Guiding Questions

“What is Latin America, and who asks the question? Who is the artist, there and here?”

Why does Luis Camnitzer put Latin America into question and why does it matter “who asks the question?”

“Latin America” is a concept with a complex history and shifting meanings. In its broadest sense, Latin America refers to the region of the Americas complexly linked through European colonization which introduced Romance languages (Spanish, Portuguese and French each descended from Latin) by suppressing indigenous languages and cultures. Yet the term has also been used to imagine a wider regional solidarity and unity across many differences in order to contest the external imposition of power. For the artist Luis Camnitzer, “Latin America” has been both a framework and an ideal for locating the transformative potentials of art.

This guide presents Camnitzer’s artistic methods for questioning and contesting these structures of power, focusing on a question of his paraphrased by Camnitzer’s longstanding collaborator Rachel Weiss: “What is Latin America, and who asks the question? Who is the artist, there and here?”(1) The activities presented here unpack Camnitzer’s practice to offer learners conceptual tools for interrogating how categories such as “Latin America” and “conceptual art” are constructed and used in different ways, depending on one’s social and geographic location.

Activities

The following exercises are structured to sequentially build on each other. We encourage you to consider how their learning objectives develop as you engage with these activities or adapt them to your teaching.

Activity Group 1: Activating Prior Knowledge / Engaging with the Guiding Questions

Activity Group 2: This is a Mirror You are a Written Sentence

Activity Group 3: Landscape as an Attitude

Activity Group 4: Quotes

We would also love to hear how you have used Reading Resources. Please share feedback and student work here.
Activities: Teens and Adults
ACTIVATING PRIOR KNOWLEDGE

These exercises can be done by individual learners who read and respond to the questions, or they can be done as a group led by an educator or facilitator.

1. What do you know about Latin America? Take 3-5 minutes to free associate and write down everything you know – such as countries, location, languages, geography, food cultures, etc.

2. Read over the introduction following the Guiding Question and write down 3-5 ideas that add to what you know about Latin America. Given what you have written, what more would you like to know about Latin America? Write down at least one question or sentence that expresses this.

3. Where are you from? You can write down any place or places that feel important to this question. This could be a neighborhood, city, town, country, and so forth. Perhaps you feel you are from more than one place. If so, write them down and consider adding a few details about how each place defines you or contributes to your sense of home and/or belonging. You could also consider whether your family is from a different place than where you grew up, and how that might contribute to, or differ from, the place(s) you feel you are from.

4. Given what you wrote above, if you are or were to be an artist, where would you say you are from? How would you respond to the question, “Where are you from”?

ENGAGING WITH THE GUIDING QUESTIONS

Consider the question: “What is Latin America, and who asks the question? Who is the artist, there and here?”

1. Look at the first question and quickly write down the first 3-5 observations that come to mind.

2. Now respond to the first part of the question, “What is Latin America”? You can respond with as many ideas or associations as possible in a quick brainstorm.

3. Building upon your previous observations, you can also finish the sentence: “Latin America is .......................”
4. Given what you wrote above, how does the second part of the question change or add to it? What might be meant by the phrase: “and who asks the question?”

5. If Luis Camnitzer, as an artist from Uruguay, asks the question, how does that compare to you asking the question? What is similar or different?

6. If Luis Camnitzer asks “Who is the artist, there and here?” what is he putting into question? Is he questioning identity or the perception of identity? In Uruguay, is he an artist, or specifically a Latin American artist? Once he lives and works in New York, is he just an artist, a Latin American artist, and/or a New York artist?

7. Return to the full two-part question above. Why do you think Camnitzer would ask this question? Why might he ask this question as an artist from Latin America living and working in New York? Generate as much thinking as possible – try to write down at least 3-5 reasons.
Luis Camnitzer, “This Is a Mirror, You Are a Written Sentence,” 1966-1968, Vacuum formed polystyrene 19 1/8 x 24 4/8 x 0 4/8 in (48.42 x 62.49 x 1.48 cm). Daros Latinamerica Collection © 2023 Luis Camnitzer / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.
THIS IS A MIRROR YOU ARE A WRITTEN SENTENCE

These exercises can be done by individual learners who read and respond to the questions, or they can be done as a group led by an educator or facilitator.

Prelooking/Prereading

Part A
1. What is the role of a sign (think traffic sign, signs posted in windows or lawns, etc.)? Write down the first few ideas that come to your mind. Try for at least 3-5 ideas.
2. What is the role of an artwork? Write down the first few ideas that come to your mind. Try for at least 3-5 ideas.
3. Given what you wrote above, what are the key differences between a sign and an artwork? List them and try for at least 3-5 ideas.
4. If a sign becomes an artwork, does that change anything you wrote in response to the questions above? Explore your ideas in writing (at least 2 sentences).

Part B
5. When you look in a mirror, what do you see? You can respond to this question however you like. You can be descriptive or you can go where your thinking takes you. Generate at least 5-7 details.
6. How can a mirror be “you” and not “you” at the same time? As with the question above, you can respond however you like in at least one sentence.

Looking/Reading

1. Take a look at Luis Camnitzer’s artwork: “This is a Mirror / You are a Written Sentence” (1966-68). Make 3-5 observations about what you notice. Any and every detail you see is important. You can look at color, texture, scale, font, etc.
2. Now consider the words that are a part of the artwork, “This is a Mirror / You are a Written Sentence.” Make 3-5 observations about the words themselves What do they mean? How would you paraphrase or summarize them? What’s confusing or unclear? Write out all questions and confusions you have.
a) Why do you think the artist chose to use “This” at the start of the sentence? What does “this” refer to? Is it the artwork or something else?
b) Consider the phrase “You are a Written Sentence.” Who do you think “you” is here? Is it you, as the viewer? Who else could “you” refer to?
c) What would it mean to be a written sentence? If you were a sentence, write out the one you’d like to be.
d) How does it feel being able to choose the sentence that you’d like to be?

3. How would it feel to be told “You are a Written Sentence?” How do the feelings compare?

4. “You are a Written Sentence” is a declarative statement, almost like an order. You are sentenced in language, a language that might not be your own. Look over all of your responses and write 1-2 lines that talk back to the artwork. If “This is a Mirror / You are a Written Sentence” is addressing you, respond to it by writing a second sentence drawing from your thinking in the previous questions.

Post-Looking/Reading

1. Who do you think is talking in this artwork? Is the artist talking directly to you or is the artist talking to himself? Or is it the sign or artwork talking? Does the meaning of the artwork change depending on who you think is speaking?

2. What does this artwork say about art itself? Is art supposed to be a mirror? If so, how does this artwork function as a mirror? If not, what else might art be?

3. How is a mirror similar to and different from a portrait? Do you think this artwork is a portrait of the artist, or the viewer, or something/someone else?

4. Given what you wrote above, why is it important that Luis Camnitzer chose to create a mirror and/or portrait through language rather than an image?

5. We know Camnitzer is a Uruguayan artist and speaks Spanish, as well as English and German. This artwork is in English. What does it mean to work in a language that is not your mother tongue? How does this connect to what you wrote in the previous two sections of this exercise?

6. Return to the guiding question and your thinking about it in Activity 1. Given what you explored and wrote in this Activity, what more do you notice or wonder about the Guiding Question? Explore your response for at least three minutes in writing.
LANDSCAPE AS AN ATTITUDE

These exercises can be done by individual learners who read and respond to the questions, or they can be done as a group led by an educator or facilitator.

Pre-Looking/Pre-Reading

1. What makes up a landscape? You can think of the landscape you look at as you drive, ride a train, or walk. You can also think about landscape paintings or photographs you have seen. Write out what comes to mind – brainstorm freely.
2. When you see the word “pastoral,” what comes to mind?
3. A pastoral scene or setting is a kind of landscape. It typically refers to an idealized or romanticized country scene that existed before contemporary technologies such as cars, phones, and TVs. You might see shepherds or farmers and farm animals roaming around a field or hill. Have you seen a picture or painting like this before? If so, which one and/or where did you see it? What did it look like? Respond in writing in at least 3-5 sentences.

Looking/Reading & Post-Looking/Reading

1. Closely observe Luis Camnitzer’s photo. What do you see? Write or say at least 3-5 things. Consider the position of his face and where you think his eyes are looking. Consider what you see on his face and where on his face you see it.
2. What does “attitude” mean? Ask someone or look it up and write the definition down.
3. Given the title of this artwork, “Landscape as an Attitude,” what kind of attitude do you see expressed in this photo? What kind of landscape do you see shown in this photo? How do your two responses compare/contrast?
4. Why do you think the title is “Landscape as an Attitude”? Write down the first ideas that come to mind. Don’t worry about being wrong or right. What does it mean that he compares a landscape to an attitude? What kind of attitude do you think is suggested in this photo? Is this something expressed in the photo or brought to the photo by the viewer or both? This photo is of the artist himself. What kind of portrait has he created? How would you
describe his attitude? Why do you think he adds the question of landscape to his portrait? Return to the Guiding Question and your thinking about it. Given what you explored in this Activity, what more do you notice or wonder about the Guiding Question? Take a few minutes to respond in writing.

**Your own Landscape as an Attitude**

1. Make a self-portrait of yourself (in drawing or with a camera) and draw a landscape of where you are from on your face. (if you are from multiple places, choose one for this first exercise and you can add another in the second.)
   a) Consider the importance of the position of your face. Are you standing up? Are you looking at the camera or is it your profile? Where is the camera in relation to your face (above, below, in line)?
   b) Consider the important components of the landscape where you are from. Write down the first 3-5 things that come to mind when you think of the landscapes of your “home.” Is it a cityscape? Are there animals? What kind of trees might there be? Is there a mailbox nearby where you live?
2. Use the same self-portrait of yourself and draw a landscape of another place you are from or have been that’s different from what you drew above.
3. Put the two photos/drawings side by side. What do you notice? What do you wonder? How do the different landscapes change how you look? How do the different landscapes change how you feel when looking at yourself?
4. What kind of “attitude” do you see yourself demonstrate in each photo?
TWO QUOTES

This Activity will ask you to read and engage with a quote from Brazilian educator Paulo Freire and a second quote by Luis Camnitzer. These exercises can be done by individual learners who read and respond to the questions, or they can be done as a group led by an educator or facilitator.

(A)

“Reading the world precedes reading the word, and the subsequent reading of the word cannot dispense with continually reading the world. Language and reality are dynamically intertwined.”
— Paulo Freire, “The Importance of the Act of Reading,” 1983

Reading

1. Starting with Freire’s statement, take some time to make observations about what you see in it. Looking at the words, the sentences, what sticks out to you? What patterns do you see? Write at least 3-5 observations.
2. Next read the statement aloud or have someone read it to you and write down a few observations about what you hear when you read it. What do you notice?
3. Which words are you unsure about or which words would you understand more clearly by looking them up in a dictionary? Look up the definitions and write down what you learn.
4. Using your observations and new definitions, paraphrase or summarize what you understand Paulo Freire to be saying in these sentences.

Analysis

1. How is Paulo Freire defining the act of reading? What does reading have to do with the “world” and the “word”?
2. How do you “read” your “world”? What are some of the places, people, and things that are important to it?
3. How would you define your relationship to your world or your environment? Describe it.
4. What are some of the words important to your world? These words could be ones you use when talking to your family or friends; this could be a word that
refers to something important to you (a food, game, music, social media, film, etc.). Please list as many words as possible – brainstorm and try to come up with 5-10 words.

5. Looking at the words you came up with for #4, do any connect to something you have read? A text message, a game, social media, etc. all count as instances of reading.

6. What do you like to read? What kinds of books or texts? What kinds of social media?

7. Do they differ from or are they similar to what your friends or family like to read?

Rereading

1. Go back to Paulo Freire’s statement. Given what you unpacked for the “Analysis” section above, paraphrase what he says again without looking at your first paraphrase.

2. Once you are done, go back to what you said in your first paraphrase. What do you notice? What’s similar and/or different?

(B)

“The museum is a school: the artist learns to communicate; the public learns to make connections.”
— Luis Camnitzer, Site-specific installation, dimensions variable, 2009–present.

Pre-reading

1. What is a school? What should a school do? What should students do in a school? Respond quickly with the first ideas that come to mind, writing at least 2-3 details in response to each question.

2. What is the role of a teacher? What should a teacher do? How should this involve students? Respond quickly with the first ideas that come to mind, writing at least 2-3 details in response to each question.

3. What is the role of an artist? What should an artist do? How might the artist’s role connect to the role of the public? Who is the public? Respond quickly with the first ideas that come to mind, writing at least 2-3 details in response to each question.
4. What is a museum? What should a museum do? What should the public in a museum do? Respond quickly with the first ideas that come to mind, writing at least 2-3 details in response to each question.

5. Look over your responses to each of these questions. Write down at least 2-3 similarities and 2-3 differences that you see across your responses. Some questions to help you: How is a school similar to or different from a museum? How is the role of a teacher similar to or different from an artist?

Reading

1. Read Camnitzer’s statement, “The museum is a school: the artist learns to communicate; the public learns to make connections.” Write down 3-5 observations about what you notice. Next, summarize or paraphrase Camnitzer’s statement in your own words.

Analysis

1. How does Camnitzer define the museum? How does his definition compare to yours? What’s similar/different?
2. How does Camnitzer define the artist? How does his definition compare to yours? What’s similar/different?
3. How does Camnitzer define the public? How does his definition compare to yours? What’s similar/different?
4. What do you connect or relate to in Camnitzer’s statement? What do you agree with?
5. What do you disagree with or have questions about? You can think about these questions as a way to help you better understand his statement.

Post-Reading

1. Given your responses in “pre-reading” and “reading,” what can museums do to become more like schools? Come up with at least 4-6 ideas. You can consider how people access museums: How do they find out about museums? Do museums charge entry fees? You can consider how museums display art, and how publics engage with art in museums.
2. How can schools become more like museums? Come up with at least 4-6 ideas. You can consider what students typically do in classrooms, how they sit, where the teacher is positioned, and how they teach, etc. What would need to change to make a school feel more like a museum for students?

3. Given what you wrote above, choose one of the top changes you wrote down to make a museum like a school and one to make a school like a museum. Write them down again. How would these two ideas make museums and schools better for the people they serve/people they educate? Respond in at least two sentences.
Activities: Kids
Luis Camnitzer, “This Is a Mirror, You Are a Written Sentence,” 1966-1968, Vacuum formed polystyrene 19 1/8 x 24 4/8 x 0 4/8 in (48.42 x 62.49 x 1.48 cm). Daros Latinamerica Collection © 2023 Luis Camnitzer / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.
THIS IS A MIRROR YOU ARE A WRITTEN SENTENCE

These exercises can be done by individual learners who read and respond to the questions. An educator or facilitator can also read the questions to learners and give them some space and time to verbally respond.

1. Camnitzer’s artwork is presented in the form of a sign, the kind we see everyday in public. What should a sign do? What is the purpose of a sign?
2. If you were a sign, what would you say? Who would you say it to? And where would you place it?
3. Use one or both of the sentence starters below to create a sign similar to Camnitzer’s artwork.
   This is a Mirror You Are ........................
   I Am a Mirror You Are ........................
LANDSCAPE AS AN ATTITUDE

These exercises can be done by individual learners who read and respond to the questions, or they can be done as a group led by an educator or facilitator.

1. Make a self-portrait of yourself by drawing on a page or using a camera and printing out the image. Draw a landscape of where you are from on your face. If you are from multiple places, choose one for this first exercise and you can add another in the second.
   a) Consider the importance of the position of your face. Are you standing up? Are you looking at the camera or is it your profile? Where is the camera in relation to your face (above, below, in line)?
   b) Consider the important components of the landscape where you are from. Write down the first 3-5 things that come to mind when you think of the landscapes of your “home.” Is it a cityscape? Are there animals? What kind of trees might there be? Is there a mailbox nearby where you live?
2. Use the same self-portrait of yourself and draw a landscape of another place you are from or have been that’s different from what you drew above.
3. Put the two photos/drawings side by side. What do you notice? What do you wonder? How do the different landscapes change how you look? How do the different landscapes change how you feel when looking at yourself?
4. What kind of “attitude” do you see yourself demonstrate in each photo?
Biography

Born in Germany in 1937, Camnitzer moved to Uruguay with his family in 1939 to escape persecution by the Nazi regime. Growing up as a bilingual German and Spanish speaker, he then studied sculpture and architecture in the city of Montevideo before moving to New York City in 1964. In New York, Camnitzer became part of a wider set of artists who rejected the conventional approach to making art at the time. Instead of creating objects to be looked at by passive viewers, this set of artists proposed that an artwork could be an idea. For some conceptual artists, as they became known, artworks could be a way of interrogating the nature of art in language. For others, idea-based artworks could be proposed and realized by anyone, in a variety of forms – potentially making art more democratic and accessible.

By the 1970s, Camnitzer began relating his artworks to the political events and history of Uruguay and its wider regional context. This was a period when multiple countries in South and Central America, including Uruguay, were ruled under repressive military regimes – often directly or indirectly supported by North American and European governments. Many artists living and working in these countries also used art as a means of communicating ideas, of subverting repressive political structures, and of conveying knowledge. For these artists, creating art based on ideas – not objects – was not only a way of transforming art. It was also a strategy for transforming an oppressive social reality.

In the 1980s and 1990s, as Camnitzer reflected upon his conceptual art practice and connections both to Uruguay and New York, he began to question how conceptual art was defined, and by whom. In many mainstream art institutions, “conceptual art” was work produced by artists in the U.S. and Western Europe. This narrative obscured the work of artists in Latin America who produced idea-based art using similar, but different strategies. For Camnitzer, this situation could be traced back to structures of economic and cultural power. This guide presents Camnitzer’s artistic methods for questioning and contesting these structures of power.
Additional Material

Read various essays by Luis Camnitzer compiled recently by the Hoosac Institute.

Download the catalog for Camnitzer’s 2018 retrospective exhibition at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid.

Read an interview between Camnitzer and Alejandro Cesarco published by Bomb magazine.

Watch a video interview with Camnitzer made by La Escuela__

Watch a video in which Camnitzer and Tania Brugera discuss political art.

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