

Rottenberg, Silvia. "Leandro Erlich Plays on the Cusp of Reality," *Hyperallergic*, August 20, 2019.

## HYPERALLERGIC

INTERVIEWS

### Leandro Erlich Plays on the Cusp of Reality

The Argentine conceptual artist reminds us that imagination can transform reality into art.



Leandro Erlich, "Invisible Billboard" (2019) (image courtesy of MALBA)

BUENOS AIRES — About a week after nominees could register as candidates for the Argentine presidency, *Liminal*, the first survey of Argentine conceptual artist Leandro Erlich on the American continent, opened at the Latin American Art Museum of Buenos Aires (MALBA). Curated by Dan Cameron, the show brings together 21 installations produced between 1996 and today. His famous "Swimming Pool," ingeniously constructed to be viewed from either above or inside, is on view for the first time in Erlich's home country. It co-represented Argentina at the 2001 Venice Biennale, before traveling around the world and going on permanent display in museums in Japan and the Netherlands.

Elevators going nowhere, a rainy sidewalk reflecting a hidden cityscape in its gutter, a beauty salon missing its mirrors, an empty classroom filled with ghost-

# SEANKELLY

like reflections of the public — these are among the works visitors can enjoy in Ehrlich’s playful, interactive survey, which remains on view until Argentina’s election day on October 27, 2019.



Leandro Erlich, “Port of Reflections” (2014), metal structure, cover, boats, dimensions vary (© photo by Hasegawa Kenta, courtesy Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, Japan)

One work in particular hit social media even before the show opened: an enormous billboard installed on the façade of the museum, offering it up for sale. If interested in the 7,455-square-meter museum and its collection, feel free to call “Erlich Propiedades.” The museum’s president and owner is real estate developer Eduardo Costantini, who immediately posted a photo of the sign on his Instagram account. This led to a gulf of reactions, from worry to disbelief. However, Costantini admitted to Hyperallergic, “It didn’t take long for most, though, to understand it was part of Erlich’s exhibition. It’s like that with Erlich: you get fooled at the beginning and only later, you get it.” Perhaps the sale of a museum may seem like an obvious artistic intervention, but in an election year in Argentina, it could be real — the dates of the show are well chosen to prompt speculation. (I only got the joke later.) Erlich wants his audience to doubt all realities. *Liminal* references the threshold of a next phase — leaving a prior reality behind, on the cusp of a new one.

When I interviewed Erlich, he was wearing round, blue sunglasses the entire time. I asked him if he saw John Lennon as an inspiration. “Yes, I am a big fan of Lennon!” he laughed, adding, “I have to make something of my appearance. It’s

# SEANKELLY

so dull otherwise.” This seemed like a perfect metaphor for his art, and a reminder that imagination is what makes reality into art.

\* \* \*



Leandro Erlich, “The Cloud” (2018), ceramical digital print on extra light glass, wooden case, led lights, 78.3 x 68.8 x 26.3 in. (© photo by Hasegawa Kent a, courtesy Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, Japan)



Leandro Erlich, “The Room (Surveillance II)” (2006/2018), video installation and flat screen monitors, 114 x 118 x 15.7 in. (© photo by Hasegawa Kenta, courtesy Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, Japan)

**Silvia Rottenberg:** How do you feel about *Liminal*?

# SEANKELLY

**Leandro Erlich:** I am thrilled. Especially because it consists of a larger body of work. When you interpret the work of an artist, it is quite difficult to do this through one work. It's like with books. Reading all an author has written makes you understand his intention or coherence better.

**SR:** So, what is your intention or coherence?



Leandro Erlich, "Swimming Pool" (1999), metal structure, wood, plexiglass, water, metal stairs, dimensions vary (© photo by Keizo Kioku, courtesy 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa, Japan)

# SEANKELLY



Leandro Erlich, "Cadres Dorés" (2008), wood, frame, C-print, base, dimensions vary (© photo by Hasegawa Kenta, courtesy Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, Japan)

**LE:** It's not only something for the public to find out, but also for me. Most of the works have been presented as exhibitions in themselves, such as the classroom or the swimming pool. These installations were each one project, with stories that start and end with the work itself. But now, when [moving between] the works, there is a link. You can visit or revisit these works and find the ordinary in them, or something potentially different, with distinctive connotations — different, at least, as to what you expect to find. It makes sense to me, all together ... I don't work with a guideline. I just move forward and try to capture what has my interest at the moment.

**SR:** There are signs all over asking the public to hashtag their photos. Is it important to you that the works are being photographed?

**LE:** I am very pleased that my work activates this. Everyone has become a photographer. It could sound somewhat banal, but I believe that our life experience has changed because of the incorporation of technology in our lives. We have incorporated a third eye. We all have a camera at our disposal, and not only that, we share the images. I often think of the telephone as a prosthesis of memory. We activate it in our daily lives at any time, interacting with this technology. It really thrills me that the work is able to incorporate this new way of living. When I produced the swimming pool, which is a highly published and very photogenic work, there were no cell phones, no smart phones, let alone Instagram. And I think that somehow, the work has anticipated this new way of seeing, which has modified our relationship with all.

**SR:** So, when you create a work, you don't consider the "photographability" of it?

**LE:** No. Never. Nowadays it has become almost a trend for visual artists to think about what the selfie spot is in a work. There is nothing wrong with that.

When you go and see the show, there are many works which are difficult to photograph, such as "Sidewalk" (2007), because even if you try to photograph it, it doesn't capture the experience. It will always require an explanation.

# SEANKELLY

**SR:** And what about the beauty salon? That is more like a set, no?

**LE:** Well, everything is a set. Not only inside the museum, I mean. The whole world is a set. And we are the players, playing the role that is our life. Art should not have to be dissociated from life. The closer art reaches our daily existence, the more significant and the more pertinent it is.

**SR:** And your works are close to this daily reality?

**LE:** Yes. Besides the sign outside, which is clearly a play of perception, or fake news, there are a lot of things in our daily lives that deal with articulation, not to say manipulation, of reality. We don't only see things as they are, but we see things as they are presented to us. And that's why I believe that having a critical sense is crucial. Through this playful way of moving through the works, learning what is going on later awakens a level of awareness. Thereafter you could go out and see things again, not just taking them for granted, assuming they are the way they are, because you know that things aren't what they are. You could question why things are like that and not any other way.

To me it is a relief to imagine that I don't need certainty of many things. On the contrary: I think that what I personally need is to be able to participate in the construction of these certainties. We, as a society, build a consensus together. Science could also be considered an illusion, an illusion of facts. You can interpret reality, not accept it as something immutable, but as an organically built construct based on a mix of all the knowledge we have. The world has changed, because there is a new understanding of the world and we participate in this change. If all was based on perception, we would still believe that everything turns around the earth instead of the sun. If we only trust what we see, then we'd still believe the world is flat.

Leandro Erlich,  
"Classroom"  
(2017/2019), wood,  
windows, desk, chairs,  
door, glass, lights,  
dimensions vary (©  
photo by Hasegawa  
Kenta, courtesy Mori Art  
Museum, Tokyo, Japan)

**SR:** So, you are  
inviting the people  
to look beyond  
what they see?



# SEANKELLY

**LE:** Yes. But again, I am not trying to make a statement or prove something. It's an invitation and it's all, and I mean all fiction.

**SR:** You are also talking about outside the museum walls?

**LE:** I don't know, you tell me ...



Leandro Erlich, "Swimming Pool" (1999), Erlich on left in sunglasses (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

*Liminal continues at the Latin American Art Museum of Buenos Aires (MALBA) (Av. Figueroa Alcorta 3415, Buenos Aires, Argentina) through October 27. The exhibition was curated by Dan Cameron.*