

Leandro Erlich's Port of Reflections
Helaine Posner

In a 2014 interview Leandro Erlich observed, "I became interested in perception as a way to question our sense of reality. I am not so much interested in illusion per se, in the sense of tricking or fooling peoples' perception, but I'm rather interested in illusion as a way of questioning reality."¹ For Erlich this inquiry is rooted in the ordinary. In installations based on the architecture of the everyday, such as staircases, elevators, swimming pools, building facades, gardens, and ports, he paradoxically turns inside out and upside down, challenging our senses and unsettling our expectations. His work serves to stimulate our consciousness and liberate our imagination. Erlich juxtaposes reality and fantasy, the playful and the profound, to build environments that exceed the bounds of logic, creating uncanny spaces in which multiple realities may coexist.

Erlich's visually striking interactive works disorient and amaze us. For example, in *Swimming Pool* (1999), one of the artist's best-known and most photogenic works, fully clothed visitors, viewed from a deck above, leisurely walk, talk, and breathe while seemingly submerged under water. In *Bâtiment* (2004), visitors seem to defy the laws of gravity, as they appear to scale the walls and hang from the balconies of a traditional French facade.² Our curiosity is aroused



Leandro Erlich
The Swimming Pool, 2004
Metal structure,
wood, Plexiglas, water,
and ladder
118 x 236½ x 137¾ in.
(300 x 600 x 350 cm)
21st Century Museum
of Contemporary Art,
Kanazawa
© Suzuki Rio, courtesy
Leandro Erlich Studio

¹ Quoted in "IM Interview Leandro Erlich," *Artikel OLYMPUS Photography Playground*, October 27, 2015, p. 3.

² Both *Swimming Pool* and *Bâtiment* have been exhibited internationally. *Swimming Pool* debuted in Core 1999 at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. The work was included in the 49th Venice Biennale, Fondaco dei Tedeschi via Rialto, in 2001 and was presented at MoMA PS1, Long Island City, New York, in 2008. It is included in the permanent collection of the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa, Japan. *Bâtiment* was shown as part of *La nuit blanche* in Paris in 2004 and was presented as *Dalston House* in London in 2013, commissioned by the Barbican Art Gallery.



as the tricks are revealed. The artist placed a large acrylic sheet, covered with inches of water, over an empty enterable space to create his fantastic *Swimming Pool*. A model of a building's facade, positioned on the ground and reflected in a large angled mirror above, generates the illusion in *Bâtiment*. According to the artist, discovering the mystery is an important aspect of his works, sparking a sense of wonder as the ordinary is transformed into something extraordinary.³

Port of Reflections, presented for the first time in North America at the Neuberger Museum of Art, is Erlich's most ambitious and poetic museum installation to date. Commissioned by the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Seoul (2014) and exhibited as *Port of Memories* at the Museo de la Universidad Nacional de Tres de Febrero in Buenos Aires (2016), *Port of Reflections* depicts a serene nighttime harbor in which five colorfully painted rowboats appear to float, gently rocking, as their reflections shimmer in the dark waters below. Once again, the artist blurs the boundary between reality and illusion, not merely to confuse or astound, but to encourage us to question how we perceive and relate to the world through ambiguous sensory data. For in *Port of Reflections*, the boats actually float in air, balanced atop metal poles, their subtle movements powered by motors. In fact, this port contains no water, and therefore, the boats cast no reflections; each element of the work has been fabricated, liquid has been made solid. Again, Erlich employs paradox and surprise to destabilize the familiar, transporting us to a dreamlike world that runs parallel to yet departs from our own, expanding our notions of the possible.

Like much of Erlich's work, *Port of Reflections* has a narrative, cinematic quality. The installation vividly evokes the port as a transitory space, a site of arrival and departure, of shelter, of nostalgia and longing, a place both physical and psychological. A melancholy mood prevails. We are reminded that all is fleeting, both as universal truth and as deeply personal fact. And though Erlich's work can be playful and experiential, it also may be contemplative and philosophical. As the artist has noted, "I have a feeling that our existence is ephemeral, just like a reflection. A reflection moves constantly and it's a fragment of a second in which an image is observed as it is. This work is about the interpretation of the ephemeral quality of our life and our attempt to grasp the moment."⁴

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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

³ Elena Oliveras, "Leandro Erlich: Mirages in the Everyday," *ArtNexus* (Bogotá) 7, no. 70 (September/October 2008): 71.

⁴ Quoted in Lee Woo-young, "Small Post Occupies Museum Space," *Korea Herald* online, November 5, 2014.