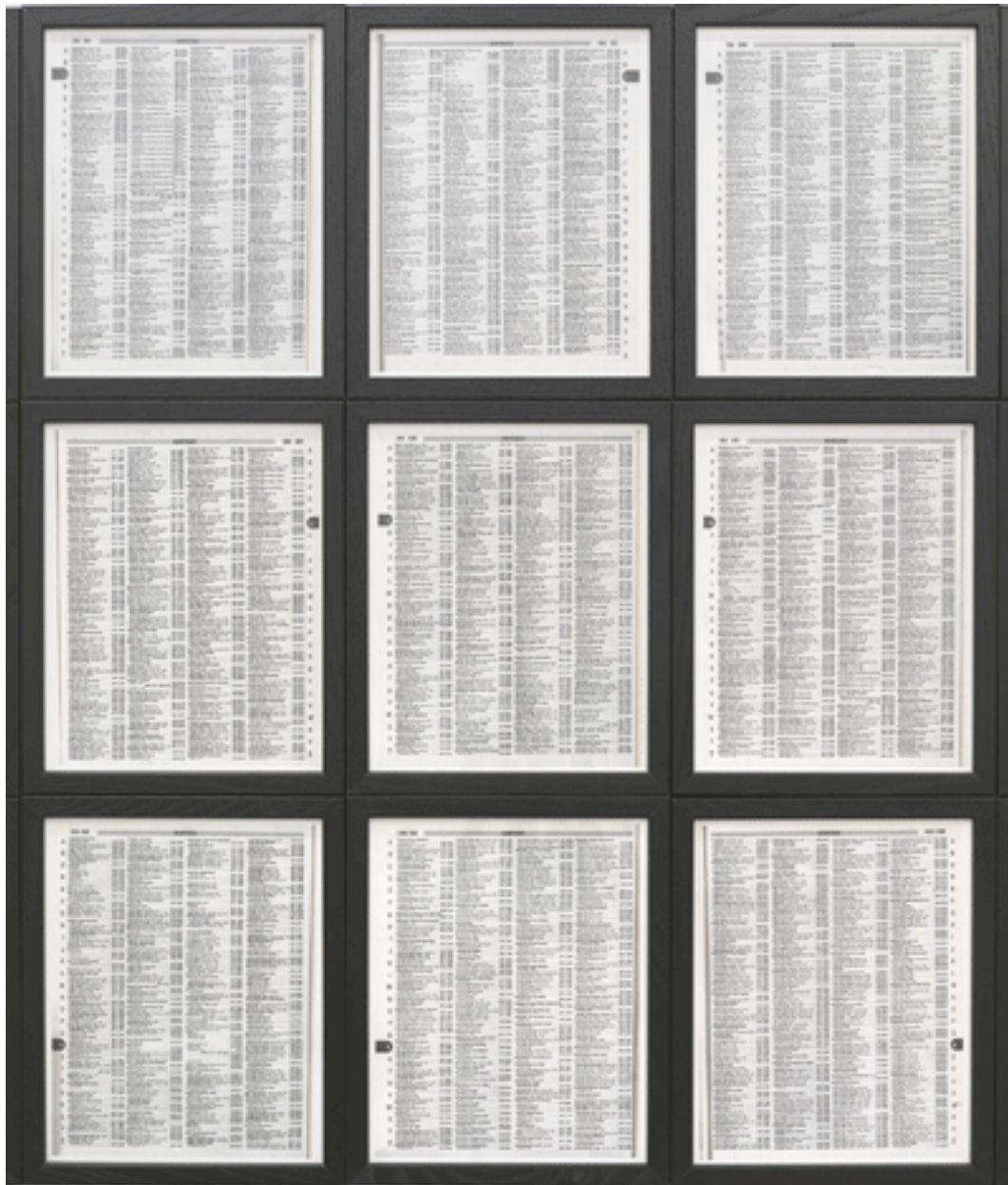


# Art Review:



## Luis Camnitzer: Memorial at Alexander Gray Associates

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Luis Camnitzer, *Memorial* (2009), Pigment print, Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York, NY

**By Jonathan T.D. Neil**

I recall a visit to Hiroshima's Peace Memorial Museum more than fifteen years ago during my first visit to Japan. I was studying architecture at the time, so the reason for the visit was not merely to check off one more station on an itinerary of the twentieth-century's more traumatic sites, but to take a look at Kenzo Tange's designs for the building and its campus, which stakes out a datum north from the museum and is aligned with the Hiroshima Memorial Dome, so named after the delicate, shattered copula that remains aloft the building's three storeys which were, however improbably, saved by the paradoxical fact of their location nearly directly beneath the point of detonation of any military's first wartime use of an atomic weapon.

As an example of architectural modernism transplanted to Japan, the building has its merits, but on its own terms, it's more a forgettable and thus effective backdrop to the memories that haunt the place (Alain Resnais understood this implicitly in his 1959 film *Hiroshima Mon Amour*). For my own part, the architecture of Japan's feudal seventeenth century was far more interesting. But architecture school in the early 90s still worshipped at the altar of modernism; so, there we were, wandering the grounds, snapping photos and diagramming the relations between ground planes and building sections in our sketch books. At least a little time was allotted to go in and see the museum's exhibits.

Most of the material is of the kind that one expects: maps and photographs predominate; artifacts, such as burned shoes and watches that still read the exact time of detonation, have been delicately placed and preserved in their vitrines. It was all appropriately horrific and grave, but this was a clinical history, a kind of memory diagnostics, and so I did not find it very affecting — that is, until I came to the end of the hall, at which point the catalogue of horrors subsides and one is confronted with another legacy that the Bomb has bequeathed to the city of Hiroshima, and that is a letter written every year from the Mayor of the city to every country in possession of nuclear weapons, pleading with them to eliminate their stockpiles, so that what happened to Hiroshima might not happen to any other city, and any other population, ever again. At this, I cried.

The combination of futility and persistence, of the stark reasonableness, let alone obvious rightness, of such a request, combined with the manifest decency and humility with which the letters were written, was overwhelming. No photographs, no maps, no numbers, no artifacts amounted, for me, to the successions of "Dear President...", "Dear Prime Minister...", etc., each one dated 6 August and written every year since 1945.

I do not know why reading and contemplating the circumstances of those letters was so visceral an experience *for me*, but I do know that it was only this for me, as none of my colleagues felt similarly. And I recount this experience

because I suspect that the same might apply for Luis Camnitzer's recent work *Memorial* (2010), for which the artist has reproduced every page of Montevideo's phone book, but into which he has digitally inserted the names of hundreds of the 'disappeared' victims of Uruguay's military dictatorship, which lasted from 1977 – 1985. That is to say, though Camnitzer's Memorial did not affect me in any visceral way, I imagine that it holds that potential, and not solely for someone with an intimate connection to these people or that place and time.

There is much that one can say about *Memorial* and its implications: Camnitzer's seamless insertions implicate all residents of Montevideo as members of the 'disappeared', and none of them at the same time; it states that we are all potential victims of state violence; it speaks to the obsolescence of the telephone book itself, of the names indexed to physical addresses in a publicly accessible way, of the changing face of various archives and the means with which our identities are bound up within them; it says something about the meaninglessness of certain acts of reading and the senselessness of certain acts of looking; indeed it says something about the ironic muteness of a directory predicated upon the potential for speech.

But in all of this I suspect that there is something more behind the pages of Camnitzer's *Memorial*, something about how we are affected by information that is shot through with the tragedies of politics, even if it is information that remains unintelligible for some, unbearable for others.

*Luis Camnitzer, Memorial is on view at Alexander Gray Associates until 24 April 2010*

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