Unheimlich Erlich: The Optimistically Uncanny Works of Leandro Erlich

Patrice Giasson

For me there is no better place to question reality than in the ordinary. We take our daily surroundings for granted, cease to see them and hence our capacity to experience surprise is usually asleep. To face the unknown is part of the learning process. We have to seduce our certainties into question—in my case by using a device that awakens the desire to learn, to destabilize. This desire is the antidote for our fears.

—Leandro Erlich[1]

Leandro Erlich is not always where we expect to find him. Born in Argentina in 1973, he spent several years abroad, living in the United States from 1999 to 2002 and then in France until 2006. Erlich's international career led him to show his work in some of the most important museums worldwide and to participate in major art events. He had major exhibitions in Paris, London, Madrid, Barcelona, São Paulo, Rome, Seoul, Tokyo, and Kanazawa. Today he is back in the United States, winner of the Roy R. Neuberger Prize, with one of his most ambitious and complex installations: *Port of Reflections*.

If we wished to describe his approach to art in a few lines, we might say the following: Erlich works with perception. His interest in architecture has allowed him to create well-executed installations, which we could call sculptures,[2] that act as illusionary devices. Most of his works originate in and put on display ordinary places—an apartment, an elevator, a swimming pool, a staircase—but these structures are nonfunctional and invite the viewer into a world of illusion. Erlich uses mirrors and trompe-l'oeil to question the way we look at the everyday. His oeuvre may be divided into two experimental poles: works that are primarily for viewing—such as *Rain* (1999) and *Monte-Meubles* (The Furniture Lift; 2012)— and works that we can enter or physically engage with—including *Bâtiment* (Building, 2014) and *Changing Rooms* (2008).

[1] "A Conversation between Leandro Erlich and Cecilia Fajardo-Hill," in Cecilia Fajardo-Hill, *Leandro Erlich: Jardín perdido/Lost Garden* (Long Beach, CA: Museum of Latin American Art, 2010), 6.
[2] "Many of Erlich works, while containing actual architectural elements, can be seen as independent sculptures in their own right, like spatial versions of Duchamps' readymades." Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, *Cream 3: Contemporary Art in Culture; 10 Curators, 100 Contemporary Artists, 10 Source Artists* (London: Phaidon, 2003), 132.

Yet, in spite of this synthetic description, Erlich is not always where we expect to find him. His work challenges and resists homogenizing interpretations.

Erlich the Familiar

Let us begin with the familiar Erlich. The American audience may remember *Swimming Pool*, on view at MoMA PS1 from 2008 to 2010, in which Erlich created an illusive swimming pool that the visitor could experience both from above and from within, without getting wet. The work played with the senses and stimulated semiotic parallels. With René Magritte in mind one could say, This was not a pool! Erlich's magnificent sculptural work engaged with familiarity and perception. Viewed from above, the visitor had the strange surprise of seeing people walking while underwater, or appearing to swim while walking. Upon reaching the floor below, in search of an answer to this dreamlike vision, the visitor discovered that a small door led inside the pool, and that he or she could become the person who was seen from above.

The source of the illusion was swiftly discovered: the water was not filling the pool, but instead three inches of water was atop a layer of acrylic. The illusion was precisely the point of departure for a theatrical experience, one that would complete the work. Like Federico Fellini's films, in which the set design is made visible—as, for example in the movie *Casanova* (1976), when a large wavy plastic fabric theatrically mimics the waters of Venice—Erlich doesn't hide the artifice behind the illusion: "I think," he says, "that revealing the trick is crucial. That revelation transforms the 'deception' into something positive. I want the spectator to think and discover. Following the thread of this 'lie' is what brings the gimmick into metaphysical and philosophical areas."[3]

To better understand the importance of Erlich's words, we may recall a passage by the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan on trompe-l'oeil and the capacity of art to engage in the world of ideas:

> What is it that attracts and satisfies us in *trompe-l'oeil*? When is it that it captures our attention and delights us? At the moment when, by a mere shift of our gaze, we are able to realize that the representation does not move with the gaze and that it is merely a *trompe-l'oeil*. For it appears at that moment as something other than it seemed, or rather it now seems to be that something else. The picture does not compete with appearance, it competes with what Plato designates for us beyond appearance as being the Idea. It is because

[3] Erlich, in "A Conversation between Leandro Erlich and Cecilia Fajardo-Hill," 6.

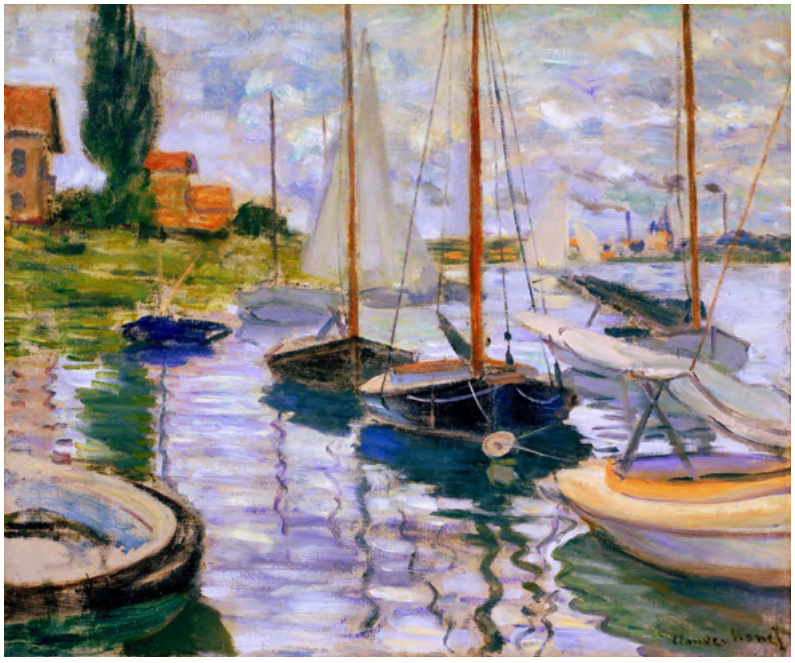
> the picture is the appearance that says it is that which gives the appearance that Plato attacks painting, as if it were an activity competing with his own.[4]

As Lacan explains, the power of trompe-l'oeil is less about its capacity to create the illusion of a real thing than the possibility to generate ideas. Trompe-l'oeil allows art to surpass the idea of imitation. By discovering the illusion, the viewer enters in a process of thinking. In light of this, we can say that Erlich's works and trompe-l'oeil act in a similar way: they do not simply copy reality and ordinary scenes, but instead they give the viewer the key to unveil the illusion, and thus to question the ordinary and join the artist in the interrogation. The ability to spark intellectual activity may also explain why many of Erlich's works can be understood universally.

Swimming Pool—La Pileta in Argentine Spanish— was initially created for the exhibition Core 1999 at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, before traveling in 2001 to Italy for the 49th Venice Biennale, where Leandro Erlich and Graciela Sacco represented Argentina. After its exhibition in Venice the work was permanently installed at the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art in Kanazawa (Japan) and inaugurated in 2004. Erlich envisioned three editions on different continents, and a new permanent version was recently installed in the Museum Voorlinden in Wassenaar (Netherlands). Swimming pools are a reference common to many cultures—while not everyone can afford them, most people know about them. They are "ordinary objects," and this probably explains why the Japanese used an image of *Swimming Pool* for the cover of their exhibition catalogue entitled *The Ordinary*? Erlich's work offered an experience familiar to visitors in many parts of the world. The Japanese, like the Americans and the Italians, easily understood it. But, ultimately, it is the capacity to stimulate interrogation everywhere that makes the work universal.

Port of Reflections, the new work that is presently showcased at the Neuberger Museum of Art, can be seen as a continuation and the evolution of Erlich's ingenious use of trompe l'oeil. Like the *Swimming Pool,* it departs from a common object understood by all: the boat. A source of fascination for numerous artists, boats embody the possibility of multiple destinations; they can take you to unknown islands, or present you with the infinity of the horizon. In the water a boat travels with its alter ego, the shadows that follow it through its journey. Its reflections are hard to pin down as they vary during the course of a day. Erlich ventures to capture a fleeting experience, just as the Impressionists before him sought to grasp the constant movement visible in nature. Claude Monet, for

[4] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998), 112.



Claude Monet
Sailboats on the Seine at Petit-Gennevilliers, 1874
Oil on canvas
21¼ x 25¾ (54 x 65.4 cm)
Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco
Gift of Bruno and Sadie Adriani
1962.23

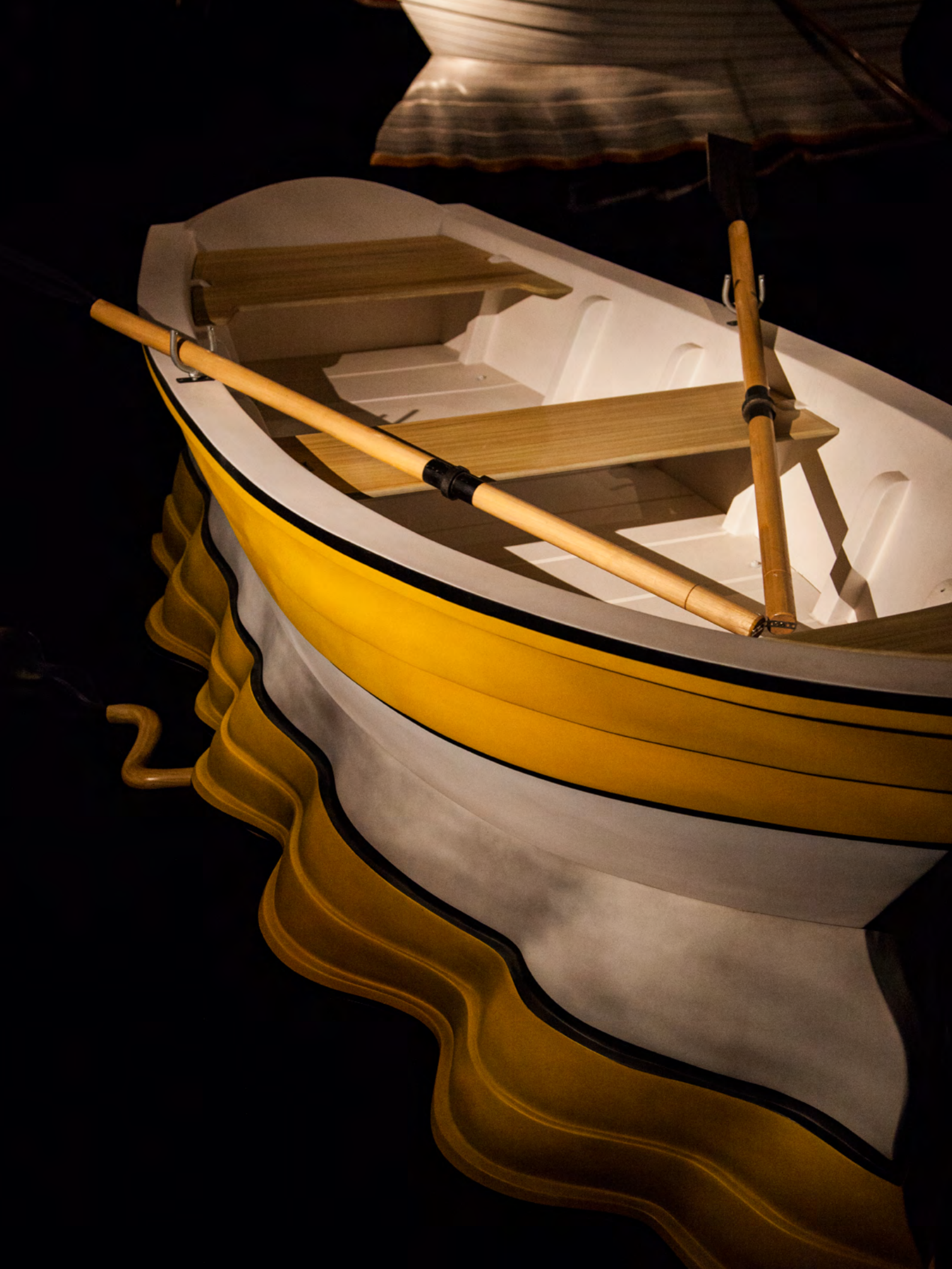
example, painted several boat scenes in Argenteuil, where the colorful and fluctuating reflection of the vessel appears on the water. In *Sailboats on the Seine at Petit-Gennevilliers* (1874), he painted his impression of an actual daytime view, in which appearances change constantly with the passage of time and through natural motion, not only of the water but also of the clouds as they are blown by the wind. Erlich's *Port of Reflections* seems to combine the ideas of both time elapsing and spatial displacement. However, the viewer soon understands that he or she is in front of a trompe-l'oeil: the rippled reflections of the railing and boats are in fact built elements, as solid as the boats themselves. Just as in the *Swimming Pool*, there is no tangible water, that is, the essential missing element, precisely what lies behind the existence of boats. Boats were invented for water—without it they simply become strange forms. Erlich thus brings the boat out of its expected context, subtracting the source of its existence.

By placing these boats specifically inside a museum, the decontextualization may recall a passage from Gabriel García Márquez in *Love in the Time of Cholera*, when a boat is found in the middle of the jungle, miles away from water. However, unlike García Márquez's stranded boat, Erlich's constructions do move. The use of motors to activate them greatly accentuates the illusion. Along with the absence of a viewer's own reflection, the apparent animation of these boats from within is perhaps the most phantasmagorical element in the piece.

Erlich the Argentine

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

Before his installations in Venice, New York, and Japan, one of Erlich's first important conceptual projects was rooted in Argentina's main urban center: the city of Buenos Aires. Originated in 1994, this work was ambitious for a twenty-year-old artist. His idea was to create a steel replica of the city's Obelisco (Obelisk), the national monument that stands in the center of the city on one of its most prestigious avenues. Erlich's replica would be transported to the periphery, to a historical neighborhood called La Boca. From a social perspective this audacious project challenged the city's iconic symbol, while forcing elite



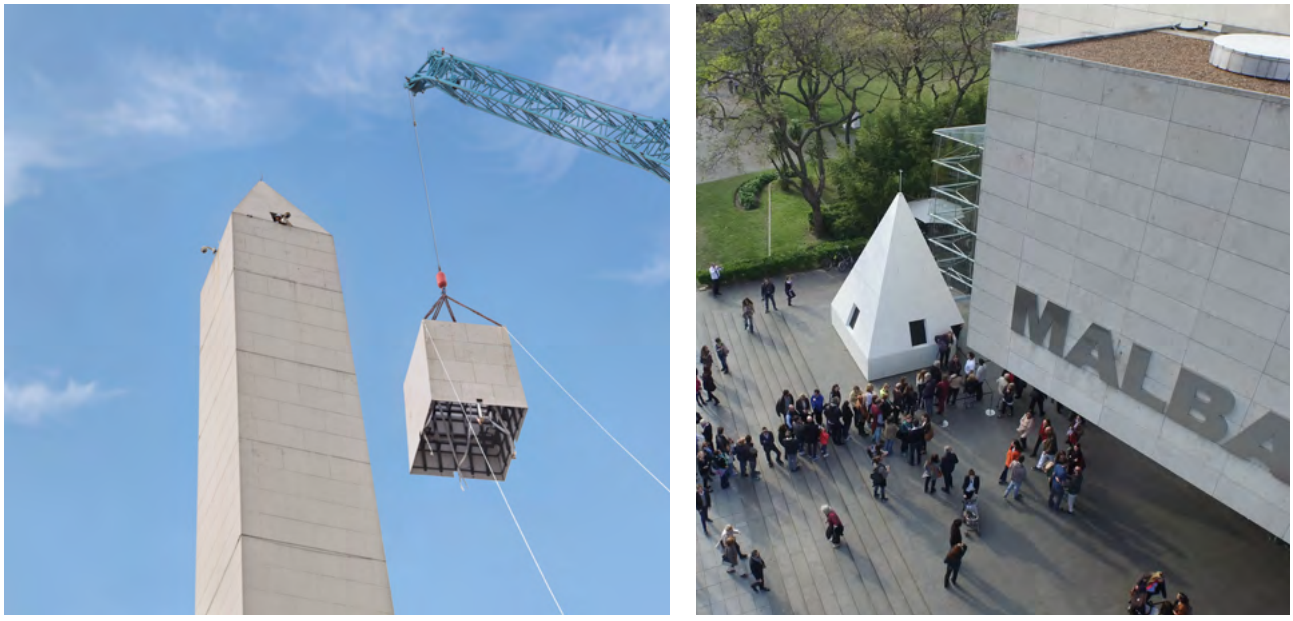
Leandro Erlich
Obelisco project at La Boca, 1994
Photograph from the artist's archive
Courtesy Leandro Erlich Studio

society to turn its gaze toward another part of the city. Erlich has acknowledged that though the original plans for his *Obelisco* were never completed: "It was the beginning of my conceptual period . . . It was what allowed me to access my language, which has to do directly with space and architecture—the latter being connected to my own life, since I come from a family of architects."[5]

This project is important to consider because it crystalizes most of the elements that would define Erlich's works over the next two decades: displacement, doubling, the nature of the gaze, and preconceptions about how and where things are supposed to be. Erlich's concept of the *Obelisco* also contained a social dimension because it played with urban sites where people live—the work was not intended for a museum but for a peripheral neighborhood—and invited people to interact with it, to visit the site and look differently at a monument usually accepted as the city's icon. In a way, this unfinished work paved the way for the dozens of new projects to come, all of which manifest Erlich's interest in architecture and urbanism. The project also offered the surprising and ludic effect found in future works: the city would suddenly awake to find itself with two national monuments, generating a sense of the uncanny that would give way to humor and discussion. The unfinished *Obelisco* thus tells us about the origin of the artist's playful and positive nature, as well as his commitment to people and the places where they live. The project itself also has an implicit historical dimension, as it invites us to rethink the ways in which a city or a nation engages with its past. Erlich has explained that the original Obelisco, which was built in 1936 to commemorate the city of Buenos Aires, would perhaps have had greater relevance if situated in the neighborhood of La Boca, where the artist intended to place his replica, than to its location in the center of the city: "The dock in La Boca has been more important to the subsequent history of the city . . . It is believed that Parque Lezama, which is not far from La Boca, was where the first settlers set up camp."[6]

While the *Obelisco* in La Boca was never realized, after several years abroad Erlich returned to Buenos Aires and decided to re-engage with the city's icon, in front of which visitors from around the world pose for pictures or selfies.

[5] Quoted in Elena Oliveras, "Leandro Erlich: Mirages in the Everyday," *ArtNexus* (Bogotá) 7, no. 70 (September/October 2008): 73.
[6] Leandro Erlich in Agustin Pérez Rubio, "Interview with Leandro Erlich," in *La Democracia del Símbolo*, ed. Socorro Giménez Cubillos (Buenos Aires: MALBA, 2015), 166.



Leandro Erlich
La Democracia del Símbolo (The Democracy of the Symbol), 2015
Public installation produced by MALBA—The Latin American Art Museum of Buenos Aires
Photo © Sebastián Diez
Courtesy Leandro Erlich Studio

Erlich would call his new project *La Democracia del Símbolo* (The Democracy of the Symbol; 2015). It consisted of a box placed over the top of the 220-foot-high monument to create the illusion that the pyramidal apex had been cut off. Built for the occasion, a replica of the tip was brought to MALBA, the Latin American Art Museum of Buenos Aires, a few miles away from the monument. This pyramidal structure had a door that allowed visitors to enter and enjoy the sights of the city through digital screens, as if they were looking out from the top of the monument. The work challenged the authority of the imposing structure, bringing its height within the visitor's reach and giving access to the privileged views that could be seen from above. In contrast to Paris's Eiffel Tower, the monument in Buenos Aires was not built to be entered or climbed on. Erlich's title, "The Democracy of the Symbol," could not be better chosen. We might look more deeply into the symbolic meaning behind this work, which created the illusion that the Buenos Aires Obelisco had lost its crown, that it had been decapitated and that the head, as during the French Revolution, was then shown in the public space so everyone could witness the event. France has a similar monument, the Luxor Obelisk, covered with hieroglyphs and standing in the center of the Place de la Concorde, a "gift" from Egypt in gratitude for Jean-François Champollion's achievement in deciphering the ancient hieroglyphic writing system. While the French monument proclaims to the world the power of the new republic, it also hides the secrets of the sanguinary Egyptian campaign by Napoleon and the violence of the French Revolution.[7] The architect who designed the Obelisco in Buenos Aires may have had

[7] This monument was erected precisely in the center of what was previously called the Place de la Révolution, from which the statue of Louis XV had been removed in the eighteenth century, to be replaced by the guillotine where Louis XVI and other royalists were decapitated, as were, ultimately, a

Leandro Erlich
Site of *La Democracia del Símbolo (The Democracy of the Symbol)*,
Buenos Aires, 2015
Photo © Sebastián Diez
Courtesy Leandro Erlich Studio

the French example in mind. In both cases, the monument expresses nationalist ambitions and is placed in the center of the city on a main avenue: on the Champs-Élysées in Paris, and at the junction of Corrientes and 9 de Julio in Buenos Aires. Both monuments were erected within the context of an emerging republic in search of harmony. The obelisk in Buenos Aires was built over the church of St. Nicholas of Bari, where the Argentine flag was allegedly hoisted for the first time.[8] Also similar to the structure in Paris, the Argentine obelisk has inscriptions: celebrating not just the raising of the flag, but paeans to the national capital, and a poem by Fernandéz Moreno dedicated to the monument. In recent decades, however, the Obelisco has received new inscriptions, tagged with graffiti from people expressing their unhappiness with the authorities who built a fence around its base to deter vandalism. Nevertheless, as with the Place de La Concorde, which means "place of resolution," the location of the Obelisco in Buenos Aires can be seen as a place of pacification between opposing forces. The critic Dan Cameron notes that since its erection the obelisk has functioned as a rallying point for a nation that has been independent from Spain for just over a hundred years: "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

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number of former revolutionaries. The spot was later renamed the Place de la Concorde in honor of the peace agreement after the turmoil of the revolution, and the Luxor Obelisk eventually replaced the guillotine, transforming the site into a place of national glory in the center of the city.

[8] For a complete historical overview, see Christian Ferrer's essay, "Vertical: The City and Emblems of Power," which recalls, among other things, the symbolic nature of erected monuments, including pyramids, and their relation to the history of Buenos Aires and the erection of the Obelisco. In Giménez Cubillos, *La Democracia del Símbolo*, 127–51.

struggles for power."[9] And as Christian Ferrer points out, "Once embedded, a construction of such magnitude is no longer the domain of its builders or the city government that commissioned its construction. It is at the mercy of the judgment and fantasy of the public that gathers around it or recalls it from having walked by . . . While at first the Obelisco may have been an intruder, it ended up a beloved if unlikely outbreak of family love."[10] Erlich's "decapitation" of the Obelisco seems precisely to question the imaginary and symbolic relation that individuals and families create around the compelling icon. On a psychoanalytic level, we may suggest that it also brings to mind the castration complex, and the need to eliminate the powerful father. But perhaps we are going too far for this essay. Let us end this section by noting that Erlich's title, "The Democracy of the Symbol," may be read as a challenge to power by desacralizing and democratizing its icons.

Erlich the French, Looking at India

Let us now turn to Monsieur Erlich, this time a French artist. After living for several years in New York, in 2011 Erlich—who had previously lived in and created several important works in France—was invited to Paris to participate in *Paris-Delhi-Bombay* at the Centre Pompidou. The exhibition's goal was to explore "Indian society through the eyes of Indian and French artists . . . to promote communication between the two cultures, establishing new and lasting links," and posed the question: "how is India seen by Indian and French artists?"[11]

For *Paris-Delhi-Bombay,* Erlich metamorphosed into a French artist looking at India. Through his work, entitled *Le Regard* (The Gaze), he invited visitors to look inside a bourgeois apartment. At first, there was a sense of familiarity—this richly furnished apartment perfectly matched the setting of a wealthy neighborhood in Paris. Looking closer, you noticed a copy of the newspaper *Le Monde*, along with a woman's clothing scattered around the room, and saw that the bed was undone—as if the woman living there had just gotten up or awakened from a dream. Everything seemed "normal." But suddenly, as you were about to turn around, you noticed something awkward about the scene. While one of the windows opened onto the streets of Paris, the second window "opened" onto a busy street that was not in Paris, but in Bombay!

The catalogue of the exhibition explains that "the spectator becomes an actor while unconsciously adopting the role of a voyeur by looking out the windows onto another world, without being seen. The windows constitute frames, limits and transitions. Erlich thus questions our relationship to our surroundings: individual/

[9] Dan Cameron, "A Room at the Top," in ibid., 157.
[10] Ferrer, "Vertical," 130.
[11] http://www.thukralandtagra.com/paris-delhi-bombay.

crowd, interior/exterior, private space/public space."[12] I would add that it is his ability to move from place to place like a chameleon that allows Erlich to create a space where two diametrically opposed realities, Paris and Bombay, collide. This is indeed what surprises us, the sudden realization that there is an intruder in the comforting image. Who is this intruder? It is a person from another part of the world whom privileged society would prefer to keep distant. This subversion is created through the ability of another intruder, the Argentinian artist playing the French looking at India.

Erlich and the Political Present

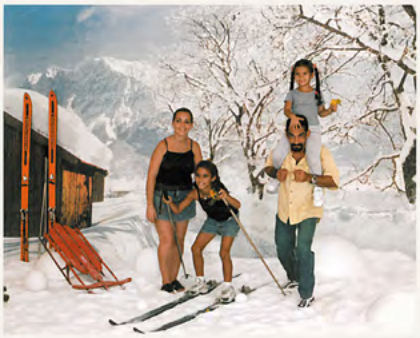
For Erlich, the art of clashing realities did not begin in Paris. We have seen that the same juxtaposition was also embodied in his initial *Obelisco* project, where two socioeconomic realities—humble and rich neighborhoods—entered into contact through a game of mirroring and duplication. Both works in a sense allow the visitor to experience a certain displacement and to wander into new geographies parallel to the reality that he or she is used to. In this regard, a text by the philosopher and theorist Michel Foucault may help illuminate Erlich's work. In 1967 Foucault used the term *heterotopia* to describe a place that is not bounded by its normal context, that allows displacement precisely through its capacity to contain and juxtapose different spaces: "The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible."[13] Erlich is thus the creator of heterotopic experiences that are capable of taking the visitor "elsewhere."

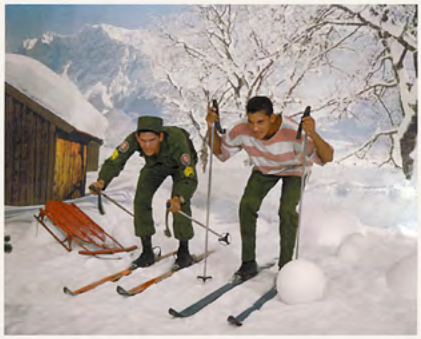
The juxtaposition of geographical and social realities in a single site was already visible in an early work by Erlich and Judi Werthein in Havana, titled *Turismo* (Tourism; 2000). The artist-duo created a stage with a snowy photographic background that allowed local Cubans to become part of the touristic elite enjoying skiing in Switzerland. Polaroids taken on the spot by the artists feature visitors posing with the clothes of their choice to make the image as vivid or lively as they pleased—in some cases emphasizing the paradox, in others trying to give veracity to the image. The work of course marked the contrast between the everyday life of Cubans, who cannot experience tourism, and people from wealthier parts of the world, who can afford to spend winters under the Caribbean sun. Rather than openly political, *Turismo* subverted reality through illusion and play, but it also brought to mind the paradoxes of reality; while Cubans can only experience skiing

[12] Leandro Erlich, quoted in Sophie Duplaix and Fabrice Bousteau, *Paris-Delhi-Bombay* (Paris: Éditions du Centre Pompidou, 2011), 38.
[13] Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias" (1967), *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité 5* (1984): 46–49: http://foucault.info/doc/documents/heterotopia/foucault-heterotopia-en-html.

through dream or play, privileged people far away—in the United Arab Emirates, for example, where class division is striking—can ski in the middle of the desert. The viewer was free to invest the work with a political meaning, though both artists stated that they did not want to convert the work into a manifesto: "We were aware of the reality of life in Cuba," they explained, "and from the very beginning we were also aware of the fact that a political meaning could be ascribed to any proposal in Havana. It was important for us to generate an opportunity within Cuban reality in which we could underline the everyday reality of the people without creating a political manifesto."[14] Their stance probably explains why they avoided speaking about Che Guevara—one of the island's most iconic figures—while in Cuba. After all, El Che, like Erlich, was also born in Argentina.

Looking at Erlich's long trajectory, one may also wonder why none of his works echo Argentina's tragic history in the last decades of the twentieth century. Between the 1960s and the 1980s, South American countries were dominated by dictatorial regimes and Argentina was no exception. From 1966 to 1973 and again from 1976 to 1983, the country was ruled by the military. Erlich was born in Argentina in 1973, and raised by a generation that was profoundly affected by the dictatorship. However, he is less interested in Argentine history or politics than in the everyday, in ordinary scenes, in people. For Andrés G. Duprat, who wrote about Erlich's work in Venice, "He's an artist who recreates in his work the ideological vacuum that Argentina suffers since, precisely, the last military dictatorship, and he chooses, deliberately, to concentrate on everyday icons and make them inside his own space."[15] In other words, Erlich seems more concerned with the present than with reexamining the past. It is not that he is apolitical or ahistorical, but that he is most interested in opening a dialogue with people today, in a synchronic manner.





Leandro Erlich in collaboration with Judi Werthein
"Familia Ramos", "Soldados Michael y Yordis"
From *Turismo (Tourism)*, 2000. Photography studio, artificial snow, ski equipment, sleigh, and Polaroid photographs
Dimensions variable
7th Havana Biennial
© Leandro Erlich Studio and Judi Werthein

Erlich the Unfamiliar Familiar

Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, devoted years of study to the unconscious and was the author of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, *The Ego and the Id*, and *The Future of an Illusion*—all titles that could well be used for Erlich's works. With *Das Unheimliche* (translated as *The Uncanny*), Freud entered the

[14] Judi Werthein and Leandro Erlich, *Turismo: La Habana, Cuba* (New York: Kent Gallery, 2001), 3.
[15] Andrés G Duprat, "Leandro's Pool in Venice," in *Argentina: La Biennale di Venezia 49; Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte; Leandro Erlich/Graciela Sacco* (Venice: Marsilio, 2001), 35.

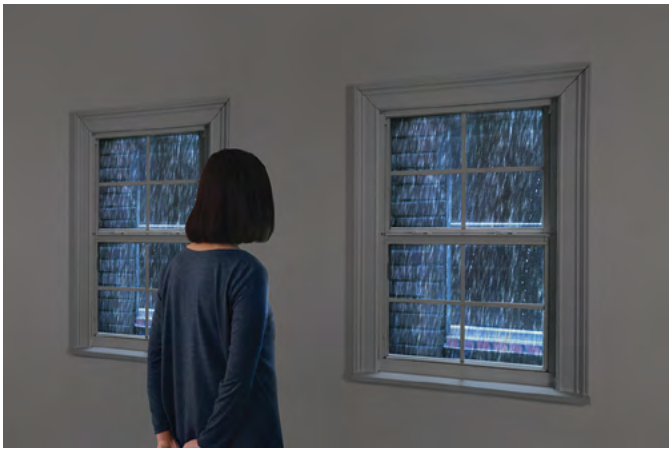
field of aesthetics to explore fantasy literature.[16] While Freud acknowledges that "intellectual uncertainty" is an element of the uncanny, he asserts that it is only one aspect.[17] Through a lengthy analysis that begins with dictionary definitions of the word *uncanny*, followed by examples extracted from literature, Freud demonstrates that one of the main characteristics of the uncanny (*Unheimlich* in German) concerns its relation to the familiar (*Heimlich*). Rather than opposing unknown and known, fiction and reality, the uncanny for Freud is profoundly rooted in the familiar; it is the hidden aspect of something habitual that suddenly comes to light. If the bedroom, the apartment, the family, or the nation are associated with the familiar and the protective, they also have the potential to become unfamiliar and uncanny. Jacques Lacan subsequently developed a similar concept called in French *eximité*, and translated in English as "extimacy." For Lacan, extimacy is the intimate that suddenly becomes visible and therefore produces an uncanny feeling. One would only wish that Freud and Lacan had seen the work of Erlich, who is able to materialize and magnify the qualities of the uncanny through his sculptural installations. With *The Elevator* (1995), the artist produced an inversion that made the inside visible from the outside. With this clever work, Erlich playfully overturned the rules imposed by the organizers of the Premio Braque competition at the Banco Patricios Foundation, which stipulated that all of the works submitted must fit within its elevator. "This constraint seemed absurd," Erlich later said, "but I was motivated to create a work that measured exactly that; on the one hand it accepted the constraint, but on the other it questioned the interior/exterior relationship. The button panel, the handlebar, the mirror, and the sign with the maximum load and capacity were on the exterior side."[18]

The uncanny element in *The Elevator* derived from the fact that the inner, private, and comfortable space—where one may feel hidden—became open to voyeurism. There was also an implicit duplication, which for Freud was another source of the uncanny. As Erlich explained: "Through the door fence, one could see a set of mirrors that created the sensation of depth, as if the viewer were peeking into an interior that would normally contain him/her."[19]

Erlich's work *Rain*, shown at the Whitney Biennial in 1999, also featured an inversion between outside and inside. False windows containing real running water,

[16] Sigmund Freud, "The 'Uncanny,'" (1919), trans. Alix Strachey, http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/freud1.pdf (p. 8).
[17] In referring to the element of intellectual uncertainty, Freud was responding to Ernst Jentsch, author of *Zur Psychologie des Umheimlichen* (*On the Psychology of the Uncanny*; 1906). Regarding Jentsch's assertion, Freud noted: "On the whole he did not get beyond this relation of the uncanny to the novel and unfamiliar, he ascribes the essential factor of the production of the feeling of the uncanny to intellectual uncertainty; so the uncanny would always be that in which one does not know where one is, as it were. It is not difficult to see that this definition is incomplete, and we will therefore try to proceed beyond the equation of unheimlich with unfamiliar." Freud, "The 'Uncanny,'" 2.
[18] Erlich in Oliveras, "Leandro Erlich: Mirages in the Everyday," 72.
[19] Ibid.

with shower heads and a pump system, created the illusion that it was raining outside, when in reality it was raining inside, within the limits of this boxed environment. "I'm interested in the background places that hold our experiences and emotions on a daily basis, even though we are unaware of them," Erlich later said. "For *Rain*, I looked for a particular mood: a nostalgic scene, where the viewer participated in the act of contemplation."[20] His work therefore unveils the emotions that architecture contains and conveys .



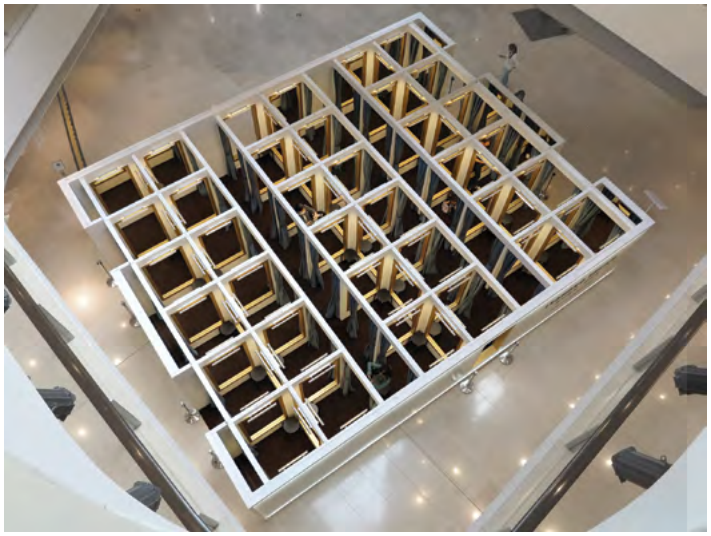
Leandro Erlich
Rain, 1999
Metal structure, water circulation system, sound, and strobe light
96 x 55 x 19¾ in. (244 x 140 x 50 cm)
Whitney Biennial 2000, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
© Martin Sichetti. Courtesy Leandro Erlich Studio

Freud argued that the writer is able to generate uncanny feelings more successfully than those experienced in real life because he or she can recreate an entire scene, and decide to remain within or leave the realm of fiction.[21] Erlich also selects his worlds of representation, but his fiction always has one foot in reality; not only is his work frequently featured in a real context—an actual neighborhood, a street, a museum, a site in Venice—but what he represents always originates, as we have seen, in the everyday.

In contrast to the writer who may keep the reader in the unknown, Erlich in all cases offers the viewer the possibility to test what he is seeing. Freud recalls the example of peacefully traveling on a train, seated next to a window, in a half dream state: "I was sitting alone in my wagon-lit compartment when a more than usually violent jolt of the train swung back the door of the adjoining washing-cabinet, and an elderly gentleman in a dressing-gown and a traveling cap came in. I assumed that in leaving the washing-cabinet, which lay between the two compartments, he had taken the wrong direction and come into my compartment by mistake. Jumping up with the intention of putting him right, I at once realized to my dismay that the intruder was nothing but my own reflection in the looking-glass on the open door."[22]

For Freud the surprise at seeing his own image in the train was not precisely the source of an uncanny feeling, because he was not frightened. He was simply surprised by his double, and the negative feeling he experienced was generated by the impression that someone had intruded on his privacy. Freud admitted he had simply failed to recognize the double as such during the first few moments. But he also acknowledged that some primitive and long forgotten collective fears

[20] Leandro Erlich in Paul Laster, "Interview: Leandro Erlich," *Artkrush*, October 29, 2008. Text avai-lable at: http://www.skny.com/attachment/en/56d5695ecfaf342a038b4568/Press/56d-5698dcfaf342a038b61fe.
[21] "The story-teller has this license among others, that he can select his worlds of representation so that it either coincides with the realities we are familiar with or departs from them in what particulars he pleases." Freud, "The 'Uncanny,'" 18.
[22] Ibid., 17n23.



Leandro Erlich
Changing Rooms, 2013
Wood, frames, mirrors, stools, curtains, and lights
Dimensions variable
Shanghai International Art Festival, 2013
© Justin Jin. Courtesy Leo Xu Projects

suppressed by modern society —superstition, the evil eye, the return of dead people—could nevertheless reemerge in the individual without warning and thus create a sense of the uncanny: "Is it not possible, though, that [my] dislike . . . was a vestigial trace of that older reaction which feels the double to be something uncanny?"[23]

Faced with Erlich's works I do not think that one feels fright, dislike, or even disillusion, because the encounter is profoundly amusing and inspiring. Freud's reaction on the train is similar to what one may experience in, for example, *Changing Rooms*, a series of small connected spaces. The visitor who feels at ease will be surprised, or perhaps amused, to discover that each changing room is open on one side, and allows someone else to see inside what was expected to be a private space. But once I understand the "trick," I may want to move to another changing room in search of a second experience, this time fully conscious of the context. Then again, I might turn my head, look into a mirror and suddenly meet with myself. And if I look the other way, I may face a sudden void, or an infinite multiplication of mirrors created by reflecting mirrors. The work constitutes a complex labyrinth within which the uncanny is quickly replaced by amusement.

Erlich, Us, and the Other

Erlich's use of mirrors and trompe-l'oeil recalls the explorations of seventeenth-century Flemish and Dutch artists who reproduced convex mirrors in their paintings as a means of expanding the work to include a second representation of perspective aimed at further engaging with the viewer's reality. The mirror allowed the introduction of new characters not present within the immediate space of the room represented in the painting; as in Erlich's installations, the fiction in the work of art encouraged a dialogue with reality.

Erlich used a device similar to that for *Changing Rooms* in the *Elevator Maze* (2011), which connected several elevators, playing with mirrors and illusionary mirrors that were in fact cavities opening onto another elevator. Like a changing room, an elevator is a small space, but it lacks the same privacy since at any floor the solitude can be interrupted by the unexpected irruption of another, or others. Here again, rather than a feeling of disillusion, the viewer is amazed by the clever

[23] Ibid.

conception of the experience, and the artist's frank expression of the truth. In all cases the artist offers the possibility to test reality, as Freud would say, and that is where his work departs from traditional uncanny fiction, which in Freud's terms does not allow analysis. Erlich's installations require deliberation: "I think that the duplicitous power of mirrors creates a certain magic in both the physical and the conceptual world," he has remarked. "It is fascinating how the simple fact of the reflection can become so complex in the world of ideas."[24] We may turn back here to Foucault's text on heterotopia, in which he addresses the question of the mirror and its powerful capacity for displacement, at the edge of reality and fiction:

Leandro Erlich
Elevator Maze, 2011
Mixed media installation
Dimensions variable
Sean Kelly Gallery, New York
© Sean Kelly Gallery

> From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there. Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am. The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there.[25]

In one of his first works, *The Living Room* (1998), Erlich created the illusion of a room reflected in a mirror; in reality, there were two rooms: the first one opened through a rectangular void in the wall onto a second—an exact duplicate. Everything had its double except the visitor, who could not see himself or herself. This work was less open to experimentation and did not stimulate social encounters as did *Changing Rooms* and *Elevator Maze*. Instead, extrapolating from Freudian theory, we could say that it played on the loss of ego in a novel way, swallowing the visitor into the landscape of the room.

The Living Room inspired another work, *The Ballet Studio* (2002), which again confronted the visitor with an empty "mirror" in which everything seemed replicated except him. However, while in *The Living Room* the space and its false reflection were static, *The Ballet Studio* was animated, featuring performers

[24] Erlich in "A Conversation between Leandro Erlich and Cecilia Fajardo-Hill," 6.
[25] Foucault, "Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias," 46–49.

whose actions were symmetrically mimicked by the performers opposite them, creating the impression that the first group was reflected in a mirror. For Freud, "an uncanny effect is often and easily produced by effacing the distinction between imagination and reality, such as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us as reality, or when a symbol takes over the functions and significance of the thing it symbolizes, and so on."[26] In *The Ballet Studio*, we think, we imagine, that we are in front of a natural reflection when in fact we are faced with a theatrical effect that performs the reflection.

Psychology has shown us the ways in which as humans we define ourselves through our relations to others. In what Lacan calls the "mirror phase," the child discovers himself in the mirror with the support of his parents or someone else who helps him understand his place in the world, where he stands. Mirrors remain important in adult life. The loss of one's reflection in Erlich's work seems to play off of what is called "role confusion," resulting in a sort of fusion with the other. The sense of losing one's identity will furthermore be increased if someone unknown observes the visitor. Erlich's work, in a way, put into action all these elements.[27]

Erlich and the Psychoanalyst's Office

The psychoanalytic dimension in Erlich's work seems undeniable. Argentina, like France, has been fertile terrain for the practice of psychoanalysis, and it is not surprising to discover that one of his works, developed while the artist was in France, was entitled *Le Cabinet du Psychanaliste* (The Psychoanalyst's Office, 2005). "The space of *Le Cabinet*," recalls the critic Elena Oliveras, "was also divided into identical-size halves. To one of them, viewers had no access; it reproduced in painstaking detail a psychoanalyst's office, from the couch to the framed photograph of Freud. Separated by a glass panel was another space, a dark room that the viewer entered; there they saw their mirror image inside the office. It was a kind of phantasmic 'double' reflected on the glass, accompanied by the equally phantasmic images of other viewers."[28]

Mirror, reflection, illusion—all of Erlich's arsenal is deployed to create the uncanny (phantasmagorical) effect that occurs in *The Psychoanalyst's Office*, under the vigilance of Freud, who also invites himself to the celebration through his photograph on the wall. One wonders how this piece would work in a non-Western country where psychoanalysis has not been developed? Is this the reason that in Korea, using the same reflective device as in *Le Cabinet*, Erlich

[26] Freud, "The 'Uncanny,'" 15.
[27] I would like to thank my mother-in-law, Alice Altini, who has been practicing psychoanalysis in Bologna for nearly forty years, for her inputs on this section.
[28] Oliveras, "Leandro Erlich: Mirages in the Everyday," 74.

decided to create what he titled the *Chairman's Room* (2012)? In conversation with Erlich, he explained that the idea behind that work directly related to the context: ". . . psychoanalysis in Asia is something completely exotic. I needed to do another version using a similar device. Now, the work as a whole is universal, but the composition of the room for *Chairman's Office* comes from the context; the Foundation [in Korea] where it was shown had conserved the room of the chairman, with all the furniture; it was a kind of space of memory. I used the same device as in the psychoanalyst's office, but it was site specific in the way that it related to Korea. Of course, it also invites a story of power . . ."[29] While a "Psychoanalyst's Office" would not be successful in Korea, the idea behind it was exportable; *Chairman's Room* created a similar experience and conveyed the same idea of authority.

Erlich the Universal Optimist

To melancholy, Erlich opposes the game. And anyone who experienced *Bâtiment* (Building) in Paris (2004), or its later versions, site-specifically developed around the world—*Tsumari House* in Japan (2006), *Bank* in Ukraine (2012), *Building* in Buenos Aires (2012), and *Dalston House* in London (2013)—will understand that the joy is contagious. The first installation and its subsequent adaptations incorporate the largest mirrors the artist has used. In *Bâtiment* the mirror reflected the facade of typical nineteenth-century Haussmannian architecture in Paris, and likewise, the other works also represented local architecture. In all cases, the reflection did not have its source in a real building but instead from a mock-up built on the ground. From a distance the visitor imagined that people were climbing on the building's exterior walls. Approaching closer, it became clear that the other visitors were actually on the floor. More than the feeling of terror the visitor might experience when seeing someone hanging from a second-floor window, he or she was pleasantly startled, and upon discovering that it was possible to enter the work, was taken by a feeling of amusement. Visitors were transformed into children, using their imagination to "play" with the work, to entertain those who were watching, and to pose for mind-boggling photos.

When I saw this work at the Centquatre in Paris, an art space dedicated to the young people in a working-class neighborhood with a significant immigrant population, both adults and children seemed thrilled by their participation. "My goal was to make the art accessible," Erlich stated. "It became clear to me that the project should engage common people not only art lovers."[30] In this sense, Erlich was not only successful but also revealed a refreshing optimism. His work lacks

[29] Leandro Erlich, phone interview with the author, New-York–Montevideo, September 28, 2016.
[30] Erlich in Laster, "Interview: Leandro Erlich."

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

any form of contempt or despair, and is open to all. Moreover, his interest in Freud may have provided him ways to understand the essence of affects in humans in general, beyond cultural differences. To evoke the child in a visitor, to awaken his curiosity, to make him temporarily lose his references, is probably the best strategy to reach everyone. Children feel amazement when they look into a closet or under a table, and staircases or elevators are always subjects of great interest. Erlich's works restore this sense of curiosity to the adult's gaze on ordinary things.

In contrast to other forms of conceptual art, in which the logic of the work seems bounded to a specific idea, and sometimes so reduced that an object is unnecessary, Erlich's sculptural works allow introspection and a myriad of interpretations. They also differ from immersive art, in which the participant is plunged into a phenomenological experience, with all the senses stimulated, and the bodily experience surpasses the intellectual. As we have seen, Erlich's installations are mostly based on the eye—the gaze—and their universal dimension originates in their capacity to stimulate both intellectual and emotional introspection in each subject, each visitor. Our intellectual curiosity begins the moment we seek an answer to the artist's "trick," when we search for a logical explanation of our experience. The emotional introspection emerges from deep feelings—the feeling of loneliness that might be felt underwater, the sense of nostalgia in front of a window on a stormy day. *Port of Reflections* is possibly one of the clearest examples of Erlich's ability to trigger both our intellect and our emotions. It is a subjective experience that everyone can enjoy, one that will stimulate curiosity and pleasure, but it will also awaken individual memories, nostalgia, desire, and a great deal of reflection!

A final word on the title of this essay. In German *Unheimlich*, which translates as "uncanny," takes on another meaning when combined with the word *E(h)rlich*, or "honest." *Unheimlich E(h)rlich* does not translate as "Uncanny Erlich" but suggests quite the opposite—here *Unheimlich* conveys the sense of "deep" or "profound." *Unheimlich E(h)rlich* thus means "truthful to your heart, deeply honest," which suits so well the essence of Leandro Erlich's work.[31]

I would like to thank my wife Alessandra Russo for her kind support and perceptive suggestions.

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[31] Translation by German historian Ann-Christin Doyen.