in contrast to Morales' canvas and paper as traditional bearers of the line. And yet again: while Morales forces us to step back in order to better grasp the monumental scale of his compositions (which, paradoxically, are freighted with an intimacy of texture), Camnitzer (although the tone of his work is distancing) forces us to step closer in

we should take. While Camnitzer's color is muzzled, in Morales' work color is a deafening scream. The former uses color as a trace, a remnant, a faded spoor; the latter uses it as a herald of the future. Morales' "El vivero/Chicken Coop" is a riot of grays that anticipates the road of blood. Camnitzer's "El muro de la incredulidad/ Wall of Incredulity" is the *shattered continent and the stubborn*

spaced out in the rest of the exhibit, yet that always tend towards a surrounding, swaddling whole. Camnitzer creates a literal "environment" by using the walls, the floor, and suspended objects in the Museum, and the lower part of the walls at the Stellweg. Both of these exhibitions create a stage on which empty space is as important as the plastic objects that limit it. Through visiting the exhibitions



Jose Morales. *Laminas*, 1995.

order to read the minuscule type or faded calligraphy. In "The Book of Walls," we are forced to bow, even get down on our knees, in a posture of ceremonial genuflection, in order to take in his memorial objects which are mounted like a staccato wainscot on the lower half of the wall.

While Camnitzer privileges twilight and isolates every piece in a frustrating maze of walls and canals, texts and objects, raising obstacles in our path to the goal, Morales turns on the lights, whether on canvas or on paper in its raw whiteness, and his explosive color calls us to "take sides," "get involved," inside and outside the picture-space, though it is not always clear which side

blood that refuses to bleed away. Yet continents/contents, containers/containment, are the themes of this reading of two bodies of work which share a single space - together they constitute a ménage that looks arbitrary, but turns out to have many eloquent connections.

For, both bodies of work are "installations," if we take the word to mean "mounting, distribution in space, pictorial signs transformed by arrangement and juxtaposition." Morales' work becomes an installation from the moment his easel-paintings are transformed into wall-coverings (literally, in the case of the polyptych titled "Picture") that may be more

several times, I was able to confirm my first impression that they were single, solitary shows yet characterized by a great deal of mutually-bolstering solidarity. In both, the presence of other viewers produces an unpleasant change in the sense that one has of communion, of shared solitude with the artist's testimonio (as the mode of personal reporting of great historical moments is called in Spanish). The presence of other people breaks a silence so imperative that it can not bear even the muted sound of wandering footsteps. Morales' large canvases and the gigantic scale of some of his figures (which ask to be seen in their totality so that one can better sense the weight of their desolation) and

the minute, conspiratorial detail of Camnitzer, demand a secrecy from the viewer, and evoke a shared humiliation.

For both artists, art has a profoundly political urgency, however, their identification with that urgency is so complete that it becomes the life-breath itself, the pulsing of blood through the veins, a pulsing which answers to no individual political program or party. While Camnitzer combines documents, data, and the manipulation of objects in a *craftsmanship of loss, an aching word*

game, so as to enunciate a tragic riddle, in Morales' work, violence becomes the painter's gesture in the making, erasing, and re-painting of an image that struggles to establish its primacy, to be allowed to proliferate over a medium that constantly checks its advance, resists its formulation.

It is the continent of the Americas, which the United States has truncated with the force of the historic wound that is the Panama Canal, that is the immediate subject of Camnitzer's AMANAPLANACANALPANAMA. It is a

wounded continent, a contained or walled-in bottle, a word like the ourouboros which bites its own tail, a textual isthmus through which thronging contents (chopped into a vast copper collage) constantly travel, a brilliant belt around the narrow waist of a shrunken America. From the softly-lit wall, the work beckons us yet distances us. At the Stellweg, "The Book of Walls" forces us to stoop down so as to read, implore, perhaps pray before the announcements, intimations, aims, incredulity, instruments, homages, exits, days,



Luis Camnitzer.  
*El Muro de las Metas*, 1995.

rewritings, silence, and finally before the lost identities. The surgery on the Isthmus and the cordoning-off of the Island are acts that will soon have their hundredth birthdays - a hundred years of the United States' continental operations on the New World's body.

If Camnitzer's wounded continent only haltingly yields its violated contents in Panama and Uruguay, in the Canal Zone and the Southern Cone, Morales' contained island/island-content is a Puerto Rico encysted, a Puerto Rico encapsulated as much in the Bronx as in the Caribbean. Morales, like Camnitzer, uses the module to structure his wall-discourse. The pictorial drama of his work is the formulation of an image, the recognition of its sources, its multiplication, affirmation, and negation, the repeated act of "picturation," the attempt, so often frustrated, yet so consistent, to discover a definitive identity. The Island is an icon worshipped in time and at a distance. In its urgency to escape its limits, to push out of its confines, to break out of its containment and to become a continent in its own right, the colony colonizes the empire. Morales is part of the Puerto Rican diaspora and its offspring, now living upon the continent. In him, there is a central awareness of the violence that isolates him. This image/Island, drawn so many times, only to be erased and drawn again, reproduced, blown up, its color, climate, and temperature changed, is traced and destroyed, to appear in another place - *content and continent*.

The amputated body and the prosthesis in Morales' work are echoed in Camnitzer's *fragmentation of memory*; both are children of political violence.

Thus, the words etched in the glass of "Wall of Sayings" almost disappear, only to be rescued in their own unread shadow: "Después de lograr por decreto que la ficción ocupe toda la realidad, vieron que la ficción sabe recordar, y que lo que las sombras son a las cosas, los recuerdos son a la vida." (After they had managed, by decree, to make fiction occupy all of reality, they realized that fiction can remember, and that what shadows are to things, memory is to life.) It is not possible to forget that, though Camnitzer has lived much of his life in the United States, he is a Uruguayan, who arrived in Uruguay in the same year in which he was born in Nazi Germany. Camnitzer's baggage is his memory.

In Morales' work, words disappear because the image is the word; words are embedded in the image, they bed down in it, remaking and reflecting themselves, flexing the powerful muscle of imagination. In the triptych called "Lámina," figuration appears and disappears, fades into the promising rectangle of the canvas, is heralded in the gesture that announces it, or erases it. In Spanish, laminar can mean two things: firstly, "to make a picture," to construct something as fragile as the paper or canvas that supports the image, but also, "to stiffen - to cover, protect, armor one thing with another" - and to make it resistant to time. Thus, in "Lámina" Morales explores the format of the rectangle, unquaring it by expanding it - blurring the boundary between "foursquare" and "picture," and between "foursquare/picture" and "room."

Both artists are artificers of memory, executors of the legacy of memory who interrogate the future. On one of his walls, Camnitzer quotes

General Omar Torrijos, the president of Panama who died under mysterious circumstances: "I do not want to enter the history books. I want to enter the Canal Zone." Almost a hundred years after the US intervention both in the Panama Canal and in Puerto Rico, neither the Canal nor Puerto Rico have found a solution that is either definitive or fair. Morales' "Four Corners" are, amongst other things, the crossroads of history. In his "Book of Walls," Camnitzer tries to read, and to make us read, the handwriting on the wall, handwriting which foretells the future. Both artists approach the writing on the wall in a staccato way: the writing is as fragmented as it is provocative, a text in which images and words are fired off in every direction, creating a maze of signals.

Camnitzer's and Morales' texts, both written and painted, are constant testimony to the artist and the hard work of configuring an image of his/her world: they speak particularly of the body-to-body dialog as creation itself. It is this dialog that gives the intrinsic drama to their work, with its meticulous technique, its transformative manipulation, its clarifying erasures, its confusing corrections, its maddening repetitions, its arresting amplifications, its commanding reduction, its ruptures that beg for bridges, its threatening fragilities. Continent and content, *containers and containment*, interrogate each other, (with)drawing into isolation and then coming together again in the *process of becoming another thing*, and we viewers are left feeling like the scribbled message in the shipwrecked sailor's bottle, like the picture invaded at all four corners.