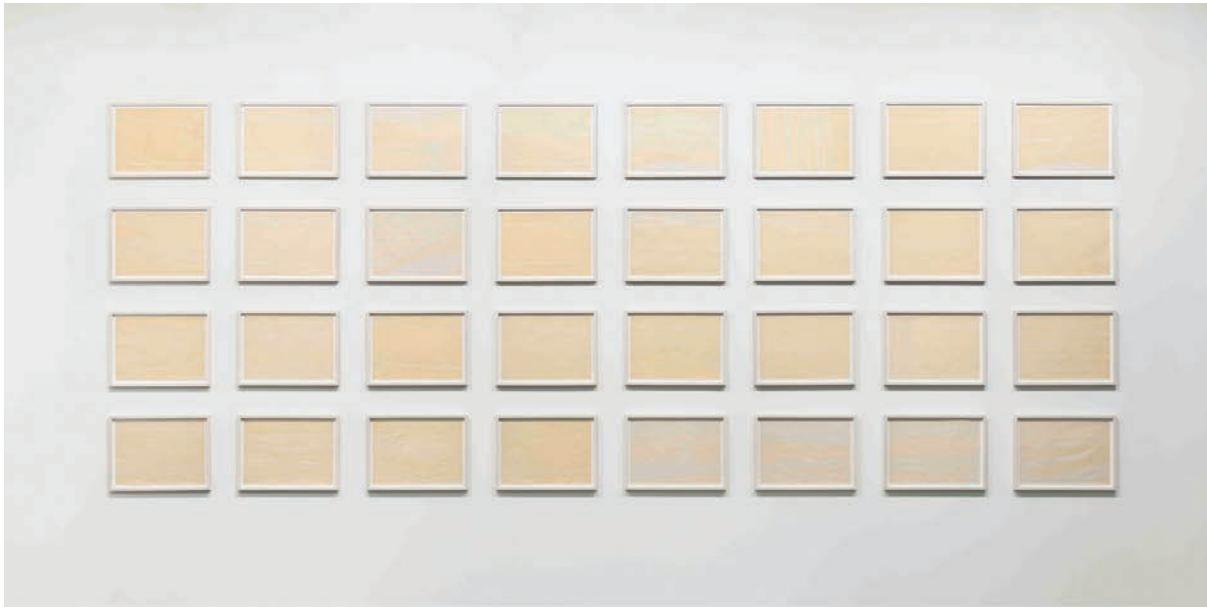


# Loaded Narratives

*by Oliver Basciano*



Runo Lagomarsino sharpens his attack  
on European paradigms in works that make  
the personal highly political



Runo Lagomarsino has something of the nineteenth-century Romantic tradition to his work: there lies in his films, slideshows, sculptures and actions (of which mostly just the remnants or documentation constitute the work) an interest in nature and the ravages of time; a melancholia, or rather, to use the Brazilian Portuguese term, *saudade*; a yearning; a sense of distance travelled, geographical or temporal.

The work has a hard-bitten edge too. A political sharpness, one that's feeling sharper as Lagomarsino's personal interests in questions of colonial heritage, migration and borders are increasingly those that prominently concern the press and its audiences. Yet while the artist's work looks at the mass social effects of the movement of people between countries, across nation states and cultures, it is also concerned with the process of migration itself and how that might change the individual. This is not surprising given the artist's family history. Lagomarsino's parents left Argentina after the 1976 military coup, travelling to Sweden, where the artist himself was born a year later. His parent's continental migration was, with bitter irony, the reversal of the earlier emigration Lagomarsino's Italian grandparents had undertaken following the First World War. Taking inspiration from this history, in 2010, and now himself based transatlantically between Malmö and São Paulo, the artist undertook one of the first in a series of works that involved the Atlantic in its production. At Lagomarsino's behest, a solo sailor, navigating the breadth of the ocean, secured 49 sheets of blank newsprint paper provided by the artist to the deck of his vessel. During the crossing, the paper, open to the elements, was bleached by the harsh sun. Once framed individually and hung as a grid, the 32 sheets that

survived the journey make for a minimal work, titled *Trans Atlantic* (2010–11), in which each element, in a varying state of discolouration, each marked with white straplines, is a memorial to the crossing. Two years later Lagomarsino again made his family background an explicit part of the thinking behind a work. *Crucero del Norte* consists of 25 sheets of photographic paper that the artist carried in his luggage on a 2,700km bus journey from Buenos Aires to Rio de Janeiro, replicating the journey his father had made in 1976 to join his mother and sister before their transatlantic escape. Once at the bus station the artist stripped off the papers' protective film, exposing them to the Brazilian light, a photographic 'portrait' of the moment of arrival similar to that shared by so many immigrant families.

It might be hard for the lay viewer of much of Lagomarsino's work to glean the loaded narratives of their production purely from the end products; yet the artist provides tantalising hints in both his titling and caption information. Aside from the title, *Trans Atlantic*, for example, there is the suggestion that the production of the work may have involved some hazardous process by the artist's inclusion of the 17 sheets that did not survive the journey in the accompanying caption information, noting them as a constituent part of the project. *Crucero del Norte* takes its title from the name of the Argentinian long-distance bus company that provided Lagomarsino's passage, a strong suggestion of the idea of a journey involved in its production. The artist also gives the work's production dates as 1976–2012, a reference to the fact that, within the 24 prints, glossy black rectangular voids but for a shaft of white light on the lower side of around half of them, there is a greater narrative history at play and the work is the product of an aspect of Lagomarsino's biography.

above *Trans Atlantic*, 2010–11,  
32 sun drawings and 17 unrealised sun drawings,  
newsprint paper, 33 × 48 cm (each)

facing page *Trans Atlantic* (detail), 2010–11



Similarly, when Lagomarsino makes reference to the colonial histories of the South American continent, as he has done in more recent works, moving away from migration as his central theme (though of course the two subjects are entwined, as both involve some aspect of travel), he does so in a manner that expresses the ways in which the artist himself, and therefore to a large extent his autobiographical work, are products and manifestations of colonisation and its aftereffects.

There is an apocryphal tale that concerns an argument Christopher Columbus had with a nobleman who claimed that the ‘discovery’ of America was hardly a great feat, and that someone else would have landed on the continent sooner or later. By way of reply, the explorer is said to have asked for an egg and wagered that his interlocutor would not be able to balance it on its end. Once this nobleman had failed to do so, and to demonstrate that something only seems easy retrospectively, Columbus tapped the egg’s bottom flat and stood it upright. Lagomarsino’s 2013 inkjet print *Europe is Impossible to Defend* features William Hogarth’s 1752 etching of this moment (*Columbus Breaking the Egg*), with Lagomarsino’s damning titular phrase silk-screened across its centre in gold. The story of the explorer’s egg surfaces again in the video installation *More delicate than the historians’ are the map-makers’ colours* (2012–13, the title taken from the last

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*More delicate than the historians’ are the map-makers’ colours,*  
2012–13, HD video, 6 min 42 sec, 16:9,  
variable dimensions, Edition 1/3, 1 AP

line of Elizabeth Bishop’s 1935 poem ‘The Map’). A handheld digital camera captures Lagomarsino and his father in the Parque de San Jerónimo in Seville unwrapping two parcels the artist has brought to Spain from Argentina. The packages contain boxes of eggs, which the two are shown carrying as they approach the park’s monstrously giant sculpture depicting Columbus inside an egglike structure (by artist Zurab Tsereteli). Lagomarsino and his father take the carton’s

contents out one by one and start to hurl them at the monument. The video is often installed alongside a half dozen eggs on a shelf against the artist’s 2013 wallpaper *EntreMundos*, which sports repeating symbols of conquest: a knight and a galleon.

Lagomarsino cites the Argentinian semiotician Walter Mignolo and his concept of ‘decoloniality’, theorised in his 2009 essay ‘Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and De-Colonial Freedom’, in relation to this and to his more recent work. In attacking the giant edifice of Columbus, and the European colonial power-nexus it represents (and perhaps even celebrates), Lagomarsino is enacting, albeit to an extent symbolically, Mignolo’s call for a rejection of traditional Western supremacy and a ‘de-colonial de-linking with all its historical, political and ethical consequences’. (Mignolo identifies decoloniality as differing from the more familiar ideas of globalisation and ‘de-Westernization’ by



noting that these last two are essentially processes in which neoliberal capitalism levels the playing field between the former coloniser and former colonised, whereas decoloniality seeks to do so outside the ‘primacy of the production and reproduction of goods’). One methodology Mignolo notes as a means to achieve his aims is ‘disobedience’. The petty vandalism in *More delicate than the historians’ are the map-makers’ colours* and the basic impotence of Lagomarsino and his father’s actions – some of the eggs don’t even hit their target and are not likely to inflict much damage – only serves to demonstrate the might of the Western monolith. This small act of criminality can be recalled also in works in which the artist has engaged in petty theft. Over a series of visits to the Ethnological Museum of Berlin, which houses one of Germany’s most important collections of non-European artefacts, Lagomarsino stole several lightbulbs and tubes. When exhibited, the slightly blackened fittings are laid out neatly in a vitrine and the nearest wall is covered entirely in goldleaf. With this reference to the gold of South America and its colonial exploitation, Lagomarsino’s comment in *Stolen Light / Abstracto en Dorado* (2013) is clear: the artist thieved these bulbs from a place that is itself a repository of colonial loot as a small act of retribution and reparation, a protest against not just the economic and political power wielded historically by Europe, but also the colonisation of knowledge of which the museum is symbolic. The work is recalled again in *Pergamon (A Place in Things)* (2014), in which more bulbs, this time coming from the Pergamon Museum, Berlin, which exhibits reconstructed buildings and interiors from beyond Europe, are neatly arranged on the

*Pergamon (A Place in Things)*, 2014, incandescent bulbs, fluorescent tubes, halogen lamps and other light devices from the Pergamon Museum, Berlin, 500 × 600 × 75 cm

*all images* Courtesy the artist; Mendes Wood DM, São Paulo; and Nils Stærk, Copenhagen

gallery floor, and in *Blind Spots* (2013), photographs of the museum’s blackened or burnt-out bulbs *in situ*.

Working within a zone of decolonised knowledge seems to be the challenge the artist has set for himself of late. In *Sea Grammar* (2015), an identical photograph of the Mediterranean Sea is loaded into each slot of a slide carousel; each successive image, however, has an increasing number of holes pricked through it, so that by the end of the loop, the original idyllic picture, which had the aesthetic of a holiday snap, appears to have been riddled with bullet holes. Lagomarsino writes that the work seeks to compare the traditional European image of the Mediterranean as a symbol of tourism and leisure with that of those on its other coastlines, who see it as a dangerous, deathly space (though one to be traversed for economic or political reasons). Mignolo again: ‘Civil disobedience... could only lead to reforms, not to transformations. For this simple reason, the task of de-colonial thinking and the enactment of the de-colonial option in the 21st century starts from epistemic de-linking: from acts of epistemic disobedience.’ The instability of perspectives that Lagomarsino is attempting to instigate with *Sea Grammar* is perhaps part of a greater future project for the artist in which his work aims at moving beyond the power structures of the coloniser’s knowledge and language (structures upon which conceptual art, as a European invention, is founded, of course) and towards something that is a truer expression of the kind of global hybridity of which the artist is a product. **ar**

Runo Lagomarsino: West is everywhere you look *is at Francesca Minini, Milan, through 6 May*