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Surveying a Sculptor's Audacious Public Art Interventions



Leandro Erlich, *Port of Reflection*, installation view (photo courtesy of the artist)

The Neuberger Museum at SUNY Purchase, under the auspices of their biannual Roy R. Neuberger Exhibition Prize, opened their 2017 season with a survey of Argentine sculptor Leandro Erlich's public art projects and gallery installations, *Port of Reflections*. Comprised mostly of photographs, video interviews, and models covering the artist's work since 2004, curators Patrice Giasson, Alex Gordon, and Helaine Posner offset the show's virtual aspect with the inclusion of one large installation called "Port of Reflections" (2016), which takes up half the museum's ground-floor gallery. With most of his work presented in documentary form, it's surprising how well the artist's amiable tone came through.

Erlich's work intrudes into public space with illusions created from ordinary things like staircases, elevators, and swimming pools, which then transcend their entertaining aspect with deeper inferences. The combination of hook followed by substance has earned Erlich accolades from both the general public and cutting-edge curators at MoMA/PS1 and the Whitney Museum. The secret to his success lies in how the illusions are effective yet easily deciphered. It's not the illusion per se but the inevitable realization of the illusion's mechanics that gets viewers to step back and reconsider the ramifications of the paradox they have been presented with.

Erlich's precursors can be found not only among surrealists and installation artists but, as Giasson's catalog essays suggests, from the ranks of writers and filmmakers. In other words, artists who seek the attention of large audiences, specifically those who trade in enchantment. Giasson mentions Gabriel García Márquez and Federico Fellini, to which I would add fellow Argentine Julio Cortázar. But I feel the picture is not complete without including Penn & Teller and perhaps Buster Keaton, because Erlich's methods parallel those of popular culture.



Leandro Erlich, “Obelisco sin Punta desde Diagonal Norte–La Democracia del Símbolo” (2015), inkjet print on Hahnemühle textured William Turner paper, 40 x 55 in. (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic unless noted)

Born in 1973, Erlich is a child of the public art resurgence that followed the “Tilted Arc” controversy of the 1980s, a positive outcome of which was the establishment of guidelines ensuring public input on all proposed projects. The size and diversity of a public art audience, comprised as it is of any individual who happens to walk by, has had a positive influence on Erlich’s generation. Accustomed to considering the reception a project might engender in a public audience, younger artists have been encouraged to think beyond avant-garde solipsism. Erlich does not challenge the public to find meaning in his work but entices them with imagery that leaves them receptive to multiple perspectives.



Leandro Erlich, “Bâtiment II” (2011), inkjet print on Hahnemühle textured William Turner paper, 58¾ x 43¾ in.

Because illusions are central to his work, encountering them in this exhibition through photographs makes assessing their full effect problematic, though some were easier than others. “Bâtiment II (Building II)” (2011), a popular idea Erlich repeated at several locations, is presented here as realized in Paris in 2011. Comprising a faux building façade lying on the ground under a massive mirror of the same dimensions suspended at 45 degrees, the illusion becomes that of a vertical façade festooned with people seemingly stuck to its surface. The magic is created by members of the public who simply lie on the façade below, and after the joke is absorbed,

an attentive viewer is brought, for instance, to thoughts regarding the concept of a façade and how it masks a building's purpose.

Most of Erlich's projects are of the same apolitical variety. When he does choose to embrace politics, he steps lightly. "Pulled by the Roots I" (2015), a small house dangling from a crane above a town square, is a playful idea but also gently hints at the vulnerability of the uprooted, its simplicity amplifying the universality of being forcibly removed from anywhere. By addressing the archetype of home, political connotations are dispersed among viewers, not defanged.



Leandro Erlich, "Pulled by the Roots I" (2015), inkjet print on Hahnemühle textured William Turner paper, 28½ x 32¾ in.

The most politically sensitive project documented in the exhibition is "The Democracy of the Symbol" (2015), in which Erlich, made it look as if he had removed the top of a landmark obelisk in downtown Buenos Aires and relocated it (a facsimile of it, of course) to the steps of MALBA, the Latin American Art Museum located about five kilometers uptown, where visitors were invited to enter it and view digital screens offered as virtual windows onto the vistas one would encounter at the top of the monument. Because the obelisk was never designed to accommodate visitors, Erlich was providing access to the public where none had been, in effect bringing the apex of power down to the people.

Oddly enough, the installation that gives the exhibition its name, "Port of Reflections" (2016), offers the least persuasive illusion. A darkened space accessible along a surrounding wooden walkway harbors five unmanned rowboats that gently bob up and down on a dark surface. The upside-down undulated hulls below each boat are meant to read as reflections, and in a still photograph, they do just that. But onsite, their obvious sculptural solidity gives them away. And yet, a few SUNY students sharing the space with me when I visited seemed to delight in the sheer audacity of the installation itself, which succeeds as a whole by suggesting that the darkness in fact hides a substantial body of water.

More than anything, the exhibition leaves one with the optimistic feeling that artists can rise to the challenge imposed by limitations that would have seemed much too constrictive to earlier generations. The truth is, to get your work seen anywhere these days requires the efforts of many. And because public art is so intensely collaborative, it promises, in the hands of artists like Erlich, to continue reaching out beyond the confines of a collector-oriented bubble.