A ROOM AT THE TOP

by Dan Cameron

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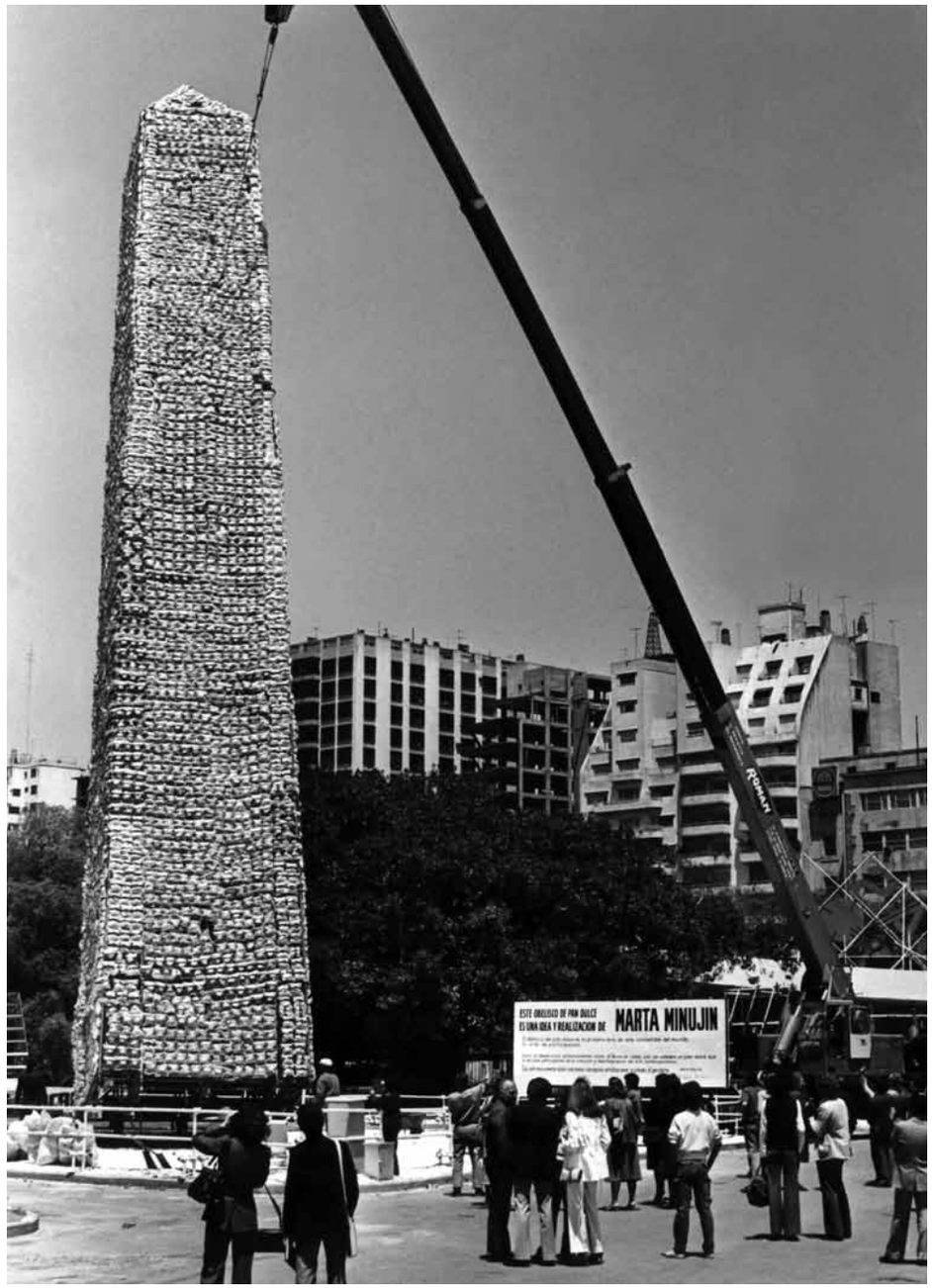
As half-voluntary residents of a world where impossible things take place on a daily basis, in which everyday gadgets are newly purposed to execute a flurry of dazzling functions, it would be easy for an impartial observer to conclude that we humans of the early 21st century have gradually developed a built-in resistance to the spell of illusion. Such resistance, if anything, is probably attributable to the ever-greater collective effort expended at producing more illusion elaborate spectacles of visual wizardry whose level of pyrotechnical ambition would have been unthinkable less than a century ago. In fact, demonstrations of the extreme possibilities of visual deception, far from being a rare event in one's life, are now so commonplace that we may encounter a hundred of them in a single day, in the form of a television commercial crafted to sell you auto insurance, or a short video taken and uploaded from an individual phone, then viewed within hours by millions of people around the world. One might argue that such acts and displays are not illusions at all, but the very fiber of our contemporary world, a multilevel platform of interwoven virtual and physical events onto which other illusions, and realities, can be effectively mapped. If so, perhaps we have indeed reached the stage at which the self that thinks, breathes and otherwise makes itself physically manifest in the world can no longer be thought of as distinct from the virtual surrogate that chats on social media, or the dot that exists on a GPS matrix.

Although Leandro Erlich's invented world of visual riddles and mirrored labyrinths does not require or even hint at the transformation of our physical environment into a screen-based simulacrum of itself in order to be experienced more richly, it is hard to avoid the recognition that the visceral sensation of body-displacement which his work tends to

induce in viewers serves as a palpable reminder that the parameters of the perceptual world in which we function are far more limited than we permit ourselves to believe. Moreover, too profound an immersion into multiple virtual realities only intensifies the sense of dislocation when the limitations of such modes of interaction are unmasked. The more we gaze into our portable screens, longing for the possibility of a "real" connection to this other world we cannot fully enter, and despite our refusal to engage the non-virtual world for more than intermittent moments of attention, we become frustrated at the fact that we are not as engaged by anything as profoundly as we think we should be. And yet there is little in the physical world, that seems able to compete with the all-enveloping illusionistic embrace of a fully linked-in techno-environment, with one's phone, car, TV, laptop, watch, and eyeglasses synchronized to each other, tapping into our biological vital signs, and interfacing with an unimaginably vast array of satellites, screens, cameras, and band-widths across the planet and its concentric gravitational orbits.

Among of the most seductive promises of today's all-virtual universe is the species of out-of-body travel that permits us to "see" what is happening in different places on the globe, and to interact with others who are either seeing the same thing, or in the midst of it. If such a promise, and the desires it aspires to fulfill, seem familiar, perhaps it is because they have been part of the experience of what we call art since its earliest manifestations. Of course, "we" don't literally travel anywhere in our interactions with art, but we do peer through a virtual window onto imaginary visual constructs related to a perspective of the world that the artist aspires to share with us. Regardless of whether its ostensible subject is the ruins of ancient Greece, bourgeois Flemish values in the mid-17th century, an uprising of peasants in rural China, the history of space travel, a portrait of a celebrity, or the diminished aura of originality possessed by works of art in the age of Photoshop, the invisible armature supporting this illusion is the implicit representation of an entire order of things which is completely distinct from that of the viewer(s) who experience the artwork at a particular place and time.

But this is never quite the case with Erlich's art, since its effectiveness requires firstly that the viewer become knowingly complicit in



Marta Minujín, *Obelisco de pan dulce*, 1979. Photo by Pedro Roth.

a ritualized engagement with a situation in which the stakes involved in our recognition of the difference between what is real and what is illusion are thrown back at us. Within some deep subconscious realm equivalent to that which generates dream images and scenarios, we yearn for a universe in which people can cluster together socially at the bottom of an apparently filled swimming pool and gaze up at others walking around the perimeter, who are gazing in turn down at the ones who are submerged. Because nobody who appears to be underwater is in fact drowning, nobody aboveground is in a panic, so what might otherwise be a scene of terrible dread and loss becomes instead a site of nervous laughter and relief. We know exactly what sorts of adrenalin-charged messages our senses would be sending to our brain if this scenario were in fact what it appears to be, but even after we've discovered the trick, a small remnant of the original anxiety lingers, as if to keep us on our toes as a reminder not to drop our guard, just in case the next encounter poses an actual—as opposed to simulated—threat.

This still-glowing ember of anxiety, a leftover from the primordial fight-or-flight response that is triggered whenever we face an existential threat by way of our sensorial input, is also fundamental to the way in which *The Democracy of the Symbol*, Erlich's 2015 site-specific work for MALBA, casts its spell upon us. Beginning with a set of limitations that are already implicitly known by nearly all viewers, such as the fact that the view from the top of the Buenos Aires Obelisk is one that almost nobody has ever had the opportunity to enjoy, he invites us to partake of that perspective without ever leaving the ground. The sole condition for such a gravity-defying vista, which at first seems quite inconsequential, is that the bird's-eye perspective is only available by stepping first into a pyramidal structure meant to be a full-sized replica of the top of the Obelisk. To reinforce the illusion, the artist has first requested that the top of the actual monument be temporarily capped in such a way that it appears to end at a blunt horizontal where the point should be, as if serving as a type of "evidence" that the structure built on the grounds of MALBA has been physically removed from its perch hundreds of feet in the air, and temporarily transported to the surface of the earth. Whether or not this somewhat technical and political challenge is fully met in the final iteration of the piece, it is already sufficiently potent as a form of visual thought experiment. If we envision what it would really feel like to gaze

up at an obelisk whose point appears to have gone missing, it would be hard to repress the shiver associated with our own possible decapitation.

This is not the first time that Erlich has directed his formidable artistic focus in the Obelisk's direction. In 1994, during the time of his artist residency at the Fundación Antorchas in Buenos Aires, and barely a year after finishing his undergraduate studies, Erlich had already developed a detailed proposal by which he would pay homage to the monument by erecting its exact scale duplicate at a different urban hub on the other side of the city. On an anecdotal level, the artist seems to be engaged by the argument that whereas many cities possess an obelisk, no city boasted two identical ones, so that a civic commitment to undertake so quixotic a project as constructing the Obelisk's double would, paradoxically, provide the city with a sort of postmodern-flavored uniqueness. (He also appreciated that all future attempts to arrange a rendezvous at the Obelisk would have to incorporate the question, "Which one?"). Like its offspring of two decades later, Erlich's earlier Obelisk homage came freighted with the awareness that this monument's symbolism as an icon of the nation it served rendered it somehow untouchable, beyond the purview of political critique and therefore any artistic efforts to reframe its power as a social vessel.

And yet not only has the Obelisk always functioned, as Christian Ferrer eloquently points out in his accompanying essay, in the role of epicenter or navel of the city of Buenos Aires, and therefore also as a rallying point for the capital's disaffected or over-zealous citizens. Its very status is also rooted to a great degree in its blank, abstracted quality as a symbol. The final shape may well have begun its evolution as a visual icon in the form of a pyramid, an equally ambiguous symbol of Argentina's declared independence from Spain, but by the time the Obelisk was actually built in early 1936, the civic need for a monument had been superseded by the vital importance of not taking sides in the ongoing polarization that marked the country's internal political struggles for power. It bore no man's name or likeness, memorialized no battle, took no party's emblems or slogans, and apparently communicated to the citizenry, once its six-week construction process was completed, no secret urge to be co-opted by one side or the other. Because its abstract nature is such that it literally symbolizes nothing, the Obelisk has long ago become the vessel

El círculo del dolor, 1981. Archivo Clarín. Photo by Carlos Villoldo.

for other's speculations about how life in a grand urban center is lived, how amendments and ruptures within the social contract are received or how sports victories can be spontaneously celebrated. To be gathered in front of the Obelisk, especially in large unified groups, must spark intense feelings of solidarity, of entire masses of people coming together before the passive and benign gaze of the most abiding public monument to the Argentine collective identity.

Artists of all stylistic and philosophical persuasions have employed illusion in their work, if only to privilege the act of sight as that which provides a gateway toward rational thought, philosophical contemplation, and the identification of aligned (or opposed) interests. If the eye is momentarily tricked, the brain quickly rushes in to smooth over any missed cues, and to reaffirm that the self's early defense system is intact and functioning. If to the Leandro Erlich of the early 1990s the visual appeal of the Obelisk lay in its formal unity and its central location, today it is the inaccessible portion—specifically the pyramidal shape on top, which is more visible from a distance than close up, and the windows that face in every direction—that has inspired the current undertaking. The underlying question to his project seems to be that if nobody other than the occasional maintenance worker ever ascends to the top of the Oblelisk, for what purpose do its windows even exist? Since it strains credulity to imagine that the mere appearance of an elevated vista might somehow inspire citizens to nurture their ideals of independence and/or democracy, one logical hypothesis is that the windows were installed for the purpose of surveillance, to provide whomever had the power to ascend the stairs on their own with something to see when they arrived at the top. To complete the drama implied by somebody on the ground gazing upward, the equation must also include a viewpoint that nobody can access, but all are free to imagine. The person below appears to be nothing more than a speck from the monument's summit, but the person at the top cannot be seen at all, leaving us unsure of whether or not there is ever anyone enjoying the privilege of such an unrivalled vista of one of the world's great cities.

One possibility that Erlich needed to consider from the outset was whether or not to offer viewers live camera feeds of the actual light and weather conditions from the top of the Obelisk, which might have pro-

ABOVE: Obelisk against AIDS, 2005. Archivo Clarín.
BELOW: Police excesses on December 20th, 2001. Archivo Clarín.

vided a tidy poetic logic, especially on those days when the view was murky or obscured. Setting aside the logistical hurdles in setting up and framing such a shot, then ensuring that no gust of wind, errant cable or pigeon interfered, an additional downside to the Obelisk-cam is that it suggests that what one is seeing is somehow a verifiable piece of natural history in the making, whereas Erlich seems to have calculated that reinforcing the fictional, or idealized view of a sunny day with a perfect view would not detract from the piece's aesthetic impact, but might in fact enhance it. People who submit knowingly to a situation in which they are aware from the outset that what they are about to experience is a feat of imagination and illusion tend to be no less surprised at what magician's call the 'reveal': the instant in which the card is shown, the dove appears, or the assistant steps unharmed from behind the curtain. In fact, a magicians' "patter"—the ongoing monologue whose subtext is that both you and he know you are being fooled, in fact distracted by what he's saying, and there is nothing you can do to stop it—is more or less equivalent to Erlich's reassurance that what we see when we step inside is certainly not going to fool us.

Because the view from inside the simulated top of the Obelisk is picture-perfect, complete with the obligatory pigeon that wanders around one of the window's edges, and because the sounds of the city mixing with the wind rushing past have been edited and balanced with attention to detail, the illusion conveyed by *The Democracy of the Symbol* works. But it also works—and perhaps it does so even more—because it satisfies a desire so primordial that viewers are happy to submit to its limitations in order to make themselves believe that it is, if not real, then a convincing illusion that satisfied a deeper craving. Without, at the time of this writing, having had the opportunity to witness this effect on real people in real time, it is no less clear to this writer that such will be the work's impact for a large segment of the visiting public. The chance to see what the view of the city from atop the Obelisk might look like—or rather, what it did look like on the mornings and afternoons when the artist and his crew did the actual filming—is something that few people can be persuaded to pass up.

To anticipate the unspoken desires of their would-be viewers is one of the gravest and most consistently overlooked responsibilities of the

artist, but it is one that Erlich understands very clearly. When the most potent illusions come packaged in a format that looks like the everyday, it's difficult not to reflect on the transformation of the word "real" in our time into an adjective identifying just another genre of programmed entertainment. Perhaps genuine "illusion" consists of that fleeting, nebulous zone in which our power to bewitch one another through words, images and gestures depends less on the wizardry of special effects than on understanding one of most basic laws of human psychology: just as the best way to make people want something is to tell them it's just out of their reach, the best way to quench that urge is to show them precisely what they've never been able to see before.