

A Gap in the Limits of the Possible  
Andrea Giunta

**S**tudies of Leandro Erlich's works often begin by describing a personal experience. Texts usually focus on the sensory perceptions that his installations produce in viewers. His works articulate as visual, emotional, and mental puzzles. We know immediately that the space we walk into is not real and that nothing is what it seems. But we are certainly delighted with the enigma we are invited to enter.

We want to experience and decode it. His *Swimming Pool* (Houston, 1999) is a space where we can walk underwater while fully dressed. A dream? We take photographs and we are photographed, the outlines of our bodies blurred by the tremor of the crystal surface of water above us. This is a place where enigma is condensed.

The moment of immersion is short; but it will undoubtedly remain associated with a playful and happy memory in which the fictional force behind the structure of the work is organized by a dazzling artifice. The mechanics behind the illusion could easily be discovered, but that is not likely to be of interest to those submerged in the liquid experience. Our interest is more likely to be placed in the enjoyment to be had when inhabiting the universe that Erlich has fabricated.

This experience has been associated with the sense of the sublime that occurs when we are absorbed in the aesthetic pleasure, in the oceanic feeling,



Leandro Erlich  
*The Swimming Pool*, 2001  
Metal structure, wood,  
Plexiglas, water, and  
ladder, 118 x 236¼ x 137¼  
in. (300 x 600 x 350 cm)  
Argentine Pavilion,  
49th Venice Biennale  
© Leandro Erlich Studio



Mark Rothko  
*Old Gold Over White*,  
1956  
Oil on canvas  
68 x 46 in (172.7  
x 116.8 cm)  
Collection Neuberger  
Museum of Art  
Purchase College, State  
University of New York  
Gift of Roy R. Neuberger  
1969.01.20  
©1998 Kate Rothko Prizel  
& Christopher Rothko/  
Artists Rights Society  
(ARS), New York

of works by Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman, as well as the sensory experiments of James Turrell and Robert Irwin.<sup>1</sup> The perceptual context of Erlich's works is not lacking in precedents, but it also differs. The spectator is imbued with playful empathy for the environment. This nebulous and pleasant moment of indeterminacy is joined by an experience of transition, of fluidity, of unlimitedness. We are here, but we could also be in any suspended or undefined space, without boundaries: an ephemeral state, an *in between* that implies the extension of limits, an overflow of the perception and logic that define the spaces we are familiar with. We jump in, almost unable to control ourselves, in a moment that involves mental and bodily play, a moment of redirection for our senses and sensitivity that is, therefore, political in its alterations of established meanings.

It is noteworthy that one of Erlich's first artistic proposals emerged as the response to an open call for artistic projects. When he participated in the Premio Braque in 1995, organized by the French Embassy in Buenos Aires, the criteria were strict.

The work could not exceed certain measurements—31½ by 31½ by 75 inches, corresponding to the dimensions of the elevator at the Banco Patricios Foundation, where the works in the competition were to be displayed.<sup>2</sup> As an ironic response to this restriction, Erlich inverted the design of the elevator, setting what was inside—the buttons and mirrors—outside (*Ascensor*, Buenos Aires, 1995). As a result, he transformed the entire space of the exhibition, invading the building with his inverse logic, subverting the organizer's restrictions. It was a response to authority, conceived from the idea that the order of the real is not immutable, not confined to an unchangeable destiny.

From the beginning, we can identify different drives in Erlich's work. On the one hand, there are projects steered by a desire to convert fantasies into reality, where the body of the spectator is actively involved: swimming fully dressed in a pool; skiing without snow (*Tourism*, Havana, 2000, made in collaboration with Judi Werthein); crawling or climbing on the facade of a building without falling (*Bâtiment*, Paris, 2004; *Tsumari House*, Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial, Niigata, Japan, 2006; *Bank*, Izolyatsia, Donetsk, Ukraine, 2012; *Building*, Buenos Aires, 2012; *Dalston*

<sup>1</sup> Rodrigo Alonso, "Leandro Erlich: El mundo como realidad y representación," *Arte:03* (Montevideo), no. 4 (November 2002): 12–20.

<sup>2</sup> While Erlich's first elevator dates back to 1995, the topic of the object's transitive ambiguity— i.e., the changes in its functionality—materializes in new approaches in pieces such as *Elevator Maze*, *Stuck Elevator*, and *Elevator Pitch* (New York, 2011). In all of these works the contradictions between the appearance and the function of the space result from ambiguity.

*House*, London, 2013); sitting in the office of a psychoanalyst without his presence (*Le Cabinet du Psychanalyste*, Saint-Nazaire, 2005). In all these cases, the work is only complete, it can only exist, when a spectator is involved.<sup>3</sup> The works enable potential and imaginary wishes—walking under a pool, climbing onto a building—and involve emotional, even romantic ways of relating to everyday spaces from the perspective of playful affectivity. The works come into being when viewers activate them. Only on a few occasions has Erlich introduced specific bodies as role-playing elements in an installation. For example, in *The Ballet Studio* (Shanghai, 2002), he positioned four performers mimicking each other's movements, as in a mirror image, producing the illusion of a reflective surface. More frequently, however, his installations involve spectators' bodies and have a biopolitical dimension.<sup>4</sup> They are works that, for a moment, administrate life and control the behavior of bodies.

There are also works that involve the expectations of participants as voyeurs, who spy through peepholes to see what happens beyond their doors (*Neighbors*, Buenos Aires and New York, 1996–2001) or windows (*The View*, Buenos Aires, Jerusalem, and Paris, 1997–2005), and even find themselves dazzled by seemingly impossible events. This is what happens in *Pulled by the Roots* (Karlsruhe, 2015), in which a huge moving crane, instead of carrying furniture into a building, raises a whole house, ripping it from the ground.



Leandro Erlich  
*Bâtiment III*  
*(Building III)*, 2011  
 Digital print on linoleum,  
 lights, iron, wood,  
 and mirror  
 315 x 236¼ x 472½ in.  
 (800 x 600 x 1200 cm)  
 Le Centquatre–Paris  
 © Leandro Erlich Studio

<sup>3</sup> In general terms, there are two kinds of artists: those who aim to control the interpretation of their work and, accordingly, enter into discussions with critics or others who understand something different; and those who believe that people and places can modify the interpretation of their work, and who accept new meanings even if they differ from the artist's own concept. For Erlich the viewer represents 50 percent of each project, and the act of interpretation is also creative. The life and experiences of each spectator determine a personal meaning. He considers the audiences in different contexts as main characters in his works, and they have, therefore, a central role in his installations.

<sup>4</sup> From a biopolitical perspective, discipline and normalization have an impact on subjectivities and guarantee the reproduction of life. See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1 (New York: Vintage, 1980).

Another view of the impossible is the work Erlich recently orchestrated in Buenos Aires, where the city awoke to find that its iconic Obelisco (Obelisk), located in the Plaza de la República, appeared to be missing its pyramidal apex, which had found its way to the esplanade of the Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires (MALBA) (*La Democracia del Símbolo*, The Democracy of the Symbol; Buenos Aires, 2015). At the museum site, citizens could enter the “apex” and view the city streets from above. In effect, Erlich made it possible to enter the Obelisco, which was otherwise inaccessible.<sup>5</sup>

*La Democracia del Símbolo* thus proposed an intervention that democratized a mysterious and inaccessible space. In line with the experiences of desire and bedazzlement, we can also mention an installation by Erlich that enabled the possession, if only briefly, of a window with rain, its movement and its sound, for as long as the visitor wanted (*Rain*, New York, 2000).

Some projects remain anchored to their context of origin. *Turismo*, produced in Havana, could probably be installed in very few other places on the planet. The site for which it was created met a specific condition: a Caribbean setting, from where it is neither easy nor affordable to plan a skiing vacation to the Alps. The installation allowed Cubans to take improbable pictures of themselves. Initially, visitors played and posed wearing their ordinary clothes, but soon they began to add layers of realism to the scenario by posing with thick sweaters.<sup>6</sup> Family holiday pictures in snowy landscapes were briefly accessible to citizens of Havana, condensing moments of happiness.

In these illusions there are always elements revealing the fiction. The artifice necessary to hide the upper section of the Obelisco in Buenos Aires could be detected by a keen eye, understanding that the monument had not been mutilated: its vertex was covered, simply hiding the prismatic structure. In addition, Erlich's physical installations subtly reveal his conception of the work, as in *Pulled by the Roots*, where roots extended through the foundations of the house, magnifying the work's literal title. Erlich's works are art, not magic. They are devices that seek to produce emotions and a different knowledge of the world. Why not think of the order given to things in a new way, poetically altered? This may be the general question behind all of his projects.

Each of his works carries its latent conditions to its limits. Erlich's *Obelisco* is one example, but so is the ladder that rests on the fragment of a house suspended in midair (*Window and Ladder*), a project conceived for Prospect 1, the 2008 New Orleans biennial. When walking the site of an apparently empty field, in order to

<sup>5</sup> As Erlich points out, the small room (64 square meters) at the top of the city's Obelisco can only be accessed by a vertical ladder and is not available to the public, as is the Eiffel Tower.

<sup>6</sup> “The Project,” in Judi Werthein and Leandro Erlich, *Turismo: La Habana, Cuba* (New York: Kent Gallery, 2001), 3–4.

develop his project, Erlich saw that it was possible to deduce the foundations of houses and the layout of streets that had existed prior to the devastating passage of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. *Window and Ladder* is a highly contextual piece, infused with other architectural typologies when installed at a different site (*Monte-Meubles: L'Ultime Déménagement*, Nantes, France, and Abu Dhabi, 2012). We can ask ourselves, What is the definitive work? What is its ultimate meaning? In the end, neither the work nor a single meaning exists definitively, for the work is embedded in the context in which it operates, but it is in constant mutation as it moves to a new location.

There is another persistent feature that crosses all of Erlich's artistic projects: the pursuit of ideas that, impossible as they may seem at first, he carries out to their full realization. Some are dependent on designs, budgets, or materials. Others involve going to city halls, requesting permits, and attending hearings. Occasionally, some projects appear to conclude in failure, until he can afford (materially, legally) to execute them.

Let's restart this story by going back to the 1990s. The place: Buenos Aires, a city where a variety of artistic explorations were taking place simultaneously, geographically concentrated in the center and the north of the metropolis.<sup>7</sup> On the southern outskirts of this scene, in the neighborhood of La Boca, there was an artists' studio, the Taller de Barracas, from which emerged most of those who at the time were conceiving large-scale works. Promoted and supported by the Fundación Antorchas, Taller de Barracas was a project of approximately twenty fellow artists enrolled in a two-year program.<sup>8</sup> The workshop provided studio space, technological assistance, and materials to undertake the research necessary to develop complex projects. Erlich, twenty-one at the time, joined in



Leandro Erlich  
*Monte-Meubles, L'Ultime Déménagement (The Furniture Lift, The Final Move)*, 2012  
 Metal structure, fiberglass, furniture, and windows  
 551 ¼ x 393 ¾ x 256 in. (1400 x 1000 x 650 cm)  
 Place du Bouffay, Nantes, Le Voyage à Nantes, France  
 © Martin Argyroglo

<sup>7</sup> On the one hand, there was the artistic agenda organized by the Centro Cultural of the Universidad de Buenos Aires (known as "El Rojas"). Many of the artists who exhibited there were investigating everyday and precarious materials, developing the traits of a queer and trash aesthetic (which some art critics have described as "light" or "guaranga") that contributed to imagery that declassified bodies and sensibilities. Other institutions were also central to the configuration of the artistic scene in Buenos Aires with exhibits that detonated intense controversies, including the Fundación Banco Patricios, site for *90-60-90* (1994); the Instituto de Cooperación Iberoamericana, a network that included almost all Latin American capitals and was established to create a new image of Spain after the end of Franco's regime; the Casal de Catalunya, in the neighborhood of San Telmo, which focused on young and experimental artists; and the Centro Cultural Recoleta, an initiative that began following the collapse of the dictatorship and that concentrated on presenting the city's cutting-edge art for many years.

<sup>8</sup> The teachers and advisors of the workshop were the artist and architect Luis Fernando Benedit, the artist Pablo Suárez, and the sculptor Ricardo Longhini. The mission of the Fundación Antorchas—created in 1985 by the Fundación Lampadía (funded by the Bolivian mining industry) and active until 2006—was to support scientific, technological, social, and cultural projects.



Leandro Erlich  
Scale model for  
*El Obelisco en  
La Boca*, 1994  
Iron  
168,5 x 17,7 x 18 cm.  
Photo: © Fundación  
Proa.

1994. He considers that, in artistic terms, he was still a teenager, which meant for him that the path he was to follow was not yet clear.<sup>9</sup> His artistic education had been heterogeneous. He had taken painting classes with the artist Ana Eckell, and with a fellowship from the Fondo Nacional de las Artes, he spent a year, every Saturday morning, drinking beer with the artist Luis Felipe Noé at Café Tortoni.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, Erlich had attended some courses at the Facultad de Filosofía y Letras of the Universidad de Buenos Aires.

The project that Erlich began to imagine at Taller de Barracas was ambitious. He wanted to build a 1:1 copy of the city's Obelisco, cut in steel and to be erected in the La Boca neighborhood.<sup>11</sup> By doubling the unique and iconic monument, Erlich imagined his project decentralizing the city and creating paradoxes. For example, if people were to search for the Obelisco or ask a taxi to take them there, it would be necessary to ask, "Which one?"<sup>12</sup> His project was designed to enact a process of decentralization and gentrification that anticipated, in a certain way, the one created years later by

Fundación Proa, an exhibition space in La Boca that became a focal point for contemporary art in Buenos Aires and changed the cultural dynamic of the city.

<sup>9</sup> In addition to painting, Erlich had by that time also created a project with a plastic parachutist, which he placed on a turbine that kept it afloat in the air. Leandro Erlich, interview with the author, Buenos Aires, August 12, 2016 (hereafter: Erlich, interview with the author).

<sup>10</sup> A member of the Argentine collective Nueva Figuración—active from 1961 until 1965 and whose members also included Jorge de La Vega, Rómulo Macció, and Ernesto Deira—Noé taught several generations of artists. Since the late 1950s, he has been a dynamic actor in the artistic scene of Buenos Aires.

<sup>11</sup> Designed by architect Alberto Prebisch for the commemoration of the 400th anniversary of the founding of Buenos Aires, the Obelisco, built of concrete, acts as a clear metaphor for the history of a territory that, unlike Mexico or Peru, could not turn to the destruction of temples for debris to erect Catholic churches. (The first brick factory of Buenos Aires was installed in 1604, and adobe was used in construction until the eighteenth century.) See Daniel Schavelzon, *Arqueología histórica de Buenos Aires: La cultural material porteña de los siglos XVIII y XIX* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Corregidor, 1991), 177. The Obelisco was erected over a course of sixty days, between March 20 and May 23, 1936. Argentine photographer Horacio Coppola recorded the monument's construction and the impact it had on the city and its population in the film *Así nació el obelisco* (1936). It prompted so many jokes and comments that three years later the city's Concejo Deliberante (Deliberative Council) authorized its demolition, but Arturo Goyeneche, mayor of Buenos Aires, vetoed this decision. In a city built at a frenetic pace, the Rationalist aesthetic of the Obelisco activated the confrontation between traditionalists and innovative architects. An emblem of the city, where its phallic symbolism has been frequently noted, the Obelisco has undergone several interventions. For example, in the 1970s it was encircled with a rotating sign that read "Silence is health": an admonition that anticipated the censorship and silence imposed by Argentina's military dictatorship between 1976 and 1983. In 2005 it was covered with a huge pink condom in commemoration of World AIDS Day.

<sup>12</sup> Leandro Erlich, interview with Agustín Pérez Rubio, in *La Democracia del Símbolo*, ed. Socorro Giménez Cubillos (Buenos Aires: MALBA, 2015), 53–65.

Given that the residents of La Boca describe the neighborhood as a republic, for its residents to have their own obelisk would further consolidate a sense of autonomy. By intuition or by chance, Erlich's project found its perfect interlocutor: architect Luis Fernando Bénédit, one of the artist-directors of Taller de Barracas. Bénédit, son-in-law of Alberto Prebisch, the architect who had designed the city's Obelisco was enthusiastic about the project. If Erlich could obtain the necessary permits, the Antorchas Foundation would provide the funds to carry out the project. He spent a year trying to secure authorizations and establish budgets.<sup>13</sup> The media announced his plans, and the concept of La Boca's *Obelisco* reached the residents: unbuilt, the obelisk already existed.<sup>14</sup>

Although that project never saw the light of day, it gave Erlich connections to all the networks necessary for an artist who develops projects in the urban space of Buenos Aires, educating him in terms of permits, laws, and negotiations with the authorities and the public.<sup>15</sup> It marked the path for his future work—work that is not enclosed within the boundaries or the nomenclatures of the art world, although it is often labeled as Conceptual. The impossible *Obelisco* involved dreams and meanings that have marked all the projects he has carried out since then. In another format, using other procedures, and invited by MALBA, his intervention on the city's Obelisco was carried out in 2015. The 1995 project had been, in a sense, both his education and his artistic training.<sup>16</sup> It is also an example of the persistence that characterizes his career. The summary of all these experiences allows us to think about a recurrent issue in art: from where does the identity of an artist emerge?

<sup>13</sup> It was also in 1994 that Erlich constructed the elevator at the Fundación Banco Patricios. He visited the Sociedad de Fomento de La Boca, the Rotary Club, and local authorities to identify partners for his *Obelisco* project. Since he needed to prepare a budget, he met with the chairman of the Department of Structures at the Facultad de Ingeniería, Universidad de Buenos Aires, who arranged for the fifth-year students to calculate the weights, forces, and winds that allowed Erlich to project costs. This resulted in a truly interdisciplinary effort in which he orchestrated the different areas of expertise required to execute his concept. Erlich, interview with the author.

<sup>14</sup> Articles were published in the journal *La Boca*, the newspapers *La Nación* and *Clarín*, and the weekly magazine *La Maga*. The television host Nicolás Repetto invited Erlich to present the project on his show. However, although Erlich tried to talk seriously about the *Obelisco* and to explain it by means of a maquette, Repetto barely allowed him two seconds for his presentation.

<sup>15</sup> As Agustín Pérez Rubio points out, these public and urban projects locate Erlich in the orbit of an international genealogy that includes artists such as Christo and Jeanne-Claude, and the Argentine artist Marta Minujín. See Pérez Rubio, *La Democracia del Símbolo*, 62.

<sup>16</sup> Through an exchange program organized by Fundación Antorchas with the Pan-American Cultural Exchange under the direction of Pampa Risso-Patron, in 1996 Erlich participated in a two-year Core Program at the Glasell School of Art, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Working in this stimulating environment, he produced *Swimming Pool* and *Storm* (both 1999); the latter was exhibited as *Rain* at the Whitney Museum in 2000. After that he lived in New York for three years and then moved to Paris. Today, even though 90 percent of his activity is highly international, Erlich lives in Buenos Aires and Montevideo, a city where he is developing, together with the Ministry of Culture, an educational project that will include fellowships.



Even for a superlative international artist such as Leandro Erlich,<sup>17</sup> an important part of his work is linked to the experiences of the life he has lived locally, in Buenos Aires. He has not always resided in Argentina, and the distance from his country has provided him with a state of waking consciousness, a stimulus that originates in the tension between distance and proximity: "I need to be displaced," says Erlich.<sup>18</sup> From this perspective, his work activates experiences that originated in the Argentine political reality of his childhood, when, from the ages of three to ten, talk of political disappearances had to be whispered, in the privacy of his home.<sup>19</sup> His works also activate private and personal experiences, such as the obstacles that his father, an architect, faced when he invented mechanisms to solve everyday problems. Erlich's work is also imprinted with cultural perceptions that are locally lived and felt—almost a structure of feeling, as Raymond Williams called it<sup>20</sup>—connected, for example, with the relevance of psychoanalysis among Buenos Aires' middle class,<sup>21</sup> a relationship that is present in the installation *Le Cabinet du Psychanalyste*. He has also condensed images of the spectacular and frequent storms in Buenos Aires, in which water accumulates in the streets, creating liquid surfaces that mirror and reflect the lights and buildings of the city, a local phenomenon invoked in his installation *La Plaza* (Saint Nazaire, 2005). Concentrating his personal experiences and site-specific research in places where he is planning new installations, Erlich creates glowing international structures of feeling that are recontextualized in different environments. He represents, in this sense, an example of what Hal Foster has identified as the characteristic condition of the contemporary artist, that of ethnographer.<sup>22</sup>

It is interesting, in this regard, to observe not only Erlich's site-specific projects, created for a precise context (such as *Window and Ladder*, 2008; *Turismo*, 2000; and *La Democracia del Símbolo*, 2015), but also the process of recontextualization that operates on projects such as *Swimming Pool* that migrate through different spaces of display. Created and exhibited in Houston in 1999, presented at the Venice Biennale in 2001, and exhibited at New York's MoMA PS1 in 2008, this work has appealed to different audiences. Participants

<sup>17</sup> He has taken part in numerous biennials, which have also served as platforms for large projects, in Havana, São Paulo, Venice, Singapore, Shanghai, Liverpool, Mercosul Porto Alegre (Brazil), New York, Istanbul, Montevideo, and New Orleans, among other cities. Many of those 150-square-meter projects were planned within the 35 square meters of his studio in Paris.

<sup>18</sup> Erlich, interview with the author.

<sup>19</sup> His family was well aware of events during the dark years of the dictatorship, when his parents were fired from the university where they taught. At home he heard conversations about the missing people, but only in whispers, to protect the family.

<sup>20</sup> Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

<sup>21</sup> See Mariano Ben Plotkin, *Freud in the Pampas: The Emergence and Development of a Psychoanalytic Culture in Argentina* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).

<sup>22</sup> See Hal Foster, "The Artist as Ethnographer," in *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).

from different places connected with it based on their own experiences. At its current headquarters, in the permanent collection of the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art in Kanazawa, Japan, the installation also gains from the strangeness of Erlich's pool among Japanese ponds. In their migration and adaptations, the iterations of *Swimming Pool* are both the same and different.

Installed as *Bâtiment* (Paris, 2004), the giant mirrored life-size facade, in which visitors could play with their reflections as if hanging from a building, strongly involved a participative audience. Each of the building facades caught in a game of mirrors is of course different, but as *Dalston House* (2013), in London, where the installation was placed in an area that had been bombed by German aircraft during WWII, the work acquired an additional layer of meaning. A distinctive sense of belonging took place in this particular context for a work that had been installed in many cities. The facade there reproduced a Victorian house in the city's Dalston district. Although most of those who played on the facade likely had no knowledge of the site's history, past events were noted in information advertising the work.<sup>23</sup> The complex past attached to the installation in London makes it a case study for what I propose to call *ludic memorials*. Unlike architectures of memory characterized by monumentality and minimalism (stripped, austere, meditative spaces), this type of memorial invites different bodies to a symbolically different experience: immersed in the game of the facade, participants in London exorcized the experiences of those who had once been terrified by the sound of the aircrafts of war.<sup>24</sup> However, it is the joy of play that prevails in all of Erlich's works. Beyond what visitors may bring from the past, those who play in his works act principally as inventors of forms, fictions, dialogues, and photographs that can become realities. Present and past images are activated by different contexts.

These projects, in which the common becomes strange, tend to be classified as Surrealism or Magic Realism, especially in the United States. "If your work deals with reality, but it is not real, it is classified as surreal," states Erlich, discarding these classifications.<sup>25</sup> Buenos Aires is a city of multiple, crossed identities with a history that involves a *sui generis* globalization, and Erlich's work cannot be reduced to a simple label. Its complexity is part of the narrative of experiences in which his projects are embedded, a narrative that also includes cultural references such as the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges.<sup>26</sup> Labyrinths,

<sup>23</sup> See "Leandro Erlich: Dalston House," *Time Out* (London), 2013 <http://www.timeout.com/london/art/leandro-erlich-dalston-house-1> (accessed August 20, 2016).

<sup>24</sup> Those who lived in London during the war still fear the sound of certain aircraft. On architectures of memory, see Andrea Giunta, "Feeling the Past: Display and the Art of Memory in Latin America," *Journal of Curatorial Studies* 3, nos. 2/3 (2014): 321–45.

<sup>25</sup> Erlich, interview with the author.

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, short stories such as "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" and "Las ruinas circulares,"

paradoxes, mirrors, and circularity, all recurring topics in the literature of Borges, can be found in almost all of Erlich's works.

The French writer and filmmaker Georges Perec can also illuminate Erlich's work. The artist quotes a text by Perec in one of the catalogues devoted to his work: "To question the habitual. But that's just it, we're habituated to it. We don't question it, it doesn't question us, it doesn't seem to pose a problem, we live it without thinking . . . What we need to question is bricks, concrete, glass, our table manners, our utensils, our tools, the way we spend our time, our rhythms. To question that which seems to have ceased forever to astonish us."<sup>27</sup> Erlich intersects with Perec in his acute and stunned observation of the ordinary. From there he questions uncommon aspects of the everyday, which are rarely the source of disagreement since the latter can only emerge from radical and detailed scrutiny.

But this does not mean that Erlich's projects are based on Perec's writings. Neither are they based on texts by Borges. What the two authors bring to the understanding of Erlich's work are the parallels between their works and the artist's images. We can view Erlich's projects from the perspective of Borges or Perec; and vice versa, we can reread these authors from the perspective of Erlich's visual puzzles. "The work is a confrontation of complex universes that makes you feel less alone, together with someone that was or is thinking about things in the same way," Erlich reflects.<sup>28</sup> There are also potential connections between his work and certain films: Erlich's father bought many of the films by Roman Polanski, Alfred Hitchcock, David Lynch, Luis Buñuel, or Sergei Eisenstein, which the son watched while the video clubs in Buenos Aires were closing with the arrival of cable television. However, he was not inspired by any movie in particular. It is rather from a set of images, themes, and ideas that we can observe echoes and parallel readings. Erlich's interruptions of routine are permeated by a romantic nostalgia, by moments that lingered in his imagination, by sediments of images activated by the present.

A significant example of the fluency of this time strata is *Port of Reflections*, the installation presented at the Neuberger Museum in conjunction with the Roy R. Neuberger Exhibition Prize, awarded to an exceptional early-career artist along with a survey exhibition and monographic catalogue. This is the first presentation of the installation in the United States, but it has a previous history. The National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Seoul commissioned Erlich to create a piece for its space, *Hanjin Shipping The Box Project* (2014), a project that has

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both in *Ficciones* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1986), published in English as *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin, 1998).

<sup>27</sup> Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, trans. John Sturrok (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 2008), 205–7.

<sup>28</sup> Erlich, interview with the author.

generated similar but different projects at other sites, including *Port of Reflections*. For the installation of the piece in Buenos Aires, the artist modified the original project by adding movement.

An ambiguous title, *Port of Reflections* is both a poetic allusion to reflections in water and a reference to deep thinking (the ambiguity prevails when the title is translated into some Latin languages, including French). This ambiguity evokes the meditative nature of the work. Small



boats are suspended in space, waiting in anticipation on the liquid illusion. Standardized in their Western, pointed form (in Seoul the boats had their common, squared shape), they recall nature and aquatic activities such as fishing. They also suggest departure, or even escape. Boats are ever present in today's headlines, specifically boats transporting refugees from Africa to Europe and that often end as shipwrecks. In this sense, *Port of Reflections* may be understood as the *floating memorial* of a present beleaguered by migrations and expulsions, rapidly constructed refugee camps, and immense walls closing national borders. Walls that remind us of other walls, whose destruction, it is said, marked the beginning of the contemporary period in art: 1989, the year the Berlin Wall fell, ending a conflict that had divided the world into two major powers and their aligned countries during the Cold War. In that previous state of the world, established by the most powerful nations at the 1955 Bandung Conference in Indonesia, the Non-Aligned Movement of nations was founded outside the major power blocs. Today the world is different. War and humanitarian crises have spread globally. While powerful countries raise new walls, immigrants rush to the sea in search of new possibilities of life. And there, on the sea or ashore, they die or remain in refugee camps, often living without documentation, citizens of nowhere.

However, the subtle movements and the liquid illusion of *Port of Reflections* does not necessarily signify the urgent and contemporary reality we have traced. It can also be linked to the more general idea of uprooting, traveling, crossing, or migration. It may concern, metaphorically, the transoceanic trip connecting Buenos Aires with Europe, which brought the arrival of immigrants from various countries of Europe—fleeing hunger, war, discrimination (the same reasons that motivate immigrants arriving in Europe today). Erlich's grandparents, Jews as well as atheists, arrived in Buenos Aires from Spain, Italy, Ukraine, and Poland, in a diaspora that understood culture as an ever transportable heritage. Members of his family came to Buenos Aires between 1910 and 1929, a period characterized

Leandro Erlich  
*Port of Reflections*, 2014  
Mixed media installation  
Dimensions variable  
National Museum of  
Modern and Contempo-  
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Leandro Erlich  
*Puerto de Memorias (Port of Memories)*, 2016 (detail)  
Mixed media installation  
Dimensions variable  
MUNTREF Museo de la  
Universidad Nacional de  
Tres de Febrero,  
Buenos Aires  
Photo © Álvaro Figueroa

by global crisis and the rise of anti-Semitism in Europe. They were closely connected to the cultural life of the city, contributing specifically to the theater, including the IFT, the Yiddish theater in Buenos Aires, and to literature.<sup>29</sup> Following *Hanjin Shipping The Box Project* in Seoul, the work was recreated in the Hotel de los Inmigrantes in Buenos Aires, a building that at one time received immigrants and provided medical care, accommodation, and transportation. On the banks of the Río de la Plata, facing the water, the installation evoked multiple overlapping pasts over the course of two centuries. The boats in Erlich's work, represented in a simple archetypal form, echo all of these meanings.

At the Neuberger Museum, as in Seoul and Buenos Aires, Erlich creates an illusion that the boats are floating in water, but they are in fact suspended above an empty space covered by a densely woven black carpet.<sup>30</sup> In Buenos Aires the boats also moved, reinforcing the illusion of a pier where the empty vessels waited for the bodies they would hypothetically put in motion. All three versions evoke imminent change, the current of life, and the importance of connections to unexpected spaces and experiences. Flowing, moving, traveling, sharing, mutating, leaving: words that are not only connected with actions but also with the emotional magma of experiences that each invoke.

From a practical point of view, these installations may seem unnecessary. From a poetic perspective, they are essential, especially because they activate creativity and subvert the ways in which institutions normalize the spaces they organize and administer. Erlich's works propose seeing the world differently. They open a gap in the limits of the possible, slightly transgressing rules and laws, expanding the possibilities of experience and imagination through delicate negotiations that engage us in a space between known and unexpected uses. As art, these installations have the capacity to open spaces that offer visitors transit between potential worlds.

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<sup>29</sup> See Karina Wainschenker, "Antecedentes, surgimiento y desarrollo del teatro IFT," *VII Jornadas Jóvenes Investigadores* (área "genocidio, memoria y derechos humanos"), Instituto Gino Germani, Facultad de Ciencias Sociales, Universidad de Buenos Aires, 2013, [http://jornadasjovenesiigg.sociales.uba.ar/files/2013/10/eje13\\_wainschenker.pdf](http://jornadasjovenesiigg.sociales.uba.ar/files/2013/10/eje13_wainschenker.pdf) (accessed October 5, 2016). As Erlich points out, "There is no one before my grandparents. They all died in the war [WWII]. But we could not talk about this." Erlich, interview with the author.

<sup>30</sup> On the complex construction and technical aspects of this installation, see *Hanjin Shipping The Box Project 2014: Leandro Erlich* (Seoul: National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea, 2014).

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