



IF YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT THE SOUTH IS

IT'S SIMPLY BECAUSE

YOU ARE FROM THE NORTH

Concentrations
61

RUNO LAGOMARSINO
EntreMundos
September 30, 2018–February 17, 2019

DALLAS MUSEUM OF ART

Concentrations 61: Runo Lagomarsino, *EntreMundos* is the first solo museum exhibition in the United States for the artist (b. 1977), who lives and works in Malmö, Sweden, and São Paulo, Brazil. His work has been exhibited in group shows at the Guggenheim, New York; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; Prospect New Orleans; and the Venice Biennale, among other venues. By transforming everyday objects and phrases into historically referential works of art, Lagomarsino considers the unstable nature of national identities and mythologies. Through these deceptively simple transformations, he points to the volatile relationship between power and geography.

KATHERINE BRODBECK: Here I am in Dallas, Texas, in 2018, at a time when US immigration policy and the policing of the country's southern border in Texas is making international news. But these stories, which are the cause of much scrutiny and tremendous anxiety, are unfortunately not new. Your work addresses historical processes of colonialization and migration, with clear references to the European conquest (in *EntreMundos*), but also extending to the present (as suggested by the stamp work *AMERICAMNESIA*). How closely is your work tied to a particular time and place?

RUNO LAGOMARSINO: As you are in Dallas, I am at the moment in the Iberian Peninsula, where two seas connect and become one; for me this embodies the questions that you raise. It's from here that the conquest of "the new world" across the Atlantic starts, in 1492. Equally important (and many times forgotten) is that, in the same year, the Spanish regime demanded that the Jewish and Muslim communities either convert to Catholicism or face a forced exile beyond the Mediterranean: the so-called Reconquista, a reconquest without a past. It is a moment of expansion and closure at the same time. The Mediterranean has always been a place for heterogeneous meetings and cultural exchange, but with the strong development of Eurocentrism and xenophobia during the last decades, it has become one of the world's deadliest frontiers.

What I try to do in my work is construct frictions between language, iconography, and dominant narratives—frictions that connect these two spaces and times. My work is a search for fractures, for blind paths from where to tell other stories, from where to unlearn, and, particularly, from where to read the past and name the future. A central inspiration for me has been decolonial thinking, based on the idea that in a colonial paradigm even knowledge has been colonized, and that in order to restructure the positions of power, knowledge has to be decolonized.

This means that there has to be a change not only in content but also in the form in which the conversation is being held; new systems, new ways of narrating have to be produced. A key word here is *delinking*, a term and idea developed by Argentine semiotician Walter Dignolo. Dignolo focuses on the totalitarian, monolithic, and authoritarian essence of the modern project and on the exploration of "the darker side of modernity." He writes: "The basic thesis is the following: 'modernity' is a European narrative that hides its darker side, 'coloniality.' Coloniality, in other words, is constitutive of modernity—there is no modernity without coloniality." Coloniality is, for the author, not only the historical experience of colonialism but also the destruction of other ways of being (and seeing the world).

KB: The works mentioned above address the colonial legacy of the Americas in particular. Your grandparents immigrated to Argentina from Italy in the mid-20th century, like countless others. You were born and raised in Sweden, where your parents migrated during Argentina's "Dirty War." You now split your time between Malmö, Sweden, and São Paulo, Brazil. Can you speak a little about how transnationalism has affected your formation as an artist? In your experience, how are legacies of colonialization and migration received differently in Europe and in the Americas?

RL: I have to say that I am sometimes a little concerned by the term *transnationalism*. While I understand it identifies practices and identities of people living within and outside national states, there is a tendency in an art context to romanticize this topic. But as Palestinian American professor and literary critic Edward Said says, "Exile is strangely compelling to think about, but terrible to experience." I would like to suggest that how, under which conditions, and why the moving between nation-states is done lends a radically different meaning to the experience of transnationalism.

An important aspect (or place) that defines my position as an artist is the idea of being an outsider within. This place (or this non-place, this in-between place) contains an element of frustration, but at the same time, it is a place for thinking, for resistance, for the making of W. E. B. Du Bois's idea of double consciousness, for the *frontera*/borderlands theory in Gloria Anzaldúa's exploration of the experiences of Chicanas living on the border of South Texas and Mexico.

I was born with my parents' exile, but my own repeated movement between Sweden and Brazil made me even more sensitive to the distances and proximities between what is understood as South and North. It forced me to rearticulate many aspects of my thinking and provoked an important shift in my work, which can most clearly be seen in relation to questions of representation, geography, memory, and diaspora. The difference is not in the subject matter; these are all topics with which I have been very engaged for a long time, but the change—of my place(s)—also transformed the ways in which I address these issues, the processes through which my works are produced, their materiality. They not only "speak" about geography, our connections to the colonial past, and displacement, but also embody these elements, accentuating a material experience that can carry the complex journey and movement of geopolitics.

KB: Your work often incorporates readymade objects, photographs, and language. Some of these works are more legible, such as when you use text. Others are more enigmatic. I want to speak in particular about *Crucero del Norte*, which is a photographic series that bears witness to the re-creation of a very personal journey, the whole of which might not be evident at first glance. Could you speak a little about this piece, and your working process more generally? What research is involved before creating a work? And how do you communicate that process to the viewer?

RL: In the spring of 1976, my family was exiled from Argentina. My father traveled by bus from Buenos Aires to Rio de Janeiro, where he joined my mother and sister. Together they crossed the Atlantic on an Italian ship. Thirty-six years later, I made the same bus journey, covering the 2,700 kilometers between the two cities aboard the *Crucero del Norte*. That was the name of the bus company, which was intriguing as I was doing a trip north, as my parents had done before. The title of the work also references *Cruzeiro do Sul* by Cildo Meireles, an artist who is very important to me.

I carried with me a package of photographic paper. Arriving at the bus station in Rio de Janeiro forty-five hours after departure, I opened the package and let the sunlight hit the paper's surface. The matter of the work in itself performs a narrative, has an experience. The photographic papers were later developed. The resulting abstract images are a way to acknowledge the difficulty and complexity of reflecting and narrating experiences of suffering, loss, and exile. These questions need to be talked about and acted upon in ways that fracture stereotypical representations and narratives, where the viewer can enter in conversation, meet in another space, a space behind the image. As an artist, it's important to trust your viewers, their complexities, their myriad forms of reading, but also to demand their engagement.

KB: The first work of yours that I came into contact with is *West Is Everywhere you Look*, an installation of rolled-up maps, like those used in a classroom, hanging from the ceiling. What I love about this work is how universal it is. The maps don't provide the information we are accustomed to seeing there: the manmade political borders that have shifted over time to reflect changes in geopolitical power dynamics. Instead, they are completely abstracted, and we can't locate ourselves there in relation to others; however, the circumambulation of the space becomes, in a way, its own experience of location. Can you speak to the importance of installation and the physical relationship between viewer and object in your work?



RL: *West Is Everywhere you Look* investigates the historiographic, geographic, and mathematic models that informed the colonial domination of the world by Western modernity. How can one trace the relationship between the historical and geographic methods of describing the planet that were devised by European reason and the political control of that world?

School maps, maps that have been used to teach about this understanding of the world, tell us how the world and the word are constructed, here rolled so we can't see the maps that we already know. It is impossible to see the image they carry, but everybody can imagine them. West is everywhere you look—West is in our way of looking, it's embodied, it is the place from which we look, and defines everything we can see. These vertical structures become bodies, subjects, with which the viewers can establish a one-to-one relationship. Spinning plays with the idea of geography, movement; it's a way of making the maps dance.

Some of us enjoyed underlining borders in the schoolbook with a black pencil. We did not know that to connect the drawing of maps with school time was a privileged position. Others, on the other hand, are forced to read and relate to maps in highly different ways. Others are forced to read maps as narratives of exclusion and fear. Others are forced to understand maps as defining who you are and who you can become.

KB: The most recent work in the exhibition is based on the Japanese tradition of *kintsugi*, in which ceramics are restored through the application of gold leaf to the constituent shards. I find this work to be tremendously optimistic, as if the greatest hope our society has to become whole is through acknowledging—and valuing—our breakages. This stands in stark contrast to *AMERICAMNESIA*, which suggests that intrinsic in the national identity is a deliberate obfuscation of history. What role do you see art playing in the reclamation of histories?

RL: The topic of reconciliation is a central societal issue. The work explores the possibilities and the shortcomings of practices of healing. As you mention, one possibility is through hope, identifying experiences where the societal and individual pain has been acknowledged, opening the possibility of healing, as in the case of Argentina, where the military dictatorship was judged and put in prison and the suffering of the survivors went from being private and isolated to being public and collective. For me, there is also another important reading of the work, or starting point: the blue as a reference to the sea (the Atlantic, the conquest, the slave trade) and the damage being restored with gold (the Atlantic, the conquest, the slave trade).

Can the work also be an investigation of capitalism at its core, with its fantasies that everything, even human suffering, can be commodified? Can the wrongdoing be rectified through covering the fractures with gold? These multiple readings that the work allows capture my own ambivalence regarding the tension between reconciliation and forgetting, between acknowledgment and social justice.

AMERICAMNESIA also has multiple readings: on the one hand, it refers to something your question also brings to light, the forgetfulness that allows for the name of a continent to be taken as the epithet of a nation; on the other hand, it refers to the amnesia that permits the repetition of history in this whole continent.

KB: You have incorporated ancient American works, like Incan *quipus*, from the permanent collection of the Dallas Museum of Art in your exhibition. Can you speak to your relationship to artifacts of the past? How can these objects find new life in an exhibition of contemporary art, or how does their presence affect the appreciation of your work?

RL: I don't see history as the past—it's here, in the present; therefore, the Incan *quipus* are not artifacts from the past. They are symbols of hidden history, and, in particular, of silenced history, of resistance. I think a central challenge in Latin America is to answer the question of who we are, which also means asking where we come from—a question that has been violently ignored (once again the amnesia) in the construction of the national states of Latin America. Having the *quipus* displayed in the contemporary section of the museum is a way of dissipating the fog of amnesia. It is also a way of questioning museums' structures of categorization, which derive from the same Eurocentric reasoning used when drawing maps.

Maybe wanting the presence of the *quipus* in the vicinity of my work can also be read as a gesture parallel to that of restoring blue porcelain by filling its wounds with gold. It's a way of searching for healing, and an awareness of the power structures that our words, our words, and our worlds are condemned to live within. In the words of poet and playwright Derek Walcott, language is "a place of struggle."

Concentrations 61: Runo Lagomarsino, EntreMundos is organized by the Dallas Museum of Art. The presentation is made possible by the TWO x TWO for AIDS and Art Fund and the DMA Contemporary Art Initiative.

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IMAGES

Recto:

West Is Everywhere you Look, 2016. Installation view from Francesca Minini, Milan, 2016, Photo © Agostino Osio.

Verso (left to right): *ContraTiempos*, 2010, projection of 27 color 35 mm slides, 5:24 minutes, Courtesy of the artist, Nils Stærk, Copenhagen, Mendes Wood DM, São Paulo, and Francesca Minini, Milan, Photo © Amílcar Packer

If You Don't Know What the South Is, It's Simply Because you are From the North, 2009, Courtesy of the artist, Mendes Wood DM, São Paulo, Nils Stærk, Copenhagen, and Francesca Minini, Milan. Installation view from Prospect.4 New Orleans, 2017, Photo © J Caldwell.

Crucero del Norte, 1976–2012, Photo © Erling Lykke Jeppesen

All works are © Runo Lagomarsino.

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

West Is Everywhere you Look, 2016

Nine maps, motors, cables, and wires
Variable dimensions
Courtesy of the artist and Francesca Minini, Milan

AMERICAMNESIA, 2017

Black ink applied on wall
Variable dimensions
Courtesy of the artist, Nils Stærk, Copenhagen, Mendes Wood DM, São Paulo, and Francesca Minini, Milan

Crucero del Norte, 1976–2012

24 exposed photographic papers
7 x 9 1/2 in. (17.8 x 24 cm) each
Collection of Lena and Per Josefsson

EntreMundos, 2013–2018

Wallpaper
Variable dimensions
Courtesy of the artist

When gold was king, 2018

Ceramic, pigment, and gold
28 pieces in various dimensions
Dallas Museum of Art, TWO x TWO for AIDS and Art Fund

LOCAL SUPPORT

Office of Cultural Affairs
CITY OF DALLAS