

LEANDRO ERLICH: THE WORLD AS REALITY AND REPRESENTATION

by Rodrigo Alonso

"And in the dreamer's dream, the dreamed one awoke..."

Jorge Luis Borges

AWAKENING TO THE EVERYDAY

From the outside, the gallery appears completely empty. The light blue color of the walls is not very usual, nor is it something so extraordinary as to discourage entering. Strange reflections on the walls, a luminous and undulating reverberation suggests that there is still something to be revealed.

Perplexity is, perhaps, the first sensation that assaults us, as soon as we cross the threshold. To *literally* enter the confines of a pool is an experience that can produce ambiguous sensations, but surely nothing linked to our everyday behavior. After the initial shock, we are astonished by a mixture of wonder and alienation, of pleasure and stupor, which is difficult to put into words.

The experience of entering Leandro Erlich's **La Pileta** [The Pool] (1998) is undoubtedly something that defies description in language. Despite being constructed like clockwork mechanisms, the works of this artist demand a first approach that is sensorial, immersive, that only later allows conceptual reflection or analysis on the mechanisms that produce this sense of alienation.

How is it possible not to evoke the oceanic sensation of the color-field paintings by Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman, that submission to the depths of aesthetic pleasure "here and now" that the latter fervently describes in his famous essay, "The Sublime is Now"? . How not to recall the sensorial experiments of Robert Irwin or James Turrell, the representatives of that American West Coast minimalism that Rosalind Krauss characterized as "the Californian sublime"?

In an article first published in the magazine *Artforum*, "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde", the philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard wonders, regarding the aforementioned essay by Newman: "How can one think of the sublime as a "Here" or a "Now"? Is not the sublime something, beyond normal experience, something that cannot be shown or presented?" . His answer is that the experience of the "here and now", which should be one of the most everyday experiences, is, in fact, completely unusual. Nothing is stranger today than the awareness of living "here and now".

In Leandro Erlich's works this awareness of the "here and now" greatly precedes its subsequent reception by the intellect. Even when in the end we discover the artifice, the magnificent *trompe l'oeil* that veils a reality that is perhaps no less illusory than the constructed one, there is an initial affirmation by the viewer in his own sensorial data that induces that "suspension of disbelief" that Borges demanded for the true work of art.

The effect of this initial shock deserves some commentary. Although it was criticized by Theodor Adorno in his *Aesthetic Theory* owing to the danger of submerging the viewer in sensations that annul his critical awareness, Walter Benjamin hailed it as one of the most original contributions of film to contemporary artistic perception, an effect that continued the avant-garde practices of Dadaism .

Nonetheless, our days are no longer that of Adorno or Benjamin, nor of Dadaism. The media culture in which we live has accustomed us to the effects of shock, which are apparent when sensationalism is resorted to as a means of attracting the masses. In this context, the initial perplexity that **La Pileta** provokes has a very different significance. Whereas the Dadaists resorted to shock in order to upset the commonplace, contemporary artists tend to resort to it in order to *reaffirm* everyday experience, in order to exalt that “here and now” that is so distant from daily consciousness. In both cases, as Fredric Jameson has pointed out, there is a *disrealization* of the world that entails a sharp reflection upon reality. But what is the reality to which a work like **La Pileta** refers?

In a series of radio interviews, Claude Lévy-Strauss noted how impressionism oriented toward landscape painting at the precise moment in which they were disappearing as a vital space for inhabitants of the growing urban centers of the nineteenth century. In **La Pileta**, the experience of leisure, the indulgence of the senses and the pleasure of enjoyment similarly constitute sensations that are removed from the lives of inhabitants of contemporary metropolises, a consequence of the deterioration of urban life so characteristic of postindustrial societies.

THE LIMIT AND BEYOND

From the interior of **La Pileta**, and above our heads, floats a watery film behind which a space of imprecise limits is perceived. This indeterminacy of boundaries, added to a series of playful inversions (interior/exterior, above/below, inside/outside), largely characterizes the work of Leandro Erlich.

In 1995 Erlich was the recipient of the prestigious Premio Braque for **Ascensor** [Elevator]. This work consisted in the reproduction of an elevator cabin, with its inner and outer spaces inverted: on the outside the button panel and the typical decoration of an ordinary elevator was apparent, while on the inside a “virtual” infinite cable was portrayed through an interplay of mirrors.

The idea for the work was suggested by the guidelines for the contest itself. Those guidelines established the maximum dimensions for submissions which, in the case of objects, were 80 cm x 80 cm x 190 cm. Upon inquiring into the reasons for these specifications, Erlich got a very clear answer: they were the measurements of the elevator at the Fundación Banco Patricios building, the precise location where the award was to be presented. The work was already underway...

This story is revealing in more than one sense. Not only for the ingenuity with which the young artist literalized the arbitrariness of the allowed dimensions, but fundamentally because, inside the elevator, the work exceeded the limits through the specular effect of the mirrors. In this transgression of limits, the artist not only questioned the imposed rules but also the institutions that upheld them, opposing the freedom and imagination inherent to the act of artistic creation.

THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

Erlich’s attraction to optical effects attains a spectacular dimension in **EI Living** [The Living Room] (1999). The installation consists of a living room whose wall contains two openings: one is a mirror that reflects the room while the other is a window that shows, in the other

side, a room that is exactly the same but inverted, as if it were a mirror *in which the image of the viewer does not appear*.

In contrast to **La Pileta**, in this work the shock effect is rather sinister. In the story “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Terius”, Jorge Luis Borges put an upsetting sentence into the mouth of his friend, Adolfo Bioy Casares: “mirrors and the copulation are abominable, because they increase the number of men” . What is so abominable about reproduction? What is so upsetting about this empty room that reproduces a universe to which we are denied access?

In literature and myths mirrors seem to be linked to two extreme and opposing circumstances that may be synthesized in the myth of Narcissus and the legend of Count Dracula. In the myth, Narcissus loses his life by falling in love with his own image; in the legend, the absence of a reflection characterizes the Count as a being without life who does not belong to mortal world. These two extremes confront us with death or, at least, with its representation. In his “Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful”, Edmund Burke indicates the sense of self-preservation and the fear of death as the principal engines of the sublime . Confrontation with the disintegration of life induces a sensation that tends to confirm it, engendering the basis for our possible subliminal experience.

However, the uneasiness that this work provokes is not just limited to the absence of the mirror image, the one that constitutes the subject according to Lacanian theory. In addition, there is a tension between reality and representation - unfolded in a *trompe l’oeil* - that necessarily propose the instability of the world and an essential absence. “Instead of concerning for the essence of the model and its precise reconstruction -affirms Severo Sarduy- [the *trompe l’oeil*...] seems to be determined to produce its *effect*. And thereafter the strength of its subversion – to capture the surface, the skin, the outer wrapping, without passing through the central and founding, the Idea – and the aggressiveness aroused in the vindicators of essentialities by the strangeness of its theatricality *that functions as if in a vacuum*” . The vacuousness of this universe, represented as a mirror, points out to the latent vacuousness of that which serves as its model.

Sarduy continues: “This efficacy - that of making the non-existent visible - does not spring from the affirmation or apotheosis of a personality, of a style, but rather, on the contrary, from its maximum dissimulation, its cancellation: the more anonymous its execution and the less pronounced and visible its marks, the more effective the *trompe l’oeil* will be” . At the limits of deception, the work obviates its author, leaving the viewer before the upheaval of his perceptive universe. This latent depersonalization places Erlich in line with the Duchampian *ready-made* and its criticism of the author as the logical organizer of representation. As Hal Foster has stated referring to minimalist sculpture, “the death of the author is at the same time the birth of the viewer” , and in the end, he is the true target of **EI Living**.

The discovery of the trick produces an alienation effect in the Brechtian sense of the term. The work reveals the mechanisms through which it produces its significance only to induce the viewer to reflect upon the ideological basis of reality, upon the devices that build it up, and upon the spectacularized world.

Beyond its prime meaning, **EI Living** dramatizes what Jameson has characterized as the core of contemporary or post-industrial transnational societies: the fascination for reproduction machines which tend to reproduce everything, including the most immediate experiences . Nonetheless, Erlich avoids the mere surface of reproduction, in order to lead

us towards a *conscious* examination of our surroundings. As in the case of Jeff Wall's photography, the *mise en scène* encourages to critically reconsider the links between reality and representation, to sharpen our perception of the spontaneous and to inquire into the foundations of the spectacle.

Still, there is another occasion for estrangement. As Lacan affirms: "the world is an omnivoyeur but it is not an exhibitionist: it does not provoke our gaze. When it begins to provoke it, then the sensation of alienation also begins". The inverted room in **The Living** has an *independent gaze* from the viewer's; that gaze preexists him and transforms him into an actor of the "spectacle of the world", as stated by Merleau Ponty. This awareness of coexistence with another gaze is, perhaps, one of the more disturbing aspects of the piece.

The disarticulation of the gaze is also a constant in the work of the artist. In **Vecinos** [Neighbors] (1996), we are invited to peer through the eyehole of a door located in a 40 cm thick wall in order to observe what appears to be a corridor, several meters long, with doors, elevator, lights and even fire extinguishers. Our perception tricks us again. But at the same time, we are reminded that this entire theater exists only for the eye, the ultimate basis for the representation. The work *presupposes* a viewer who is also a voyeur. How can we not recall Marcel Duchamp's *Etant Donnes* in his appeal to the voyeurism of the viewer?

THEATER AND REAPPROPRIATION

Turismo [Tourism] (2000) was Leandro Erlich and Judi Werthein's contribution to the Seventh Biennial of La Havana, organized under the slogan, "One closer to the other." For many long days, a multitude of Cubans crowded before the installation in order to obtain a Polaroid photograph showing them in a snowy landscape, designed in the best Hollywood style.

In contrast to the previous works, here the staging is evident from the beginning. However, paradoxically, the artifice disappears *at the end*: the snowy photographs seem "real" or, in any case, they capture the prefabricated reality inherent to tourist pictures. But the main "realist" element of the piece was conceived by the participants themselves: a group of them came to the set with heavy clothing, despite the hot temperatures of the Cuban November, clearly exposing the high degree of participation that the works by Erlich arouse in his public.

Turismo excites a series of immediate interpretations. First, it introduces its participants to an experience to which few of them have access, not only because it does not snow in Cuba but moreover because the possibility of tourism is inaccessible for most of the population. Indeed, few people possess photographs inasmuch as the photographic mania of our capitalist societies is nonexistent on the island.

On the other hand, there is a reflection upon the way in which the media molds our relation to our surroundings. Photography - a producer of sensations that are so vivid that Walter Benjamin was moved to affirm that "the difference between the technique and magic is, of course, a historic variable" - exists today almost exclusively in terms of technique, as a standardized format of experience. Little remains of the initial magic, apart from those Cubans who, with their own imaginations and dreams, transformed the initial proposal into living experience.

In **Turismo** we are acutely aware that the relations between man and his surroundings are not fixed, but rather that they can be constantly reinvented. We are confronted with the instability of experience but at the same time, with the possibility of reappropriating it in a concrete and creative way. The artist himself does so in each of his works, albeit at the cost of numerous struggles and difficulties: it is sufficient to recall one of his first projects – never completed – consisting in building a second obelisk in Buenos Aires, in the neighborhood of La Boca, similar to the one that exists in the center of the city, a project that sought to modify the urban configuration of our town.

Throughout his work, Leandro Erlich dramatizes his own nonconformist spirit, no longer that of the young revolutionaries of the sixties, but rather one that is perhaps more modest but no less effective, that refuses to accept reality as it is rigidly offered to contemporary man. In his pieces the boundaries between reality and representation are confused, but not only to denounce the insidious construction of reality, but also to indicate the real possibilities of reappropriating experience through representation. His works give rise to estrangement, uneasiness, astonishment, reticence, confusion, suspicion. But almost never to indifference.

Translation: Peter Khan.