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De Looz, Pierre Alexandre. "Mixed Media," *Tokion Magazine*, March 2009.



Text Pierre Alexandre de Looz | Portrait Photography Luna Paiva



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Leandro Erlich's Illusory Realities

Argentinian installation artist Leandro Erlich focuses on providing his audience with experiences which both confound and inspire. While his methods center on architecture and sculpture, Erlich explores notions of reality, logic and physics, evoking the possibilities of other universes. His most recognized work, *Swimming Pool* (2008), has been on view at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center since October 2008, and entirely corresponds to his view that art is a socializing medium. Once inside the museum, visitors come across a swimming pool that is apparently full of water, but they see other people staring up at them from its depths. It is in fact empty: Erlich has suspended a transparent sheet of acrylic, containing a fine veil of water, over the pool. This work is on view until May. Another work, *La Torre* (2007) is currently on view at the Museo Reina Sofia in Madrid. Erlich is preparing a solo exhibition at The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C.

Pierre Alexander de Looz is an architect, writer, and editor-at-large for *Pin-Up* magazine.

Pierre Alexandre de Looz: A lot of your work seems like it's steeped in film noir. You create a lot of strange situations.

Leandro Erlich: I am not sure whether film is part of the inspiration, but I am definitely a big film fan. The work does have some cinematographic character, especially in the installations, where they are built as a stage. The viewer becomes an actor. There is an experience, and it's very visual, and there is something cinematographic in the layout. And something fake, as fake as movie sets.

There is something in your work that is all about realism. Take *El Living* (The Living Room, 1999). You made some serious choices about what artwork to hang on the wall. You chose to hang a Warhol next to Art Nouveau. Why did you do that?

El Living is the first installation where I tried hard to [erase] the limit of the artwork, meaning: visually, it's very clear where a sculpture, painting or installation begins and ends by the outline of their frame. In *El Living*, you don't have the choice, because you are already inside a room. With regard to the pieces hang-

ing on the wall, I tried to create a space that had some references: "What is this space and who lives here?" The references to Warhol or Art Nouveau indicate a space that belongs to someone middle class [to make it easily relatable]. Like, I guess...

Joe Smith?

[*laughs*] Yeah. [To have the usual] mix-up of cultural references. The work has several channels of interpretation, and these references are more about what happens to me when I am creating the work, [rather] than expecting that they will be seen or decoded.

The most threatening thing about *El Living* is not what you put in it, but what you have left out. You think you're going to see your reflection, but it's not there. It's almost like you've created a really generic environment, and then suddenly, in the attempt to find yourself, it's impossible.

Yes. There were actually two frames. The first frame in the room was an actual mirror. When you walk into the experience, you see yourself in the room, in the first mirror. So you assume the second frame will do the same. That's when you lose your reflection. You used the word 'generic'. It is exactly that.

***El Living* is pretty terrifying. Are you trying to jar the viewer?**

No, not really. It is terrifying to lose your reflection. Our reflection is the strongest proof of our existence. To lose our reflection would be terrifying, but at the same time, [the fear] is compensated by the pleasure of finding the reason it disappeared. You know how the visual trick works, but you can't help scrutinizing what fooled you at first. Surprise acts as a trigger. The intention is not to produce a bad experience, but something that will awaken the process of thinking and willingness to reflect upon the work. It is an extremely uncomfort-

able feeling, but at the same time, it hooks you. You don't feel like escaping as you would [if you found yourself] in a horror movie. There was actually something related to the living room, considered in architecture as the common space, the space by its denomination, and that is the space to be. Not the space to sleep, or eat, neither the space to do your necessities in the toilet. It's the space to exist somehow in the house.

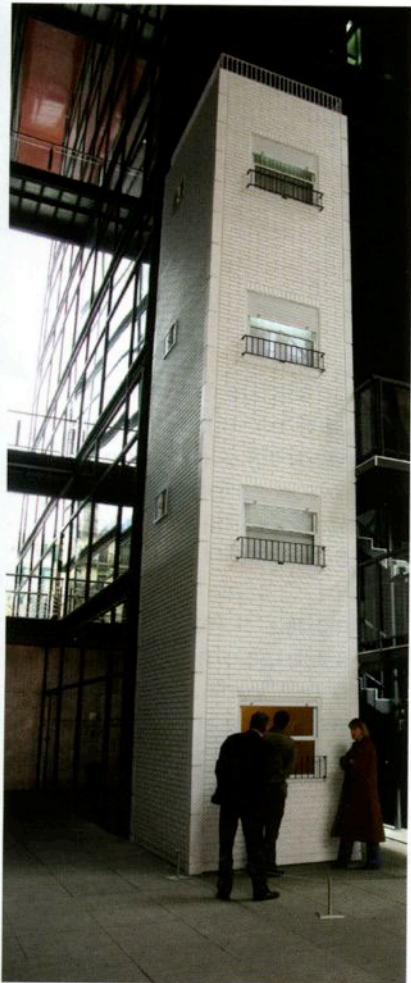
It's almost a room that has an existential purpose.

Exactly.

You did that piece after spending a year in Houston, Texas. The last time I was there, I actually felt pretty terrified because it's very hard to find a reference point when you're a pedestrian. I'm used to environments like New York. Did living in Houston have any effect on this piece?

Absolutely. Up until that point, I'd lived in pedestrian-friendly cities, and it was also the first time I was leaving my city for a long period of time. I left Argentina for nine years, and that was at the very beginning of that journey. Houston was very challenging. At the beginning it was very hard to understand the city's system. But at the end of my stay, I came up with different types of ideas about the city. One of them was that it's a city that has no history. And so it's very difficult to live in, and at the same time, very powerful. It's a place where everything is about to be invented. For me it was a very productive time. It is human ambition, to invent things that were never made before. In Europe, architects have a hard time, as there is little space to build new things; everything has been built. The weight of history is so strong that architecture is mostly interior architecture. Houston, on the other hand, has space. [While I was there],

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there was the power of money to make the city of the future. This environment allows the creation of very interesting things. On the other hand, I think that history is always there to weigh and balance what we do.

I've read that your work often references spaces you grew up with when you were young. Is that true?

Yeah, I grew up in a family where pretty much everyone was an architect. My father, my brother, my aunt... [laughs]. I became very interested in ordinary spaces in architecture. Not the functional arch, but what you could call "emotional architecture." What do these spaces we live in mean to us? How are these spaces affecting our lives? What is the information (the decoration, or the materials) layered on the spaces? One of the first pieces I did while thinking about this subject was *Ascensor* (The Elevator, 1995). Like many things in our spaces, it has no sense without function. Nevertheless, those spaces are able to produce stories, fictions and emotions. Those are the elements I grew up in. I mean, I grew up on construction sites, in apartments and houses, looking at

nothing; not extraordinary architecture, just the regular stuff, like, a floor has changed. Building something upon a previous knowledge is a major aspect [in my work].

In my work, there is a story that is laid out, and the viewer will come to interpret and interact with the work, helped by his or her own previous recognition of the space. That's why it needs to be very realistic. Not as an interpretation of the space, but close enough to the reality people [are familiar with], in order for them to understand the possible interaction, the possible situation, and follow through. Going back to film, it's a kind of screenplay. [The viewer thinks he is free to think and do as he pleases], but the truth is that the story and the viewer's action have already been conditioned by the space. I am using this [preset] knowledge that the viewer comes with. Experience, combined with story, that the work will tell.

And you reach even further into the mind, with, for example, *Rain* (1999). It's almost like a dream image.

Yes, some of the work creates fantasy, but I



don't see the work being dreamlike, just because the logic in dreams is somehow lost. Unless you go to the shrink, but the sense of logic is lost. Even though things are not real and their reality has been completely altered, I still try to hold a logic sense.

Duchamp was a great game player, and would set the viewer up in a kind of problem-solving relationship with a work. But in some pieces, he actually—like in the *Le Grand Verre* [The Large Glass]—sets up a game between two viewers. Is there any relationship to game playing for you?

Well, two things. Duchamp was—when I was a teenager—someone who reinvented art. He created the idea of conceptual art. I think that he was interested in game-play like playing chess, for instance. An extremely logical game! I would say that yes, there is some logic, and I do think that some of [my] work has a playful character. But I would say also that games and play are something that children do in order to learn the world. I do think [playing] is a positive way to trigger the process of thinking. I hate dramatic work that has a sign

saying, "Push the Button," or "Put Your Head Through This Hole." Please! The work has to seduce the viewer. Some of my work may have symbolic meaning, but the sense and the meaning of the work is actually built by the viewer [via] his experience. Bottom line, I would say that my work is as real as the rest of your reality. Nevertheless, things are definitely very fake. And this is something that is very simple and could be very profound. But the work remains accessible.

Tell me about *Carrousel* (2008).

Carrousel is about being in the right place at the right time, and that takes a lot. And basically that's what it was—it was a carousel spinning, in which there was an apartment full of furniture. It was created for the Liverpool Biennale. About 10 meters diameter—it's huge. It has a kitchen, dining room, bedroom, toilet. The public was able to enter and ride the piece like a regular carousel with carousel music. It was about dealing with the axis of our lives, time and space. These were placed in the most ordinary and quotidian way. The space is a very generic house, and the time was



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Leandro Erlich, *Carousel*, (2008) | Photography Leandro Erlich | Leandro Erlich, *Swimming Pool*, (2008) | Photography Don Pollard
Images courtesy of the artist, P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York

“THERE’S A STORY, AND THAT MAKES MY WORK VERY VULNERABLE, IN A GOOD WAY. IT’S NOT MATHEMATICS. I DO LOOK AT THE APPEARANCE OF SCIENCE, SOMEHOW, IN SOME THINGS. I DO LIKE LOGIC, OR THE APPEARANCE OF LOGIC.”

provided by the carousel. Among my work it is one of the few pieces that is definitely playful but, at the same time, it aims to reflect upon a deep subject.

It’s interesting because I think if you were to write books, the narrator would be a kind of all-seeing eye, because you’re always putting the spectator in totally impossible positions. If I’m in the *Swimming Pool* and I’m looking up at someone looking down at me, there’s no way that I can be breathing and alive in the water with someone looking down at me unless I’m dead. And there’s no way I can stand still, and also move through every room in the house, unless I’m not there at all. In a way, the other side of these very playful spaces is a kind of netherworld.

Yes, definitely. There must be other situations for our existence that are not the regular existence, [at least], our existence in the ordinary sense. The impossibility that you address as death, I would take it just as impossible. I would fight to accept this impossibility and live with it.

It reminds me of Gabriel García Márquez.

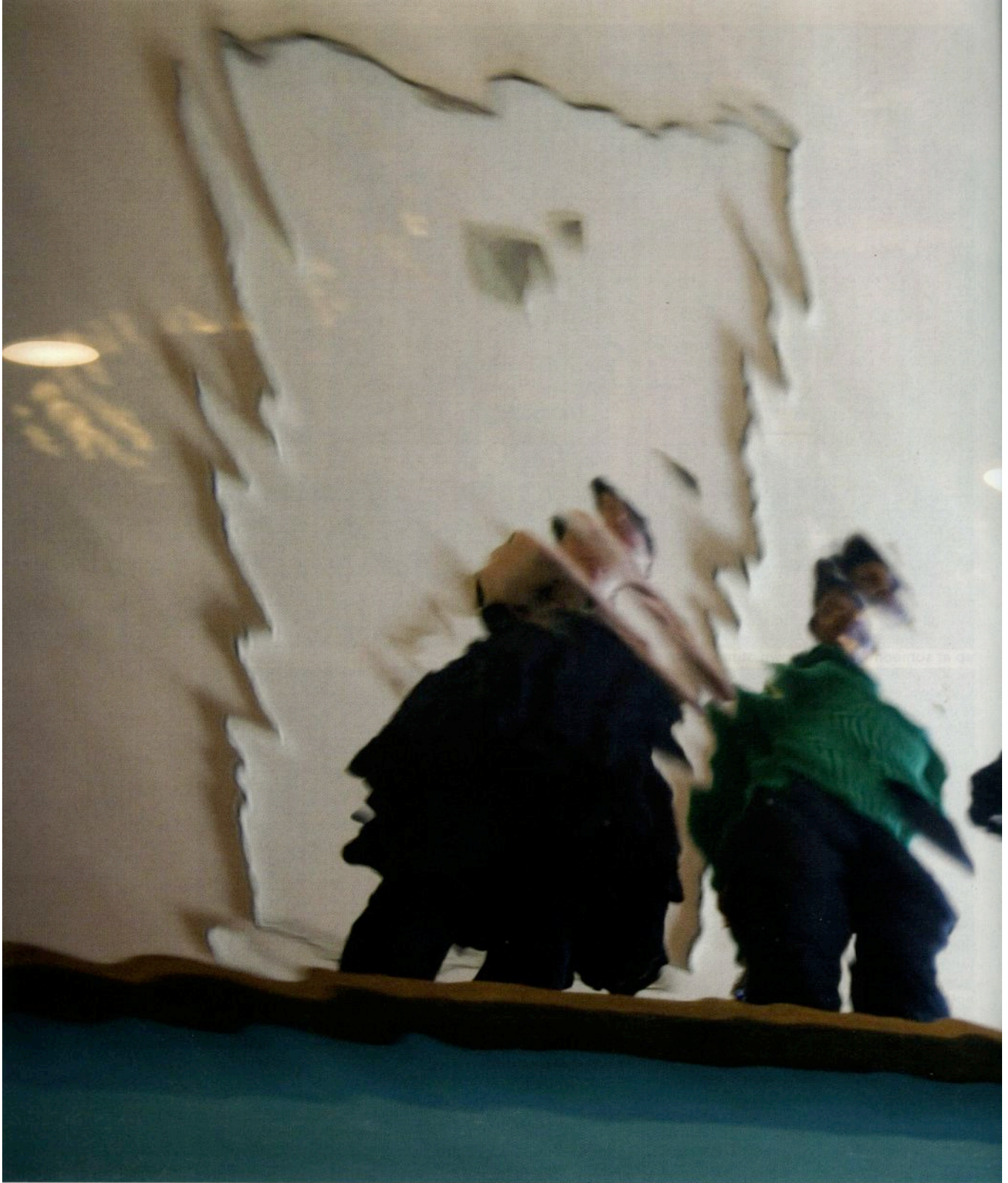
He’s the father of *realismo mágico*, magical realism. I think in terms of my work, you’re right, but I feel much more attracted to someone like Borges, just because he’s a writer, and he is nothing more than a writer—he writes fiction, stories—but many of his stories have this philosophical potential. I think it’s interesting that one can tell an [entertaining] story [that can] awaken deep questions. And the impossibility is there to force you to question yourself. Every time we have faith in something that looks impossible, we question. And it’s funny; it’s interesting that you said death, because actually that’s the ultimate impossible situation, isn’t it?

In *La Torre*, what is the realization that you’re inviting there?

The idea came from the very funny concept that, if you dig a hole straight through on the earth, say, from Argentina, you would find Asia, or somewhere in Asia. [I wanted to] create this communicating cube between people on different levels, and being able to build this fiction where people will have the illusion of things—people floating, or flying inside an apartment corridor. The result was quite amazing, because in [the Museo Reina Sofia in] Madrid, it was built to fit within the Jean Nouvel extension, the new part of the museum. It was a very interesting challenge, because it was an installation interacting with the preexisting architecture and, obviously, would be outside of any exhibition space. It wasn’t for an [interior] gallery space.

A lot of your projects take the qualities of the space that they’re installed in, and they extend them, by sub-dividing them and paving the way for a more complicated experience inside those new pockets that you’re making.

Always having a certain level of awareness, in relation to our certainties, [is important]. Reality is that thing we’ve labeled as real. It has been either part of our understanding and comprehension of a particular subject, or, a construction that human beings have been able to construct, incorporate





and define as real. So in a way, to build something that relates so much to the "real," or the elements that are part of our...

Everyday experience?

Yes. Alter space is a way to say: reality is in fact itself a construction, there's no such thing as reality as a truth, as a whole truth.

Nowadays, we're all scared to define the function of art. So let me ask you that question, but in a different way, because I think the kind of questions you raise are about perception, but they're very different than let's say, an American minimalist like Robert Irwin.

Yeah. Well, I mean, there are two things, but you have to understand one thing. Let's say you find a guy, doing work exactly like Robert Irwin, today. Somehow, this person, even if he was named Robert Irwin and was working in 2009, his work would be completely different. The statement of his work, and the understanding of his work, would be completely different then what we understand today about Irwin's work. And that would be because I think there is a time, and there's a context in which the work is created and produced—that is crucial for art. There is something about an artwork that transcends time; there's something that relates to the magic of art, magic in the very spiritual sense. Somehow, that's why something can be moving and can catch emotions, and that eventually is what is going to be transcendent and will transcend time.

Do you consider yourself to be an objectivist, a subjectivist, or something mixing both?

I think really mixing both. And I would say it's even more subjective than objective. Some of the work has something that is pure physics, and also very basic. I think that this is something that I feel attracted to, even in the aesthetics of things. Things that you can see in science museums, for instance, are a part of the aesthetic that I also like. I think it's subjective because there's a huge narrative in my work. There's a story, and that makes my work very vulnerable, in a good way, I think. It's not mathematics. I do look at the appearance of science, somehow, in some things. I do like logic, or the appearance of logic.

Well, your pieces are always exact.

Yeah. I mean there's something about logic that's always been part of the work. I don't know, I think that it's hard to say. It's hard for an artist, for anyone actually, to have a sure understanding of how the work will be read or seen in the future. But, somehow, I have the impression that the sentiments that deal with physics and logic will be alive over time: in the same way the brightness of a color, if it remains bright, will be in people's eyes, in the pupil and will remain the [same]. This deals with the logic of perception and that is part of the experience. It may change, but I do think that it is going to change in a much slower way than an aesthetic, for instance. I do think that the aesthetics of my corridors are going to become very funny in fifty years.