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30



Leandro Erlich

Mirages in the Everyday

Building, 2004. Installation at Cour de L'Observatoire, Paris, France. 3rd edition of La Nuit Blanche. Gigantography of the façade. 472 ²/₅, x 315 in. (1200 x 800 cm.). With mirror at an angle of 45°.



Leandro Erlich's mirages do not take us to remote or uncharted locations. This juggler-questioner of reality places us in such usual spaces as a living room or a swimming pool. But the living room mirror does not return our image, nor does the water in the pool make us wet. Like a building where rain falls violently on the interior walls, they are paradoxes of a timeless space, questioning that which, by sheer force of its repetition, has come to be considered "normal."

In a line of inquiry opened by artists like Dan Graham or Anish Kapoor, Erlich reveals a more realistic intention, but his discourse is also interrogative, never affirmative or negative, and is tempered by an intermittent dose of humor.

Despite his youth, Leandro Erlich (born 1973, Buenos Aires) has an intensive exhibition career and is today among the Latin American artists with the greatest international presence. So far this century, his participation in biennials has proliferated: Havana (2000), the Whitney Museum in New York (2000), Venice (2001 and 2005), Istanbul (2001), Shanghai (2002), and Sao Paulo (2004). He was also at the Art Triennial in Echigo-Tsumari, Japan (2001), was part of the "Nôtre Histoire" exhibition at the Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2006), and was recently invited to install a tower in the inner patio of the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía. The project consists of the presentation of a building, many flights tall, in whose interior a large vertical tube generates a kaleidoscopic image that dares us to experience the absence of gravity.

Erlich turns the ordinary into an extraordinary experience. He recreates the real by subtracting the function, beyond the utility of things and pragmatic conditions. We see the elevator once it ceases to contain us. We see the staircase once it is frontal to us. We see the mirror once it no longer reflects us.

By impeaching the "normal," do we perhaps aspire to create a new normality? If change refers no longer to objects but to a new attitude of the subject to the world, we can conclude that the

answer is yes. We will always be subject to physical laws (mirrors will go on reflecting us, and water will go on wetting those who dive into it), but it is possible to open new doors for perception: to see beyond what we know, to see from a position of astonishment, like children do—that is, with the always-renewed gaze of the artist. We place a mirror to see ourselves, not to see the mirror. We place a painting on the wall and forget the wall and, over time, the painting as well. However, without a wall there would be no apartment, and without a mirror there would be no image, and if there were no painting, there would be no symbols of reality.

Displacements

At the age of twenty, having already received a scholarship from Argentina's National Endowment for the Arts, Erlich won support from the Antorchas Foundation to attend the Barracas workshop, coordinated by Luis Bénédict and Pablo Suárez. This was the beginning of a significant turn in his career: the forsaking of painting and the start of his work in the fields of

object and installation art, which had a boom in the 1990s.

At the Barracas workshop, Erlich presented his *Obelisco* project, an appropriation of the famous centrally located icon that identifies Buenos Aires. The proposal was to displace the monument from the center of the city and install it at the edge of the city, in a marginal, poor area: the La Boca neighborhood.

Elena Oliveras: Your strategy was one of displacement: to take the center to the margins and, in a way, to make the margins the center. How did the idea of displacement develop?

Leandro Erlich: The obelisk I projected was to be made in steel, in the same proportions as the original. I justified the project theoretically by connecting it to the need to de-mystify icons and to displace the center towards the periphery, canceling hierarchies. I contacted professors in the Engineering School at the University of Buenos Aires, and they gave the project to their students as an exercise; in this way, without spending one peso, I had all the technical studies required, such as

Ingenuity, spectacle, astonishment, and disorientation: these qualities of Leandro Erlich's work have meant that very few viewers do not feel compelled to stop and look. Through effects of simulation and scenographic strategies, he makes us turn on our own steps and invites us to discover the world as if for the first time.

The Living Room, 1998. Mixed media, wood, glass, steel, furniture. Variable dimensions.



the ones on soil and wind. Both Suárez and Benedit helped me greatly. It was also lucky that Benedit's father-in-law is Prebisch, the architect who built the original obelisk.

E. O.: Your *Proyecto Obelisco* became a media phenomenon. There were articles in newspapers and it was talked about on TV.

L. E.: Although the project wasn't completed, something interesting did happen: it existed in a virtual way, it became known, and it took me to a completely different place. It was the beginning of a conceptual period that definitely pushed me away from painting, opening my mind and connecting me with ideas I was really interested in. It was what allowed me to access my language, which has to do directly with space and architecture—the latter being connected to my own life, since I come from a family of architects.

E. O.: Yet your spaces, unlike architectural ones, are nonfunctional.

L. E.: Architecture is an interesting topic for me, but not from the point of view of functional design, but rather from the point of view of lived experiences. There is an artistic side and another side that is connected to the functional, and art is a place where that functionality ceases to exist.

E. O.: What followed *Proyecto Obelisco*?

L. E.: In 1995, I presented *El ascensor* at the Banco Patricios Foundation, as part of the Braque competition. By the competition's rules, it was established that the work had to conform to a maximum size (80 x 80 x 180 cm) determined by the size of the elevator. This constraint seemed absurd, but I was motivated to create a work that measured exactly that; on the one hand it accepted the constraint, but on the other it questioned the interior/exterior relationship. The button panel, the handlebar, the mirror, and the sign with the maximum load and capacity were on the exterior side. Through the door fence, one could see a set of mirrors that created the sensation of depth, as if the viewer were peeking into an interior that would normally contain him/her.

E. O.: As with *Proyecto Obelisco*, in *El ascensor* there is an interrogation of everyday experience.

L. E.: Everything that questions the real world interests me. With regard to the commonplace, I believe there is a different and very strong idea of reality. The ordinary is much more real than that which we do not frequent. But we put so much in terms of experience

into those places! Like a hallway where you waited for the elevator, fought with your boyfriend, and cried.

The Double

Displacement and decontextualization are two axes of Erlich's work. Duplication, which produces added meaning, is another one—something akin to Pierre Menard's *Don Quixote*, in Borges's story, which, being identical to the original by Cervantes, was also much richer, since it referred to another text. Or something akin to Joyce's *Ulysses*, which modifies Homer's; the latter will never be the same after the Irish writer's intervention. In the same way, the obelisk in La Boca might be seen as richer than the original, since it speaks of the former while questioning hierarchies.

E. O.: The *Proyecto Obelisco* made it possible for you to gain access to your own language. What do you think carries over from it into your later works?

L. E.: In my obelisk, I worked with the idea of doublings, a constant in my work. Doublings can be produced by a mirror, but in the city my obelisk would have had the same height and size of the original, although in a different color. The issue of the double or the copy was also present in 1999, when, invited by the National Endowment for the Arts (a participant in the ARCO fair), I presented *El living*, a room that generated an unsettling effect by the presence of a mirror that reflected everything but the image of the viewer. It was an illusion; it wasn't really a mirror, but an opening into an identical but inverted room that deceptively recreated the view of a mirror. There were texts with the letters inverted, a clock with the numbers in the wrong direction and the hands moving backwards, but obviously you couldn't see your reflection because there was no mirror.

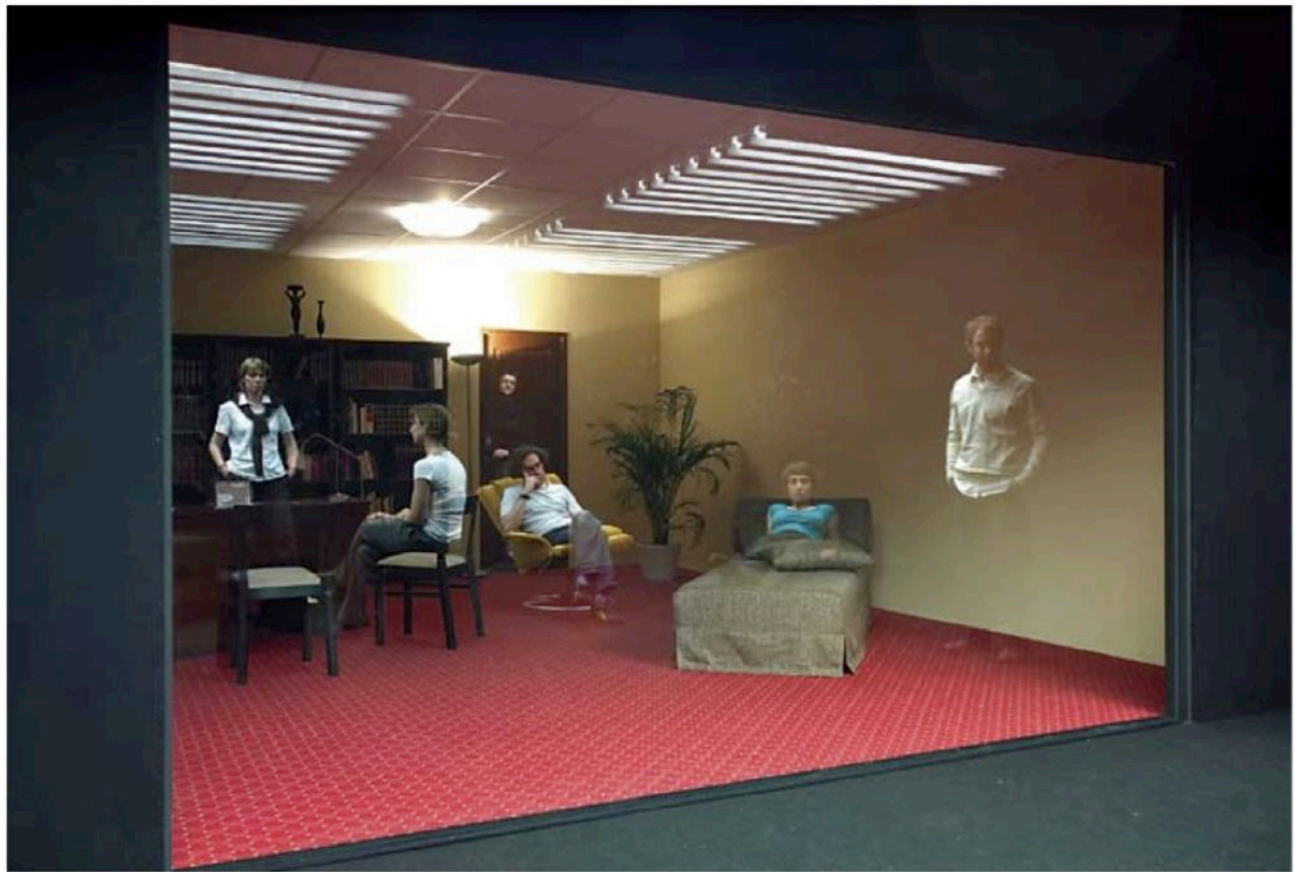
E. O.: Why did you locate the mirror in a living room and not, for instance, in a bathroom or bedroom?

L. E.: The living room is a place for being and also for social presentation, the room most oriented toward the outside world.

E. O.: We could say that it is the location of poses, of appearances—an ex-

Rain, 2000. Installation with water circulation system, light and sound. View of the exhibition at Whitney Biennial, New York, U.S.A..





The Psychoanalyst's Cabinet, 2005. Edition 1/5. Mixed media, wood, glass, steel. Each edition has different furniture. 106 1/5 x 354 1/5 x 157 3/5 in. (270 x 900 x 400 cm.).

pression of the virtuality of beings who build their identity according to how they believe others see them. In this symbolic space, we are what we appear to be. So it is not by chance that the living room later appeared as a theatrical stage, in *Le cabinet du psy* (2005).

L. E.: The space of *Le cabinet* was also divided into identical-size halves. To one of them, viewers had no access; it reproduced in painstaking detail a psychoanalyst's office, from the couch to the framed photograph of Freud. Separated by a glass panel was another space, a dark room that the viewer entered; there they saw their mirror image inside the office. It was a kind of phantasmic "double" reflected on the glass, accompanied by the equally phantasmic images of other viewers.

E. O.: In *El muro* (2007), you present a similar phantasmic situation, with an image of the viewer as if he/she is walking through the wall. But *Le cabinet* has the particularity of bringing to bear psychoanalytical ideas about

narcissism and identification. It shows us the construction of the self through the image—one's own image and others' as well. The phantasmic image generated in the gallery might also be speaking about the importance of the specular relationship in general.

L. E.: What matters to me are the symbolic charge that can reside in a space and the suggestions made by the materials in it. Besides being a very common element, the mirror has a magical property: it shows that reality is not one thing, but that there are many perspectives—the perspectives each of us takes regarding life. I believe the mirror is a demonstration of just that.

E. O.: The mirror situation you describe is repeated in a good part of your work. Thus, the mirror is a metaphor for a more general plurality of ways of seeing. I can see my image in the mirror in different ways. It is not "reality" but a particular perception.

L. E.: Yes, everything comes together in that perception.

Indoor Rain and Water that Doesn't Wet

If we had to talk about a repertoire of signs that characterizes Erlich's work, the highlights would be mirrors and water. In works like *La Plaza* (2005), water also acts as a mirror of the external world.

E. O.: How is it possible for it to rain torrentially indoors, with lightning and thunder, in one of your works?

L. E.: *Rain*, installed at the Whitney Biennial (2000) in New York City, challenged the unquestionable premise that it can only rain torrentially outdoors. It consisted of a staged view with a brick wall and windows. It was a false exterior. Water fell forcefully, hitting the windows, and the drops were clearly seen, illuminated by lightning.

E. O.: Here, you question an elemental experience—rain—but you repeat, as in the case of the elevator, the confusion between inside and outside.

L. E.: It was an endless storm, with lightning and thunder. Viewer par-

ticipation there had to do more with contemplation. One didn't have to look for one's image in a mirror. This is why I think the sensation provoked by *Rain* was different from the one in *El living*. *Rain* was a strange and unsettling situation, a kind of permanence of the same—the nightmare of rain that didn't stop. Participation, or contemplation, happened in a more passive way.

E. O.: Perhaps in a more melancholy way?

L. E.: Yes, I have thought about melancholy as a climate I wanted to achieve in some of my works, although there is also the playful aspect, from the moment I produce the work to the moment when the viewer takes part.

E. O.: Another strange experience is the one in *Swimming Pool* (1999), presented at the 49th Venice Biennale in 2001. Among your works, it is one of the most commented on and photographed.

L. E.: *Swimming Pool* was a large box mounted on the roofed inner patio of the Venice post office building, a box that in reality contained nothing. An acrylic lid covering it and which had been filled with water produced an interesting trompe l'oeil effect by making it seem as if those who entered the pool through a side door were submerged; those looking from above thought they were seeing an underwater reality. I must say that *Swimming Pool* gave me many satisfactions. Perhaps it wasn't

the best work I brought to life, but it is very photogenic.

E. O.: On the other hand, there are other works made to be walked through and apprehended in experience, which don't always photograph so well. Such is the case of *La Plaza* (2005), which is very difficult to reproduce.

L. E.: In *La Plaza*, I tried to mimic, inside a gallery, the exterior space of public circulation. I placed real tiles, typical of Buenos Aires sidewalks, on the floor for viewers to walk on. To the side you could see a puddle of water that covered part of the asphalt and on which the façades of apartment buildings were reflected. Slowly, almost in real time, the images of the buildings shifted, according with the passage of the day into night.

E. O.: The intimacy in each apartment was also present. The viewer was able to imagine the life of his or her virtual neighbors. They became voyeurs. Something similar occurred with *The View* (2005), presented at the Venice Biennale, when you were invited by the organizers of the main pavilion (Italy). There one saw—in a video projection—what happened inside a building.

Perceptual and Meaning Machine

We could say that Erlich's "vision machines" are also "meaning machines" that function to revitalize our

everyday experience, to bring us out of our generalized slumber and take us beyond the logic of the commonplace, to see the world with new eyes. It is not by chance that Baudelaire presented the portrait of the artist as a child.

E. O.: Your obsession with detail makes you a born perfectionist; your "machines" are impeccable and are supported by mechanisms that can be very complex. How do you solve all the technical problems?

L. E.: Now, as time has passed and because I have a more significant workshop, I have much more help with technical matters. But in *Rain* or *Swimming Pool*, I had to solve technical problems even though I had no prior knowledge of plumbing, for instance. So I had to search, get advice, and learn through trial and error. Inevitably, along the way you learn many things and skills. One is always incorporating something new. Chance also counts, and it can even become a stimulus. I love to be in a permanent process of discovery. Also, in Argentina, part of our history is to learn how to do something with very little. This inevitably forces you to develop a particular creativity, the famous "tie it with wire" attitude that is part of our culture. In my case, having an idea and carrying it out often involved help from other people, and I can tell you that such cooperation doesn't exist in developed countries.

E. O.: What role does surprise play in your work?

L. E.: Surprise in my work is a trigger. I always sought the surprise factor as a way to stop the viewer and make them see that things have varying degrees of reality. I believe that the kind of surprise I'm after generates great satisfaction and is optimistic. The worst thing that can happen to us is to lose our capacity for surprise. That's where the experience begins, even if it is not the central issue in my work since the work needs to continue functioning as a "meaning machine." There is a mechanism that—on the basis of perception and the fascination of the senses—strives to elaborate the meanings of the work.

E. O.: The surprise effect you mention brings to mind kinetic art's optical illusions.

Swimming Pool, 1998. Installation with metal structure, wood, Plexiglas, water. 94 2/5 x 118 x 236 1/3 in. (240 x 300 x 600 cm.). Presented at the 49th Venice Biennial, 2001.



L. E.: The relationship of my work to kinetic art is pertinent, but unlike many kinetic artists, the surprise of my optical illusions is the starting point in my work, not the end. It is the moment when the experience begins, making it interactive. There is nothing uglier than those works that propose interactivity or participation in the form of “push this button” or “put your head here.” One needs to want to continue to be involved in the work by one’s own will.

E. O.: **So, participation shouldn’t be mechanical; it must respect the viewer’s individual time.**

L. E.: Yes, the viewer must create his or her own time beyond the time of a “temporal” work, such as film or theater. I am interested in the fact that, in the visual arts, time does not belong to the work but to the viewer.

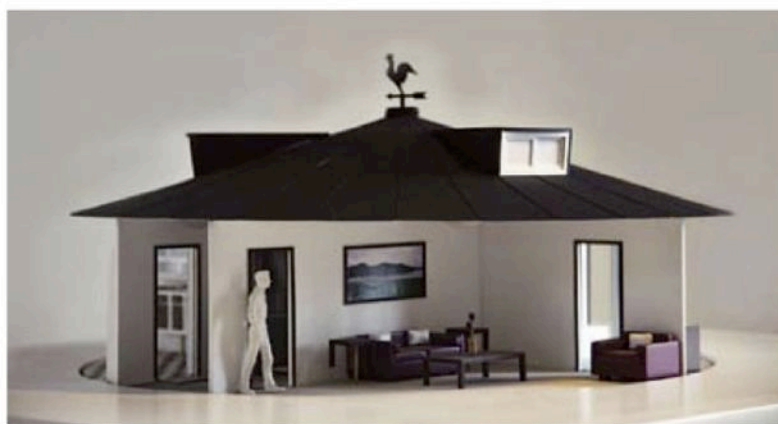
E. O.: **Another difference is that your optical illusions reveal their mechanism, which many kinetic artists do not do. You want your work to be like that of a magician who doesn’t mind his tricks being revealed.**

L. E.: I’m not bothered if viewers understand the artifice because that way they will find metaphors to reinterpret their experience. There is no better way of learning than through experience. It makes us go deeper into things and to change, much more than simply being introduced to concepts.

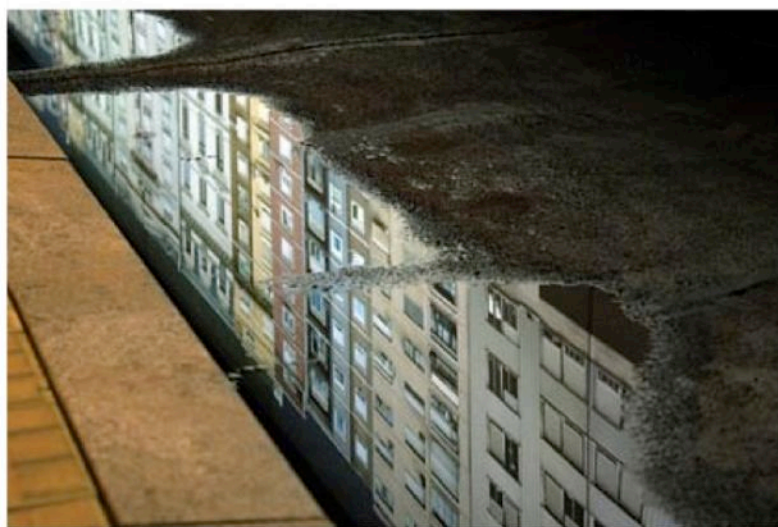
E. O.: **The unveiling of the “trick” is explicit in works like *Batiment* (2004), where, after just seconds, one understands that there are no children and adults climbing the walls or about to jump out the windows.**

L. E.: Yes. It is a mirage, a reflection in the mirror. There is no mysterious technique beyond the grasp of the viewer, who after a while discovers that the people who seem to be climbing up the walls are grounded on the floor, on a model of a building’s façade. Reflected on a mirror, they seem to be in a vertical position and not horizontal, as they truly are.

E. O.: **One could see this as a sinister parody, as if the characters were about to fall from the building. But, as you say, the important thing is to understand the artifice, to participate**



Carrousel, 2008. Wood, plastic, motors, lights and music. 23 1/4 x 12 1/4 in. (59,1 x 31,1 cm.). Edition of 5 with 2 APs. © Leandro Erlich. Courtesy: Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.



The Sidewalk, 2007. Installation. Tiles, water, projection. Variable dimensions.

in a game where the main protagonist is the viewer/discoverer.

The Infra-Ordinary

Using different strategies, Erlich turns the already known or the banal into an extraordinary experience. But he is far from a Surrealist. There is no search for the unusual for its own sake, as in a chance encounter of an umbrella and a sewing machine on an operating table. The simulacrum now serves to redirect the real. This circular path makes it possible to return to the real world with eyes refreshed by the detour of fiction.

A text by Georges Perec about the “infra-ordinary,” which Erlich chose as the prologue for one of his shows, synthesizes the essential points of his poetry:

“To interrogate the habitual. But it is precisely to it that we are habituated. We don’t question it, it doesn’t question us, it wouldn’t seem to present a problem . . . What we need to interrogate is the brick, the cement, the glass, our table manners, our utensils, our tools, the way in which we use our time, our rhythms. Interrogate what seems to have forever stopped startling us. We live; it is true. We breathe; it is true. We walk, we open doors, we go down stairs, we sit at the table to eat, we lie in bed to sleep. How, where, when, why?”

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