

"Interview: Leandro Erlich," *Artkrush*, October 29, 2008.



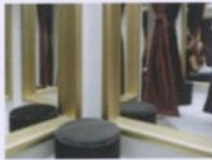
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Interview

October 29, 2008

Leandro Erlich



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*A master of illusion, Argentinean artist Leandro Erlich has amazed audiences with whimsical installations, sculptures, photographs, and videos for the past decade. His video installation *Le Trottoir* (The Sidewalk) is one of the highlights of the *Chanel Mobile Art* exhibition, and his celebrated *Swimming Pool* installation is currently enchanting visitors at *P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center* in Long Island City. Artkrush editor Paul Laster recently sat down with the globetrotting artist at New York's*

*Gramercy Park Hotel to discuss his past work and his new installation at *Prospect.1* New Orleans.*

AK: The first work I saw of yours was *Rain*, an installation in the 2000 Whitney Biennial that presented the viewer with the illusion of seeing someone through an apartment window on a rainy day. It was very clever and eerie. How did you come up with that idea and how was the illusion constructed?

LE: Like most of my projects, the idea came from the consideration of everyday architecture. I'm interested in the background places that hold our experiences and emotions on a daily basis, even though we are unaware of them. For *Rain*, I looked for a particular mood: a nostalgic scene, where the viewer participated in the act of contemplation. The windows looked out on a narrow space between two extremely close urban buildings. I built an enclosed set and used pumps to recycle the rain. In the end, as often happens, *Rain* took on a life of its own and became less about nostalgia and more about a violent storm.

AK: The following year, I stumbled upon a group show at Kent Gallery in New York that included *Turismo*. For this series, you created a wintry alpine set during the 7th Havana Biennial and photographed Cubans playing on the fictional slope. Why snow in Cuba, and how did the public react?

LE: Around that time, I was invited to several international biennials and realized that the best way to approach this type of exhibition was to play with context. I decided to engage the social, political, and geographical context of Havana, rather than deny it. I collaborated with Judi Werthein, a fellow Argentinean artist, to build a fake landscape that would never exist in the Caribbean. By photographing Cubans in a snowy environment, we were able to metaphorically transport them to a place that most had never visited. Few Cubans are allowed to leave the country, so the participants found the project

somewhat ironic. They would leave the set with a Polaroid and jokingly say, "Look, I've been skiing in Switzerland."

AK: The art world enthusiastically embraced one of your earlier installations, *Swimming Pool*, from 1999. One version is on permanent display at the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art in Japan, and another is currently on view at P.S.1. What is it about this piece that captures the imagination of the viewer?

LE: I think it's the simplicity — the fact that something extraordinary can happen in such a simple way, technically and conceptually. That's an important factor in all of my projects. The viewer can trace the process; it's recognizable. The trick is not presented to deceive the viewer, but to be understood and resolved by him. Such an engagement with the work involves the viewer's participation and leads to the thought that reality is as fake and constructed as the art; it's a fiction. Although it's the fiction that we all agree to live in. I'm a very optimistic person, and understanding that reality can be many things at the same time increases our awareness of life, politics, and our surroundings in general.

AK: 2005's *Staircase* installation, which you created for Albion in London, is very amusing. You almost get vertigo by looking at the photo documentation. How difficult was it to construct the piece in the gallery and what was the optimum point for experiencing it?

LE: It was a difficult piece to build. It was partially produced in Buenos Aires, shipped to London by boat in two containers, and then installed and finished in the gallery space. It really did give you some sort of vertigo — just by looking in front of you rather than looking down. My work has a cinematographic sensibility. It's a stage, where the viewer becomes an actor. *Staircase* riffs on an iconoclastic scene from *Hitchcock*: looking down the staircase. The viewer not only interacts with the work; he interacts with the other viewers. Like in *Rain*, the person across the way could be a neighbor, but it's more likely just another member of the public. The person on the staircase could be two or three floors up or down. There's a relation between all of the work and a path for viewing it, although each piece is proposing something slightly different — be it something physical, perceptual, or contemplative.

AK: The *building facade-and-mirror projects* that you did in Paris and Japan are truly fantastic. When did you first conceive that idea? How difficult was it to make such a large set? How did people interact with it?

LE: The project was first built for the annual Parisian art festival *Nuit Blanche*, which spreads throughout the city for one night. I had encountered the festival previously, so I already had some considerations in mind. Because so many people stroll the streets, I realized the project had to be large and accessible, even if the viewers did not physically interact with the work. There's something magical about the night, and something quite romantic about lasting only one night. I wanted to do a project that would be like a dream, one that people could actually photograph. The following morning, everything was gone.

In Japan, I was invited to participate in the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial in a mountainous area filled with small villages. The triennial aimed to revitalize the region through art, and my goal was to make the art accessible. It became clear to me that the project should engage common people, not only art lovers. The organizers were not that happy with the model of the facade that I used, and they asked me why I picked it. I maintained that it's an ordinary house, like 98% of the architecture in the region. There are probably only three or four traditional Japanese homes in the whole area. Most of the houses look exactly like *the one that I built for the project*. It's spontaneous architecture. When someone decides that they need a window, they just cut a hole in the wall and insert whatever size window is available. Art has the power to define beauty. I thought it was important for people to come and interact with an artwork that looked like their own houses, not some ideal.

AK: In the 2007 photographic series *Through the Wall*, two women seem to come out of and pass back through a brick wall. What is it about these simple tricks of the eye that amuse you?

LE: The trick of the eye triggers the detonation of experience. The visual remains in the eye even though our perception changes. It changes in a much slower way than other aspects of knowledge. Two-hundred years from now, viewers will see people underwater in *Swimming Pool* in a very perceptual and physical way. These are elements like the oil for a painter or the marble for a sculptor. They are the tools I use to build metaphors and to construct fictions, and many of those fictions and metaphors are based on something that is physically impossible. That's what really amuses me about it.

AK: In the Chanel Mobile Art pavilion, you made a video installation that presents the buildings on a Parisian street with the people living and working in them visible through the windows. The trick here is that the viewer sees the entire scene as a reflection in street puddles while walking on a sidewalk. The end result is sublime, but it must have taken a lot of production to achieve the illusion. How long did you work on it and what were the greatest problems to overcome?

LE: The biggest problem was deciding how to participate in an exhibition about Chanel. My work has never been about fashion. The challenge was to produce a work that added something to the exhibition, but remained a work of my own interests. Art always has to deal with context, but Chanel is a very particular one. The exhibition implies many things: it's obvious marketing for the brand, and it's a traveling pavilion — a capsule. I decided to capture a moment from Paris, where I've lived for the past four years, and put it into this capsule to travel to different cities. The viewer is invited to take part in a journey, which lasts only a few minutes, on four meters of sidewalk. It was technically difficult to make, but it was fun. That's often how it is. There's the research, the challenge of how to do it, and then the process of actually making the piece. It's all very stimulating. I'm happy because the end result is close to what I conceived: a poetic work that's calm and nostalgic. This is the piece I would have made if someone asked me to do a portrait of Paris.

AK: At Prospect.1 New Orleans, you have an installation in the Lower Ninth Ward. When did you visit New Orleans and what was your first impression?

LE: I first visited in 1999, when I was doing the CORE residency program in Houston. I was enchanted by New Orleans. Coming from a Latin American culture, I felt close to the architecture and the European feel of downtown New Orleans. It was not until many years later, after Hurricane Katrina, that I went back to visit the city to view possible sites for the biennial. Downtown was pretty much the same. It wasn't badly affected by the hurricane. Then I went to the Lower Ninth Ward, which had been struck hard. The whole neighborhood had been washed out by the storm. When someone first took me there, I thought it was an underdeveloped area. Then I saw cement foundations from houses that were made out of wood, and I realized that nothing else remained. It gave me goose bumps, and strangely reminded me of visiting the Rothko Chapel. There's no trace of the tragedy, just the remaining parts of houses. Knowing the history of what was there and that it's all gone — it's incredible. It was an extraordinary place. There's a spiritual sense to it. After visiting that site, I realized there was no way that I could bring preconceived ideas to the site. It was the presence of the absence that struck me.

AK: What do you hope to convey with your installation that you've made there, *Window and Ladder — Too Late for Help*?

LE: *Window and Ladder*, like so many of my works, presents an impossible situation. The ladder is leaning against a window from the remaining parts of a house. It's intended to commemorate a loss. We can never forget what happened and we have to rebuild. Bringing back what was lost in the flood is important, but you have to be sure that the memory is never washed away. *Leandro Erlich's work is on view as part of Chanel Mobile Art in New York's Central Park through November 9; at Galleria Continua in San Gimignano, Italy through November 15; in the Singapore Biennale through November 16; in the Liverpool Biennial through November 30; in Prospect.1 New Orleans from November 1 through January 18, 2009; and at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center through April 13, 2009.*