

Louis Camnitzer

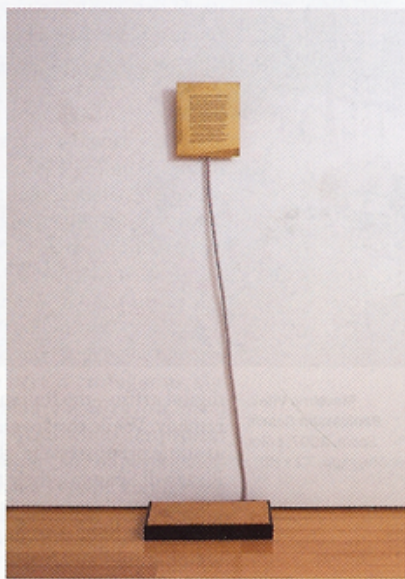
ALEXANDER GRAY ASSOCIATES

The Texas Department of Criminal Justice has made public the last words of all death row inmates executed since 1982. The statements are published, with a chilling evocation of social networking sites, in the online profile of each offender. Generally, they are brief, emphasizing love for family members and forgiveness for executioners, and offering testimonials to the innocence of fellow death row inmates. To read them is to be a voyeur in the first degree—albeit one that humanizes an otherwise unseen other. It is this apparently paradoxical duality that informs Louis Camnitzer's most compelling work. In his recent exhibition at Alexander Gray Associates, Camnitzer showed two works examining the politics of capital punishment: *Last Words*, 2008, and *Sifter* (*The Mechanism for Killing a Spectator*), 1978.

Given that the work was made two years after the United States' reinstatement of the death penalty, it is apropos that *Sifter* resembles a makeshift execution device constructed so that the viewer, in order that he or she may read a wall-mounted brass plaque, is invited to step onto a raised, carpeted platform. A cord of metal tubing runs between the two elements. The text on the plaque positions the artist-genius as dictator and the viewer as being at his mercy: THE GENIUS OF AN ARTIST IS DEFINED BY THE PUBLIC THE ARTIST CHOOSES TO DEFINE HIM AS A GENIUS. A MISTAKE IN THE CHOICE OF A SINGLE SPECTATOR CAN CREATE THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN BEING A GENIUS OR ONLY A NEAR GENIUS. TO KILL THAT PARTICULAR SPECTATOR IS THE MOST SIMPLE AND DIRECT WAY TO BECOME A TOTAL GENIUS. The implication is that, should the viewer express dissent, execution will ensue. By mimicking the power structures that the artist witnessed during his childhood in Latin America, *Sifter* renders the viewer a victim, making nearly absurd his or her actual privilege in comparison to the lives of those for whom such injustices are a constant reality. But seen today, *Sifter* functions primarily as a reminder of the era in which it was produced; one in which such earnest, literal, politicized artistic gestures had real agency.

This is especially true of the work when viewed in relation to *Last Words*. Rather than didactically imposing a specific moral stance, the later work constitutes both a political provocation and the breathing room in which to reconsider its given terms and common perceptions. Appropriating the last statements of prisoners executed in Texas, Camnitzer reprinted all those which include the word *love*, filling six sheets, each scaled to the human height of five and a half feet, with literal "death sentences." Encased in clinically white frames, the text runs across each page in neat rows of fleshy reddish brown: I LOVE YOU GUYS; I LOVE ALL Y'ALL; CAN Y'ALL HEAR ME?; TELL MAMA I LOVE HER.

In *Last Words*, the humanity of such affective content as love, thanks, hope, and regret is heightened by its containment within the rational design of a grid. It can be assumed that while most are the words of killers, some percentage belong to the wrongly convicted, but Camnitzer runs the statements together in a collective voice of the executed, burying this ambiguity in the body of the work, paralleling the way in which justice may be buried in the prison system. Although *Sifter's* dated mode of address is less arresting than that of *Last Words*, both manage to gracefully impart a sense of political responsibility lamentably rare in today's art world.



Luis Camnitzer, *Sifter* (*The Mechanism for Killing a Spectator*), 1978, mixed media, 69 1/2 x 19 1/4 x 12 1/4".

—Caroline Busta