

SEANKELLY

"All the World's a Stage," *Prestige*, July 2014.

PRESTIGE

All the World's a Stage

LEANDRO ERLICH makes large-scale installations that invite public participation and amusement – without alienating art-world critics, discovers **CHRISTINA KO**

IT'S EASY TO miss the entrance to the courtyard at the new Hong Kong Government-supported art space Oil, a small brick-and-wrought-iron gate on Oil Street, but difficult to ignore the piece that lies directly inside it. Leandro Erlich's *Bâtiment - Oil* is on display, an entire building facade laid flat on the floor, with an equivalent-sized mirror angled at 45 degrees above it. People write across the "wall" as they secure poses – dangling from the windows, scaling the face à la Spider-Man, floating effortlessly in the air like Mary Poppins, sans umbrella.

"Sorry, my English is not so great," demurs the Argentine artist. "And the hangover even worse." Erlich's language skills are actually far from a worry, and much of his work speaks for itself – or at least, he'd like it to. "There is a message," he muses. "Many things I have done, and am still doing, were born from intuition, and I think there is a message, but I'm not easy with the idea of making this message a doctrine. What I believe art should do is to leave that space for interpretation and for mystery. There's some kind

of magic that every art expression has, and I feel like when the artist speaks, making strong definitions about what they are doing, it kills a lot of the real power of art."

He won't give us a cheat sheet, but a look across Erlich's oeuvre offers a fair idea of what themes interest him. Public interaction is a huge part



of what he does, as is the creation of illusion, whether it's building a trompe l'oeil swimming pool that viewers can enter from below (*Swimming Pool*, 1999), a ladder that leads to a chunk of floating house (*Window and Ladder, Too Late For Help*, 2008) or a simple cloud suspended in layers of glass (*Single Cloud Collection*, 2012). "I'm interested in questioning our sense of reality. I'm interested in exploring different ways of approaching life, and I'm interested in awaking some kind of awareness, and at the same time making people be involved and participate in something – in the same way that everybody participates or is involved in their own lives.

"I think that when we grow up, when we are children, there's a moment in which we start to discover the world, and everything is about to be learned, and there's a moment in which – through education and through the process of growing up – we tend to believe that we know everything. We understand. And that is the moment in which we stop questioning, and we lose the sense

LEFT: KORINSKOV; OPPOSITE: LEANDRO ERLICH/STUDIO

BÂTIMENT-OIL SHOWS UNTIL JULY 8





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of surprise as well. And I think that these are things I'm interested in. Rediscovering. Rethinking. Losing our sense of confinement when we think about reality. And that applies for many things – political, social, existential matters."

Erich was 19 when he began to question the status quo of the reality around him. A painter by training, he was creating, but it was "a type of thing you're doing, but you don't really know why you're doing it." He

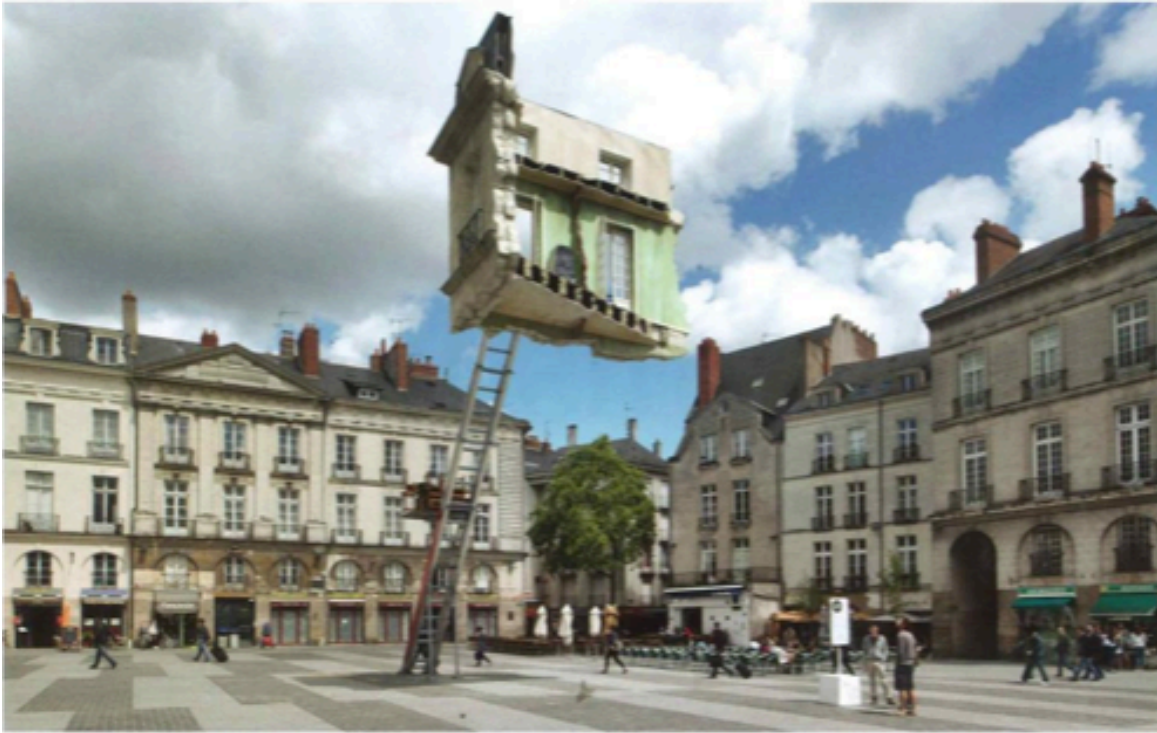
won a grant to attend an artist's workshop that year, and there had the idea that he would take the Obelisco de Buenos Aires, an icon that stood proud in the centre of the city, and replicate it in a different part of town. The very proposition whipped up a media maelstrom. "[It created an] interesting and very provocative equation in which the symbol of the city loses its uniqueness.

This symbol gets affected by the existence of a similar one." The project was never completed, but it was a turning point – a "baptism in conceptual art", as he describes it. Friends suggested he stick to painting, for commercial reasons, but there was no looking back.

Art was always held in high esteem in Erich's family, though his architect parents never encouraged this career direction – the decision, they felt, held too great a commitment and risk. From his body of work, it would appear that his family's field of architecture held some influence over him, but Erich suggests that his work strays far from ideas of design and function, exploring instead the narrative of space and the way that space is able to create alternative realities.

Film, for this reason, has held a certain amount of pull on his attention, in particular the likes of Hitchcock, Lynch and Polanski. "In films, space is treated almost like a character, and it's playing a role within the stories," he explains. Those roles, in turn, have emerged as integral to his pieces. "There is obviously a performative action in my work, played by the viewer. Maybe not cinematographic, but definitely something theatrical is going on – almost like a piece becomes a stage and the story goes through the creativity of the people who participate."

The men and women may be merely players, then, but it isn't Erich's intention to have an audience – especially not if it's himself. "Of course I'm interested in public response, because the work has been created conceiving and wondering about the public observation. [But] once the work is done, I'm in another place. I'm not making the work as a social study.



"Of course, it's very flattering as well," he adds. "When you see that people like what you're doing, it gives you a lot of energy." *Bâtiment - Oil*, for example, was first developed 10 years ago in Paris, and has seen incarnations in Austria, Japan, China, Australia, Germany, Britain and other places under various titles. Yet in each edition – for it is

a new edition, with the building facade updated to match each individual locale and take on a site-specificity – it continues to draw delight and interaction, and more often than not from bystanders with little or no connection to the contemporary art world. The fact that Hong Kong's *Bâtiment - Oil* was mounted in a public outdoor space in North Point, and not within the confines of Art Basel (though it ran concurrently with the fair), is in itself telling.

In a hypercritical art world, too much general attention can sometimes carry negative connotations, with the distance often consciously created between insider and outsider. But Erlich's work has somehow succeeded in straddling the two spheres. "A lot of people in art are interested in what I'm doing, yet still the work is accessible to those who are not into contemporary art, and I think that creates some kind of link between the two worlds," he says. Bridging that gap may be incidental rather than intentional, but it is still a genuinely happy coincidence.

"From my point of view there are things in the art world that are difficult for people who are not familiar with contemporary art to understand. Many of those things are interesting and significant. At the same time, many of those things are not. What is complex isn't necessarily good. If you don't understand, it doesn't mean you're too stupid to understand – and if you do understand, it's not because it's so shallow you get it." 