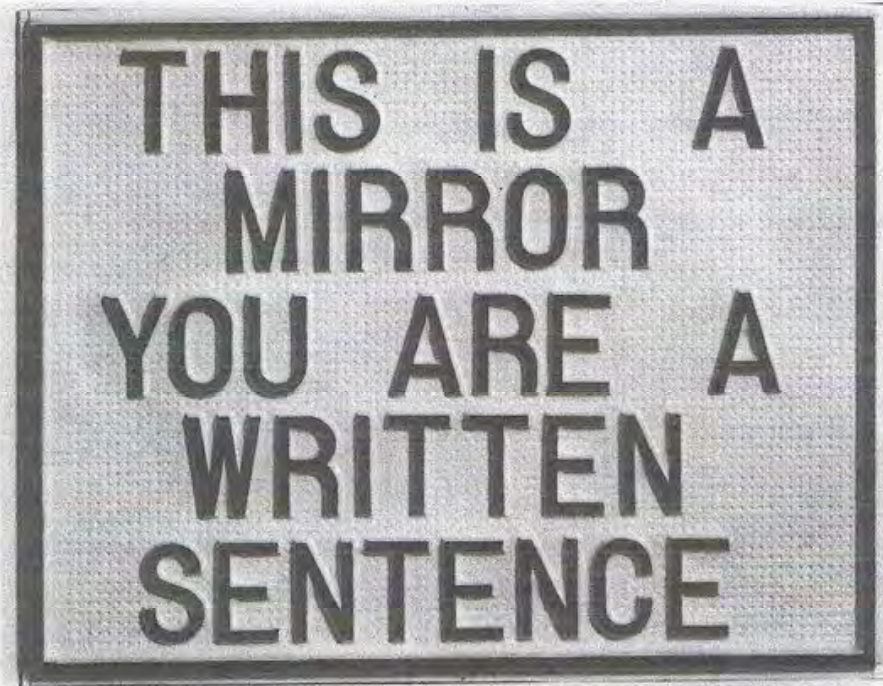




LUIS
CAMNITZER

BELINDA GARDNER



Opportunities: *What is the Mirror?*, 1971 (2007, Garry); *The Art of Form: This is a Mirror You are a Written Sentence*, 1966-1968, Courtesy, Dorsal/Artemis/Colonna, Zürich; Photo: Felix Schöberl, Frank

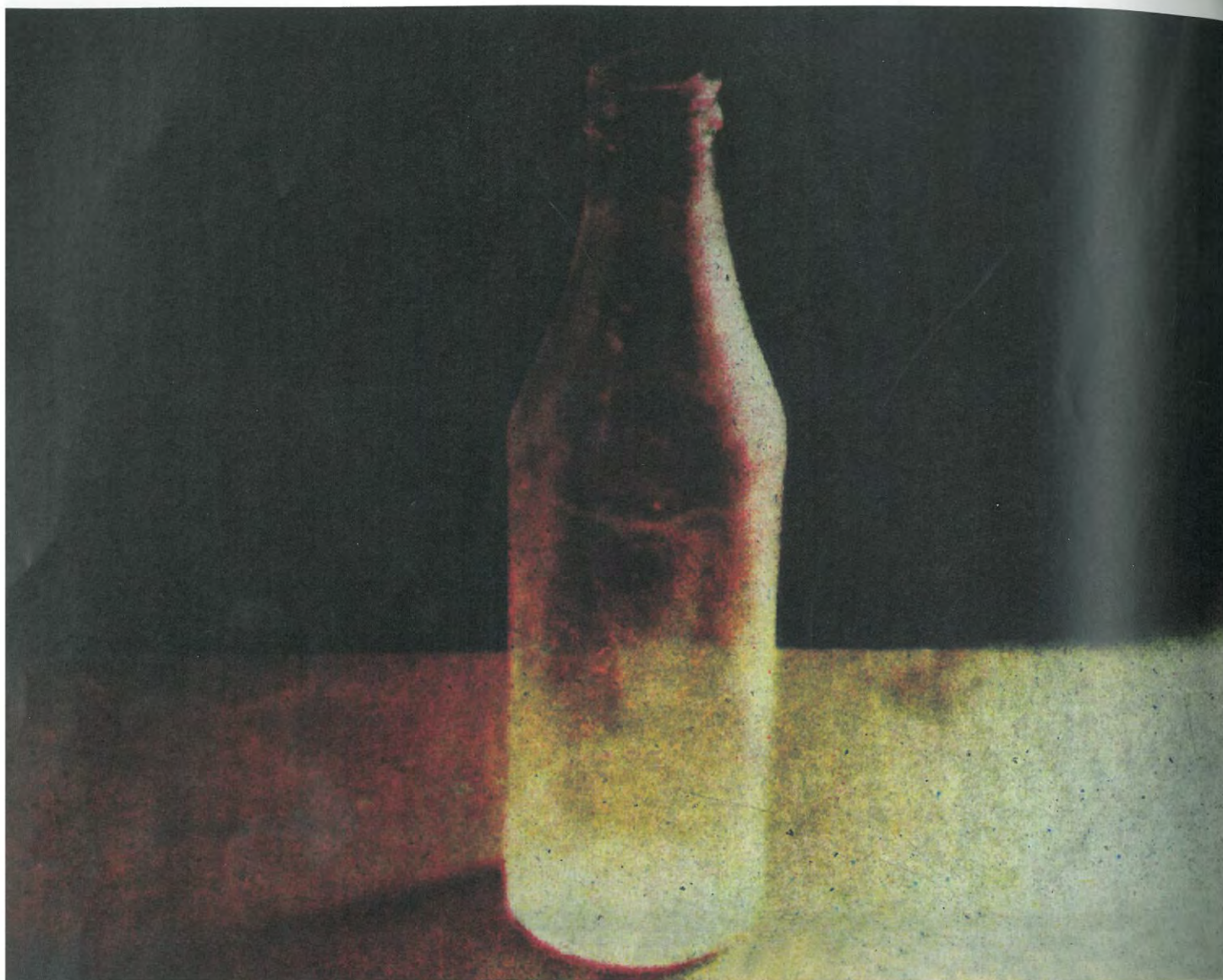
IN 1966 Luis Camitizer produced what he called his first conceptual work – a laconic statement that opened up some surprising perspectives: 'This is a mirror, you are a written sentence.' Addressing no one in particular, the statement 'This is a mirror...' speaks to any person who chooses to read it. The logic this entails is rather tricky, reminiscent of philosophical propositions and at the same time leading the recipient around in circles, until the phrase turns into its opposite: 'You are a mirror, this is a written sentence.' The phrase became part of Camitizer's series entitled 'Adhesive Labels', which were distributed at various public sites in New York.

Apart from the phrase already mentioned, prompting one to wonder which part of it denotes what, the work included assertions such as: 'A perfect circular horizon', or 'A room with the centre point of the ceiling touching the floor'. On the one hand, the series focused on the interrelationship between the words and their meaning, and on how subtle in one or the other might influence the manner in which we perceive reality. On the other, it served to evoke visual phenomena by verbal means in the viewer's, or rather reader's, mind. The 1960s were a textually very active phase in Camitizer's early career as an artist, underpinned by the thesis – as the artist wrote looking back in 1977 – that the verbal description of a visual situation could elicit the creativity of the spectator in a better way than the visual situation itself.

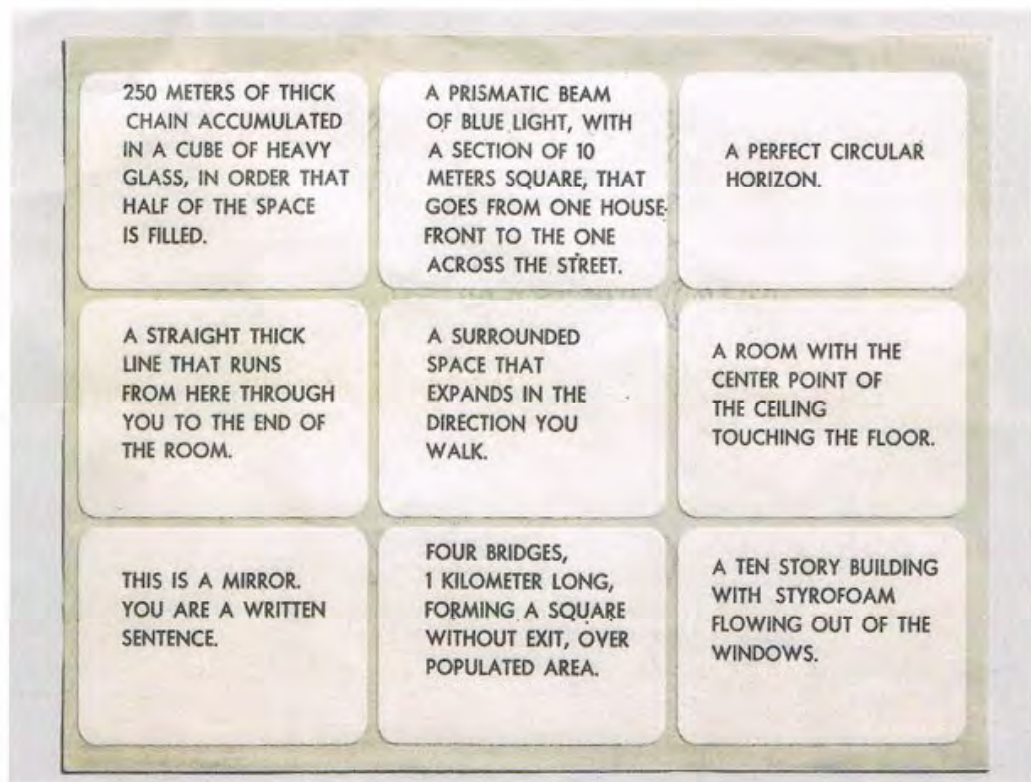
The New York-based artist, who was born in 1937 in the north German city of Lübeck and grew up in Uruguay (he considers himself Uruguayan), draws on an aesthetically potent and keen sense of displacement to investigate the question of how we, as human beings, can transcend the

boundaries of the worlds around and within us. Inspired both by the multi-layered conceptualism avant la lettre of René Magritte, and the erudite, philosophically profound phantasmagoria of the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges, Camitizer has claimed to be 'basically a surrealist', indeed, his often eerily surreal sculptural pieces and extensive installations, which have been shown, amongst many other international venues, at the Venice Biennale (where he was invited to represent Uruguay in 1988) and Documenta 11 in 2002, are charged with uncanny powers of ambiguity, disorientation and aliveness. These are combined in his work with a fragile balance between the poignant, multifaceted renderings of hallucination and the stark austerity of a mental state where dreams are no longer possible.

While Camitizer, from the 1970s onward, increasingly became concerned with three-dimensional space and the translation of the verbal proposition into the visual realm, he still retained a strong attachment to the interplay between language and images. Up to this day, his work remains deeply rooted in the perception-enhancing capacity of words – an energy that is unleashed in the gaps between the signifier and signified, the image and the linguistic message accompanying it. A case in point is Camitizer's highly intense, simultaneously fragile and relentless, beautiful and harrowing group of photo etchings, 'from the Uruguayan Torture Series' (1983-84), which was featured at Documenta 11 next to a specially created installation. In this series the impact of photographic images and handwritten words, which the artist presents parallel to one another, hits the viewer through the mutual reinforcement of the messages conveyed. The statement 'He practised every day', for example, expresses its terrifying dimension only when seen



Clockwise from top: *The Instrument Was Explained in Detail*, 1983-4. *He Practiced Every Day*, 1983-4. *He Worked With Forbidden Symbols*, 1983-4. All from the 'Uruguayan Torture Series'. All images courtesy: the artist



Above: Sentences, 1966-7. Courtesy: DorcasLatinamerica Collection, Zurich. Below: The Photograph, 1981. Courtesy: DorcasLatinamerica Collection, Zurich. Photo: Peter Schoelchli

in conjunction with a hand, of which the fingernails are pierced by nails. Before the backdrop of the work's title an entire scenario unfolds before the mind's eye, bridging the distance between the viewer and the potential torture victim.

Camnitzer employs words precisely to create the kind of atmosphere and tension that induces compassion in those confronted with his images, which, without the sparse remarks accompanying them, would appear in a totally different light. Thus, one might be confronted with a simple glass or a rudimentary drawing of birds with spread-out wings, which only when seen in the context of the subject of the series, and amplified, so to speak, by the captions, become vehicles of horror. Vice versa, the words often appear entirely harmless until conflated with a given image. Here it becomes clear that the artist's strategy relies on both the verbal and the visual spheres, which are combined in such a way as to form a synthesis in the viewer's mind. In fact, Camnitzer, in operating with fragments of information that have to be put together like pieces of a puzzle, is both challenging and enticing his audience to broaden their perceptual horizons, and to become part of the poetically complex, highly engaging narratives that he makes tangible.

BEUNDA GARDNER IS A CRITIC BASED IN HAMBURG

