

## INTERVIEW WITH LEANDRO ERLICH

*by Agustín Pérez Rubio*

**Agustín Pérez Rubio:** We are doing this interview a few weeks before the presentation of your project, produced by MALBA in conjunction with your studio and with the support of the Buenos Aires City government. Though we have been working on this project for many months—almost a year—we are, at the time of this interview, still not entirely certain what the exact result will be. By way of an introduction, I'd like to say that one of the things that surprised me when I visited you at your studio was when you told me, "I have a life-long project, something I've always wanted to do and never been able to." So tell me when and how this idea took shape, what you have been through to get here, on the verge of actually making it.

**Leandro Erlich:** There was a happy coincidence between the call from MALBA and the fact that this idea was spinning around in my mind. But that's how it always goes, right? There's always a project you're thinking about, but it seems impossible to make it happen for so many reasons (economic, logistical, legal). It's only viable with the involvement of an institution. So this is a truly magical convergence.

**APR:** How long have you been thinking about this project?

**LE:** I'd say two or three years. Twenty years ago, though, I had imagined another project also connected to the Obelisk. Though it was very different, it also intervened on the concept of the monument, an intervention that would modify the object on physical and semantic levels.

**APR:** You mean the obelisk in Corten steel, right?

**LE:** Yes. For that original project, which was sheer madness, I imagined an obelisk with the same dimensions as the one on 9 de Julio Avenue, but placed in the La Boca section of the city, which is an outlying neighborhood to the south of downtown. I wanted to make it in Corten steel which, even when new, has that rusty color. The playful idea was

that, by generating a double, it would be possible to imagine a city without a monument with the singular iconic power that the Obelisk has in Buenos Aires. I was interested in that duplicity. It was quite provocative since the Obelisk has always been a geographic point of reference, a landmark. Imagine arranging to meet someone at the Obelisk and for them to ask you, without missing a beat, “which one?” It was connected to an idea of decentralization.

**APR:** That’s also a political idea, wouldn’t you say? Downtown is a very distinct area in the city and La Boca has historically been a working-class neighborhood. That project was like taking the center of the city, the downtown area, to the periphery.

**LE:** Yes, there are political and historical points of reference. The Obelisk was built by Prebisch in 1936 in commemoration of the second founding of Buenos Aires by—if I’m not mistaken—Juan de Garay. La Boca is closer to where boats have docked in the city than the higher ground chosen for the Obelisk. The dock in La Boca has been more important to the subsequent history of the city as well. It is believed that Parque Lezama, which is not far from La Boca, was where the first settlers set up camp.

**APR:** So that was the initial idea, the first project you envisioned. It was never produced for economic reasons, I imagine.

**LE:** I must have been twenty years old at the time and I had a grant from Fundación Antorchas. The directors of the grant committee—Pablo Suárez, Luis Bedit, and Ricardo Longhini, all of whom were very important artists—really liked the project. They offered to help me get the funding if I pursued the project and got the city permits required. It was utter madness, an absurd project that I spent a year on, working with the La Boca neighborhood association and many other institutions... a whole administrative undertaking to make it happen. It was delirious but, in a way, it gave me an education in perseverance on impossible projects. It proved impossible, but I did get so far as to have a meeting with the city’s Department of Urban Planning. Now, looking back, I wonder why they ever gave the time of day to a twenty-year-old kid who wanted to make an obelisk in La Boca.

**APR:** Moving a monument like the Obelisk not only re-signifies things on a political level but also has implications for tourism. In fact,

*Turismo* (2000)—a slightly later project you did with Judi Werthein that consisted of placing a snowy landscape in Old Havana—comes to mind. They are, of course, two different projects since one is based in architecture, but they both, as if by magic, remove an object or scene from its local context and place it in another context.

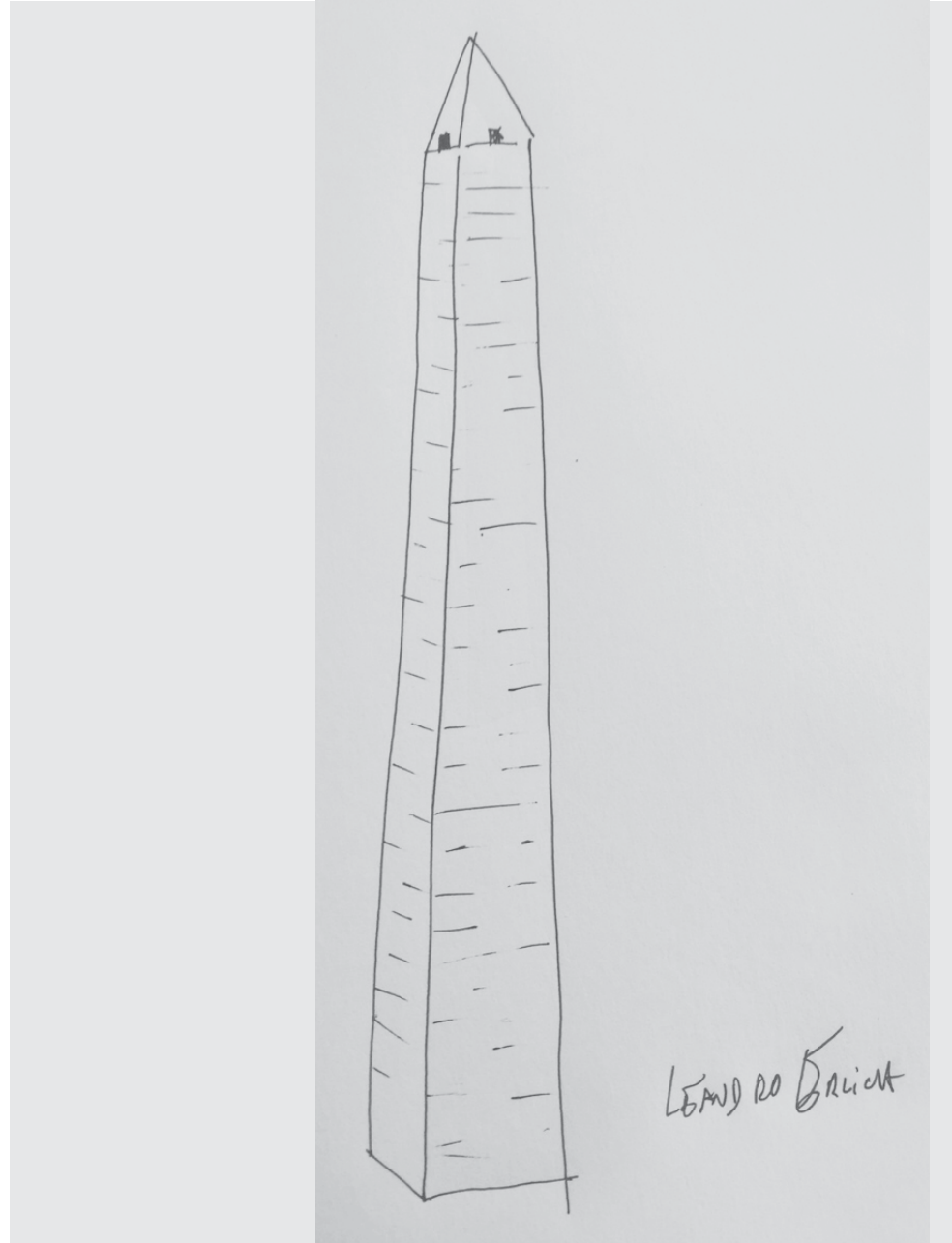
**LE:** Absolutely. That project was ten years later. I believe that the process of transposition, of transport, that we’re working on now is, in a way, related to the Havana project. The common feature, I would say, has to do with the viewer and her way of being engaged in something collective: no one is left out of either the Havana project—which consisted of taking an alpine landscape to the Caribbean—or of the Obelisk project. The idea is to construct a fiction geared to the public as a whole, to the community, to the citizenry.

**APR:** And to tourists, because people come to visit the Obelisk. So the work also raises the question of tourism, of what being in Buenos Aires means, of what that image, postcard, photograph that everyone takes in from of an iconic monument really is. Tell me, then, when did you realize that that earlier Obelisk project was utopian and unfeasible—even though you did manage to build the object—and when did you start thinking about the Obelisk again?

**LE:** The year I worked hardest on it was 93. I’d toiled away to get the project some attention. An article came out in one newspaper and then in others, and I was eventually invited to a television program that was popular at the time. And even though it was all a bit absurd—it was an entertainment show—the project, the idea had gotten so much media attention that I realized that, in a certain way, it had taken root through headlines like “A New Obelisk Coming to Buenos Aires” and the polemic that that incited. It was no longer necessary to actually build it.

**APR:** But you’ve never presented it as such. What I mean is, I’ve seen the object but I’ve never seen, for instance, that television show or those headlines... I think it would be really interesting to make a work that consists of the object along with the media coverage to show how works are also constructed by others on the premises an artist formulates.

**LE:** You’re absolutely right. Some of the documentation has been lost, but the articles in the press could be tracked down. I think all of that should be exhibited together.



Leandro Erlich, sketch for the obelisk of La Boca.

**APR:** And when did you return to the Obelisk?

**LE:** I don't have a particular fixation or fascination with the Obelisk. But I am interested in generating projects where art goes beyond the confines of conventional exhibition venues and is steeped in the logic and order of everyday life. That aspect of art is central to my interests at present. I'm interested in art as a tool of integration, of action, of connection. I'm interested in the relationship between cities and monuments and what it means to visit them. Because tourists are not the only ones to visit them. At stake as well are questions of appropriation, of pride, and of a sense of belonging. And the Obelisk monument in Argentina was never envisioned to be visited. That was never foreseen, even in terms of maintenance and safety, because the only way to reach the top is by climbing up an emergency ladder. So the idea of visiting its interior, of exploring it, was never planned. In fact, I'd say that renovations to that end would be impossible because the space on top is so small. Unlike the Tour Eiffel, which can hold a great many people, the space on top of the Obelisk is a little room no more than fifteen square meters.

**APR:** *The Democracy of the Symbol* also means going into an image, an iconic sign not formulated to be visited. Over the course of your production you have addressed a number of different fronts: the meteorological, the psychoanalytic (those rooms that seem to open, the elevators, etc.), urban issues (the façades and stairwells) where, as an individual, you witness the city and its landscape altered by certain strategies of yours that straddle reality and fiction, that which appears and that which disappears. But this is the only identifiable project: it's unique because, when you see it, you know what it is and where you are. This is the monument itself. It's a direct intervention. I wonder, then, if this work marks the beginning of something in your work.

**LE:** There are certain aspects of urban site-specific work that I've yet to fully mull over. I'd like to think more about them, to formulate them better. But I can say that the projects I've had the opportunity to develop for all the biennials I've been invited to participate in since 2000—São Paulo, Venice, Havana, Singapore, Shanghai, Liverpool—have engaged the specific context. And that has been very stimulating since it's allowed me to generate works that are inspired and built as a sort of dialogue with the context. Perhaps I've returned to the Obelisk twenty years after that first project because, after a number of years abroad, I'm once again

in the Río de la Plata region. What inspires me is what I have around me, what I experience every day. Your antennas are up wherever you happen to be, they can capture things within a certain range.

**APR:** It's interesting how an idea can exist on a piece of paper, in a community, for many years and then something sets it off. It may or may not be produced depending on certain negotiations, but it never ceases to be a work. I find that interesting on a conceptual level. In talking to architects, which I do often, I see that those blueprints on paper are works, whether or not the project is actually built. But then there is the trigger, what "activates" that work on paper. And that has to do with a negotiation. I'd like you to describe that course of events in relation to *The Democracy of the Symbol*. You had this idea for two or three years, and then a long negotiation process—with the museum, with the city, with the sponsors, with the project's engineers—began. We're talking about a project that changed shape every week and it is in that process that the conceptual and the material come together. Describe that initial idea, because I think it'd be nice to have a written account of how it has changed.

**LE:** So much has happened along the way, so many challenges. At first, I imagined bringing the top of the Obelisk to the ground so that people could go inside, but without altering the elevated perspective. I also wanted to come up with a device that would simulate the disappearance of the top. That idea predates the invitation from MALBA, which meant it was very sketchy since the visit to the top required a physical space and a context conducive to the interpretation of it as an art project. And, in terms of the disappearance of the top, well, I'm very used to working with mirrors, which have been tied to my practice in a number of installations...

**APR:** Yes, many of them. Reflection is a constant in your work: in the plaza [*La Plaza*, 2005], in the psychoanalyst's office [*Le Cabinet du Psy*, 2005], in the various elevators [*Elevator Pitch*, *Stuck Elevator*, *Elevator Maze*; 2011], and even in the swimming pool [*Swimming Pool*, 1999], which may not be a mirror but is a reflection of sorts.

**LE:** That's right. For me, mirror tricks have always offered a wide range of symbolic possibilities and possibilities for interpretation because they formulate problems related to identity. Think of Narcissus, of the Other, of all those questions that the idea of the mirror brings together. On a purely physical level, I find reflection very interesting

insofar as it produces an astonishing yet terribly simple optical effect. What I mean is it's a material that produces a very powerful illusion.

**APR:** You also form part of that genealogy of artists who work with the idea of magic. I remember that piece you showed at the Whitney Biennial: a hallway with a window through which a storm came into a museum [*Rain*, 1999]. The effects are atmospheric, but they ensue in the interior—which is impossible. Making the top of the Obelisk disappear to bring it down and tricks with mirrors are the stuff of magicians.

**LE:** Exactly. At first, I'd thought that covering the point of the Obelisk with mirrors would create a prism that, in turn, would provoke some measure of invisibility, a conceptual and optical invisibility, especially at certain times of day. Anyway, the project evolved and that idea was changed due to safety concerns and because I didn't think it would be as sharp as necessary. So the idea of constructing a sort of hood developed; it would actually raise the height of the Obelisk by just over four meters—which is scarcely noticeable to the bare eye since the Obelisk measures some sixty-seven meters. So it would be a truncated point covering the real one.

**APR:** I'm really interested in all the backs and forths that the process entails. In that sense, the project is, to some degree, by everyone: by you, by Javier Madanes Quintanilla of Fate, by the MALBA team, by the engineer, by the crane operator, by the city, by your assistant. In the end, a work is composed on the basis of an idea that many people act on. Consulting architects and calculators, and the staff at the departments of Culture and of Urban Planning who, in turn, have to talk to the Transportation Authority... And they're building new pulleys that have to be authorized with special permits... In any case, I want to make it clear that a project of this sort entails a great deal of invisible work on the part of many players.

**LE:** Exactly. I believe that without the invitation from MALBA, without the support and enthusiasm of all the actors, this work would not have been produced. At the same time, I am one of the actors in that film as well: over the course of the last twenty-two years, I've worked to build a certain degree of legitimacy as an artist and that is one of the reasons I'm here talking to you and that you've decided to take a chance on this project. Things take time; if we'd met fifteen years ago, I doubt this project would've been produced even though the idea had been formulated.



Article on the project for the obelisk of La Boca.  
*La Nación* newspaper, 1995.

**APR:** That's right, projects mutate. And I think it's nice to take a look at the process with its various stages.

**LE:** Yes, definitely. This project's work modality is akin to architecture as well, which is based on concepts that are developed in blueprints to later be materialized in the construction, in a planned action. The construction of what has been designed ensues in stages with timeframes and a planned process. In the case of an intervention on the Obelisk, the conditioning factors are more rigid than usual. Making the installation is a commando operation; it could, undoubtedly, be done differently, building scaffolding around the Obelisk, working for a month or a month and a half, and extending the Obelisk in a much more precise way.

**APR:** But the idea of magic of which we spoke, which is operative in this action, is the essence of this project.

**LE:** Exactly. An act that cannot be rehearsed. All of that means a high degree of risk, which is why I'm sharing all the project's backs and forths which, in general, are part of a closed-door creative process, a process that the artist undertakes in the intimacy of the studio.

**APR:** You have to negotiate with so many different factors so that, in the end, it turns out like something out of a top hat. (*Laughter*)

**LE:** That's absolutely right. It's been an enormous collective effort. Going back to what we said a little earlier—thinking about my work connected to meteorology, psychoanalysis, and architecture—I'd say that, one way or another, all the topics I've addressed are connected to the order of daily life, to the perceptive field of everyday reality, and to creating there a window that formulates the idea that things are the way they are but that they can also be expanded with ideas and emotions. That is, in a way, what art always does: break through and expand horizons. That idea, that *leitmotiv*, is also what binds together the Obelisk project. I'm also very moved to see the enthusiasm. A particular enthusiasm is what has allowed this project to move forward. It too is collective.

**APR:** Because the idea is very powerful. The project, the concept is very potent because the symbol is as well, on a collective level. You're not going to go inside Erlich's work here but, rather, to go inside the monument.

**LE:** Yes, that's true. But it's also because everyone has appropriated the idea.

**APR:** The idea of site-specific works has been present throughout your production. I'd like to think about this project in terms of a tradition of artists who have made public art. Your projects are bound to ways of presenting the interior in the exterior, and that tradition includes artists like Christo and Jeanne-Claude, as well as Marta Minujín, who herself worked with the Obelisk for many years. Where do you see yourself, with what affinities and differences, in that genealogy of artists who have worked with monuments, specifically with the Obelisk?

**LE:** The meanings of projects of this sort are so rich and vast. The title might suggest one interpretation or another, but I'm interested in how these actions have multiple meanings. And, in terms of what you're saying—where this action resides on a historical plane—there are two things that, to me, seem important: first, it's hard to see and to define what you're doing in real time; second, though it's very dangerous, actions of this sort tend to be very intuitive as well. It's impossible to categorize them until enough time has gone by to take another look, to grasp them more fully. It's all a bit like Heraclitus and what he said about the river: neither we nor the river is the same. Even if the action were exactly the same, it's inevitably re-defined and re-signified by the context. So I think that today, in 2015, an action of this sort will be interpreted differently from Marta Minujín's action on the Obelisk in 1980, even though not all that much time has gone by.

**APR:** Depending on how you read it, you're taking on all of Horacio Coppola's work, that of the artists from the sixties, Marta Minujín's work, the construction, etc., while, at the same time, altering the point of view of someone who, in the future, might work on this idea.

**LE:** Exactly, and on the basis of that same idea and assuming the limited ability to arrive at an absolute definition of this action today, I can say that there are questions that worry me, that interest me, that provoke me, and that inspire me to do something like this. Questions that one asks oneself, maybe not all the time, but every so often: what is the role of the artist in today's social order? What is it that we care about, that motivates us? While there are many actions in the public space, I have the sense that they're beginning to form part of something different from before. It might be obvious, but I think the role of art and of the artist, and of art centers, biennials, and viewers, has changed... What I've been interested in lately is how the visual arts influence the formulation of



The obelisk made of corten steel.

public questions, questions that operate on an almost mass scale, that have to do with education, thought, philosophy. That might seem obvious, though there aren't that many channels, really.

**APR:** Yes, that's the issue: how to bring to a large viewing public concerns with a specific theoretical and experimental weight. I always say that the art world is transparent; the whole world can see it. At the same time, the public often has trouble penetrating it. People may need to feel closer, more directly invited to engage the art institution.

**LE:** That's right. Remember that, for the Modernists, the museum was the enemy, the death of all those actions that, in their utopia, would have transformative power. Institutions are extremely valuable: they are sources of education, of access, of information. At the same time, though, their order of protection protects not only the works, but also society from the content of those works. I believe that actions like this one are transgressive in a particular way that enables them, with the complicity of institutions, to generate something different.

**APR:** Yes, it's more enriching both within institutions and beyond their confines. Lastly, you were just talking about how the meanings of works are modified when they are re-contextualized, and this interview is taking place even before the project has been presented. How do you think the art world—both in Argentina and abroad—along with the press and the viewing public will react to this project in artistic, political and social terms? How would you like them to? An aside: the Obelisk has a very strong phallic component that we have not discussed; many people say you are going to circumcise it, to cut off its foreskin: that's a popular vision of the project. But how do you think it will be received?

**LE:** In response, I want to confess something very intimate that I was not conscious of until relatively recently. Since I began making art, I've always proceeded by developing an idea, trying to figure out how to make it happen, making great efforts to materialize it. At the same time, I've always placed a veil, in a way, over what the response to the finished work might be. One always hopes, of course, that the response will be as positive as the action. Still, as a form of self-protection, I always try to avoid creating expectations for myself. Because I think working with expectations in mind would make me tremendously vulnerable.

**APR:** Would you say that your proposal extends until the moment that it's given over to others who complete a work that no longer belongs to you?

**LE:** Absolutely. But I want to emphasize that that's not only an ethical position of the sort operative in slightly solemn statements like "from here on in, the work belongs to the viewer." It's really a way of surviving. I need to do everything possible so that things turn out well, but I cannot take all those things into account beforehand.