

Slow Explosions

By Simone Neuenschwander

On Runo Lagomarsino's Installation *Las Casas Is Not a Home*

As the three young protagonists of Alejo Carpentier's book *Explosion in a Cathedral* (*El siglo de las luces*, 1962) wander through the house at the start of the novel—after their father, a merchant, has died—the objects and furniture seem at once familiar and strange to them. Looking at the cultural possessions in their family home in Havana, the orphans relate to Spanish colonial history around 1789 from a different perspective. One of the objects is a painting by an unknown Neapolitan master depicting the explosion of a church building. Over the course of the narrative, the image of this exploding cathedral becomes a metaphor for describing the effects of the French Revolution on the Caribbean colonies and the violent conflict between the “New World” and “Old World.” (1)

For me, this opening sequence in Alejo Carpentier's book is very similar to the narratives of Runo Lagomarsino's installation *Las Casas Is Not a Home*. Like Carpentier, the artist is reflecting critically on the complex connection between modernity (which, according to Michel Foucault, begins with the Enlightenment and the French Revolution) and colonialism. Carpentier's book focuses on the French Revolution, which brought the promise of freedom and human rights to the colonies but in its wake triggered another inexorable circular movement of power, control, and destruction. In Lagomarsino's case, it is a rereading of the different developments of modernity in Latin American and their inseparable connection to colonial history. The *Las Casas* in the title of the installation refers to the historical figure of the Spanish Dominican priest Bartolomé de Las Casas, (1486–1566). He was one of the first fierce critics of colonialism, who strongly disagreed with Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda on the occasion of the Valladolid debate (1550–1551), which today is acknowledged as a core philosophical discussion of the human status of the indigenous population. At the same time, the artist alludes with the literal meaning of *casa* as *house/home* to the constructions of identity and community as such.

In his works, Lagomarsino brings together objects that have been collected—such as artifacts, Argentine coins, or pieces of gold—with written materials such as ruled sheets, Post-It labels, and clipboards. He combines tools used when surveying the territory of countries on a drawing board with newspaper photographs, personal notes, and quotations from other authors. An important role is also played by altered representations of world maps from historical atlases and by materials—like stamps or colored paper—that refer to the writing of official documents. Lagomarsino produces each of his works as a small, sculptural gesture in order to present models for thinking about historical events, such as the current discussion of Manuel Zelaya, the president of Honduras, who was exiled from his own country by the military. The entire installation is an ongoing collection of cultural or referential materials, in which the artist adds and rearranges works. For example, for the group exhibition *Report on Probability* at the Kunsthalle Basel (2009), Lagomarsino produced six photographs of wallpaper preserved in a village restaurant in Ötlingen near Basel which became a part of the installation. (2) The wallpaper—produced in Paris 1820 by Dufour & Leroy, the leading wallpaper manufacturer at the time—is called Inca Panorma and is based on the novel *The Incas; or, The Destruction of the Empire of Peru* (1777) by the French Enlightenment writer Jean-François Marmontel. One of the wallpaper's motifs also shows Bartolomé de Las Casas in a benign pose surrounded by the Indians.

Lagomarsino's arrangement of works in the exhibition space refers both to personal living space and to a museum context. However, the single works—often displayed on black painted shelves—also obtain an autonomous place removed from time. Some of the prominent parts are small cardboard objects, with which Lagomarsino relates to the history of abstract art and minimal art. They encircle the form of the grid—whose use, according to Rosalind Krauss, is an expression of the avant-garde artist's claim to originality (3)—a form for thinking about geometric perfection and technical progress. However, their provisional construction of paper and cardboard, and the fact they are assembled by hand, deconstructs any unambiguous reading of them as minimal art objects. The honeycomb structures of the thin pieces of cutout cardboard and the shapes made of plaited cardboard recall both traditional building techniques as well as the history of modernist architecture in Latin

America through their use of Brazilian *cobogo* (perforated ceramic brick), a material conceived especially for buildings in a tropical, humid climate.

Lagamarsino traces the history of Latin America by means of fragments, making it possible to move backward and forward in time and to overlap individual stories. The arrangements are reminiscent of school or of scientific categorization: Although they suggest learning situations, they nevertheless leave the information to be communicated to the viewer open. The meaning of the things is connected to the direction of rhizomatous readings—from the journeys of conquering to the current political ambitions of Western countries, from modernist forms back to the art of ancient cultures, from the colonization of South America to industrialization, from the current global currency system back to the effects of the cold war.

In the video *The G in Modernity Stands for Ghosts* (2009), crumpled pieces of paper in a small cardboard box are lit with a match. The balls of paper are blank, undiscovered areas Lagomarsino cut out of an atlas. The film ends with them carbonizing completely, but, shown as a loop, the action of the burning begins over. The sequence shows a symbolic act of destruction but also of return: the small box becomes an open coffin that holds the *terrae incognitae* of the world, which are repeatedly ignited anew. The image of smoke and fire is also connected with the manifestations of ghosts, as the title of the film suggests.

Lagamarsino's title refers directly to Anibal Quijano's essay "Of Don Quixote and Windmills in Latin America" (2005). Quijano's text contributes to the current debate in South American cultural studies and social sciences, which is an attempt to reflect anew on the impact of modernity on Latin American society. According to Quijano, that society continues to develop under the preconditions of a colonial discourse on power and under the influence of Eurocentrism. In order to find a way of out this labyrinth, "where our unsolved problems haunt us like ghosts from our past," these phenomena have to be brought to light and used to understand historical experiences so that Latin America can develop a new, self-confident identity. (4)

Another perspective on modernity and its ghosts in Lagomarsino's works does not apply to Latin America alone: they reflect local and global structures of society between South and North and East and West. When one imagines the possibility of change, the lines and meshes laid out in *Las Casas Is Not a Home* seem to hold a message: in society, sustainable change in thinking is never achieved through classical dichotomies or violent acts as conquests or "explosions of the cathedral." Rather, they require slower movements to examine the processes of history writing, to understand the aims and powers that are hidden behind them.

Notes

- 1 Alejo Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, trans. John Sturrock (New York: Harper, 1979), 18; originally published as *El siglo de las luces* (México: Cía. General de Ediciones, 1962).
- 2 Group show *Report on Probability*, with Sven Augustijnen, Andreas Bunte, Patricia Esquivias, Runo Lagomarsino, Lars Laumann, Anna Molska, Anna Niesterowicz & Łukasz Gutt, and Corin Sworn; curated by Adam Szymczyk, Kunsthalle Basel, June 28–August 30, 2009.
- 3 See, for example, Rosalind Krauss, "The Originality of the Avant-Garde: A Postmodern Repetition", in Brian Willis, ed., *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, exh. cat., The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York (Boston: David R. Godine, 1984).
- 4 Anibal Quijano, "Of Don Quixote and Windmills in Latin America," trans. Meryl Adelman, *Libros y Artes: Revista de Cultura de la Biblioteca Nacional del Perú*, no. 10 (April 2005): 14–16.

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