One Man's Roof Is Another Man's Swimming Pool
Dan Cameron

What is the purpose of illusion in art, and why is it important to us as a species to constantly fool ourselves by undermining the same perceptual tools that we use on a continual basis to keep us grounded in the world? Such questions invariably come to mind on the occasion of Argentine sculptor Leandro Erlich's first career survey exhibition in the United States, primarily because they underlie most of his artistic production. Moreover, because illusion in the broadest sense has always been one of the fundamental operations through which we experience art, we often encounter it in the form of a narrative arc that includes a moment when illusion stops being a point of departure and either leads us on to some loftier goal or becomes a species of simple optical trickery.

Starting in the mid-1990s, Erlich has gradually defined and perfected a singular artistic practice with deep roots in the field of large-scale installation-based art that grew out of Minimalism and Conceptual art in the 1970s and 1980s. Freeing themselves from the limits of having to develop their work as a succession of autonomous objects, a broad range of artists began instead to generate new forms of art that consisted of room-scale (or larger) environments in which all available senses—sight, hearing, and sometimes touch, taste, and smell—are engaged. For viewers, this meant that instead of focusing on static objects hanging on the wall or resting on pedestals, merely crossing the threshold into a gallery meant confronting the possibility that art could be coming at you in any form or from any direction. The physical space where the artwork was located could thus be considered an integral part of the work itself. As a student, Erlich would have been exposed to the work of such diverse pioneers of this new development as Vito Acconci, Cildo Meireles, Yayoi Kusama, Bruce Nauman, Christo and Jeanne-Claude, Carolee Schneemann, Robert Smithson, Nam June Paik, Walter De Maria, Judy Chicago, and Bill Viola.

Somewhat closer to home, the international Kinetic art movement of the 1950s and 1960s, while centered in Paris, featured the groundbreaking works of such fellow Argentines as Julio Le Parc, Gyula Kosice, Martha Boto, and Gregorio Vardanega, all of whom based their works in the principle of an expanded field for sculptors and their creations. Marta Minujín, whose participatory approach to art making fused Pop, feminism, and technology, had long maintained a public profile in Argentina that transcended the limits of the traditional art world. One of Erlich's earliest champions was the multidisciplinary artist Luis Benedit, who launched his career in the 1960s and 1970s with room-scale installations that employed cybernetics and biomes. In the later years of his career, Benedit investigated a wide range of subjects using an eclectic variety of techniques and materials, in the process setting a local standard for art that requires collaboration with specialist practitioners in fields of design, engineering, and technology.

From his earliest efforts as a serious young artist, Erlich had a singular knack for employing the disarmingly familiar as a shortcut to evoke or trigger the uncanny. One of these projects was a proposal to build and erect a full-size replica of Buenos Aires' iconic Obelisk at a location where it would serve as an important landmark for *porteños*, but still be far enough away from the original to intentionally cause confusion among those who might otherwise make a date to meet

in front of it. For the artist, the universally accepted singularity of the monument as a fixed geographical reference was an irresistible temptation to challenge that uniqueness by effectively asking the Argentine public to consider a nonsensical proposition along the lines of: "If the Obelisk is so great, why wouldn't a second obelisk be twice as good?" The correct—but generally unspoken—answer is that the true meaning of the Obelisk is not a condition of its physical presence or even its fixed location, but rather its symbolic place in the collective mind of those people whose identification with its potency is the most zealous. By inviting us to focus on our civic understanding of the monument instead of the blunt physical fact of its existence, Erlich's conceptual sleight of hand initiates a sense of dislocation that is nearly as powerful for being rendered on drafting paper as if it had been constructed in real life.

Outside of Argentina, the conditions of Erlich's art often require that they first entice us across a threshold that might be physical, perceptual, or both. Rarely if ever is it sufficient to gaze at his work from a safely objectifying distance, as one might a painting or sculpture. Instead, the work requires from its viewer a willingness to venture across that occasionally unseen but gradually perceptible boundary that typically acts both to protect the artwork from the effects of our oily fingerprints and to protect us from an artwork's unseen protrusions. Because in Erlich's case a willing suspension of disbelief is the ideal state of mind with which to encounter his art, it helps to put some symbolic but meaningful distance between ourselves and a world where objects and situations possess fixed and defined meanings.

Swimming Pool (1999) is the rare case of a work of art whose embrace by the public is so fervent that crowd control measures occasionally become a concern. The work has two separate entrances for its upper and lower levels, which correspond to the edge of a swimming pool, where people typically stand around, and the bottom of the pool, where—in this case—people also happen to be standing around. The irrefutable knowledge that we are neither watching our fellow humans drown themselves nor seeing them stand around as they watch us drown has little impact on the behavior of those who find themselves under the work's spell. That we are being entertained by a simulation of either our helplessness or our heartlessness feels oddly liberating, as if other inhibitions can suddenly be cast aside in favor of a range of unchecked impulses bubbling away just below civilization's veneer.

This impending potential for chaos is, in essence, how we might refine our experience of liminal time. Typically characterized as that which takes place between what happened a moment ago and what will happen a moment from now, on a narrative arc it consists of being perpetually on the verge of entering into a particular destination or state of existence without ever fully getting there, partly because of this continual displacement of the immediate future with the very recent past. To hover at the liminal edge of an experience suggests being pinned between a prior reality that has recently been set aside and a new reality beckoning at close range. For this reason, the accumulated impact of experiencing multiple Erlich works in a single exhibition can leave us with an intensified awareness of this inherent duality, wondering under what circumstances we can ever confidently assert that we are exclusively here and now, or if such a state is even possible.

Erlich's pair of installations based on the universal human impulse to spy on one another, *The View* (1997) and *The Room* (2006), operate in entirely different ways. *The Room* requires the

viewer to enter a space in which a grid of twenty-five monitors are set into the wall appear to survey a room where it seems as if not only nothing is happening, but also the differences in our angle of vision from monitor to monitor is the same as it would be if a single camera was adjusted to correspond to each monitor in exactly the position it currently occupies. In one sense, the work is an exercise in creating two-point perspective, but it registers more acutely as an illustration of the degree to which a hypervigilant society can distort the human need for safety and reassurance, so that nothing can happen without detection. In this sense, it recalls the panopticon, designed for one person to closely observe the movements of dozens of individuals in their respective cells.

A more beguiling installation, *The View* consists of two adjacent indoor windows with Venetian blinds that appear to look out and across to a nearby building at an unspecified evening hour, when dozens of residents, all behind separate windows, are going about their various rituals of dressing, washing, cooking, or watching TV. In this case the neighbors are all actors who have been taped by unseen cameras, producing footage that creates the illusion of ongoing surveillance. In contrast to *The Room*, whose multiple perspectives reinforce the notion that nothing has ever happened in this forlorn location, life in *The View* is robust and detailed, permitting us to indulge our curiosity as long as we wish across a diverse range of behaviors and character types. For the viewer, the minutia of the observed activity matters far less than the rich, guilty pleasure of observing someone who doesn't know they are being observed.

Two of Erlich's most complex interactive installations rely on another standard trope of surveillance—the two-way mirror—to activate a pair of adjacent rooms of the same size in a way that causes visitors entering the first room to come face to face with what appears to be a very large window looking into a second room that is an apparent duplicate of the first. While the first room is unadorned and thematically neutral, the room on the opposite side of the window is furnished to operate as a socially dynamic space intended for particular activities and participants. Visitors to *The Classroom* (2017) seat themselves at slablike black wooden benches and tables that appear in the reflection as old-fashioned desks and chairs in a decrepit wooden classroom that looks like a dusty relic from a previous era stranded in time. Someone standing to the side or against the rear wall of the first room can see the reflection of themselves positioned in front of a blackboard or in the back of the second room, presumably ready to pick up the lesson where it was left off. By offering viewers an imaginary return to the triumphs and travails of childhood, Erlich slyly undercuts the prerogatives of adulthood.

The companion installation *Hair Salon* (2008) is based on a differently configured arrangement: a pair of identical rooms, each with two rows of identical swivel chairs and hair products face away from each other. Four of what seem to be mirrors along one wall are in fact open windows through which one peers unknowingly into the opposite room, where a row of actual mirrors has been installed along the far wall, reflecting both rooms back at spectators expecting to see their own faces. Half of the unsuspecting participants end up positioning themselves in front of an actual mirror, where they see the backs of the heads of the other people in the room, while the other half sit at windows through which they can see a room where they expect to see themselves seated but do not. The multiple reflections create the illusion that people who are facing away from you seem to peer into the room directly at you, or else they are walking around what looks

like the same space you are currently occupying, when in fact they're on the other side, also presumably disoriented.

Although the illusions sustained by works such as *The Classroom* and *Hair Salon* are not by themselves visually complex, such minutely calibrated mirrored environments are rarely encountered in daily life, which makes their simplicity more psychologically compelling and their playfulness more infectious. The nonsensical effect is likely amplified if one hasn't been in a classroom or a hair salon in a long time, so that the visual premise of having the power to simultaneously occupy two entirely separate spaces sometimes lends participants license to act out the roles intrinsic to the environment, even after the adjacent friend who a moment before seemed to be gazing meaningfully at your head turns out to be a total stranger in the adjacent room. In such cases, the projection of the socialized, so-called performing self onto a parallel, adjacent space where such behavior manifests as a form of self-expression, allows as well for a small but critical degree of self-detachment.

Erlich's return to liminality as a muse suggests that he is deeply aware of the potential for his art to engage realms of perceptions and acts of cognition that are closely tied to our sense of orientation in the world. This is further borne out with his static works, such as *Clouds* (2012), which brings us behind the scenes in a figurative sense, first by transferring the shifting image of a cloud onto a receding row of multiple planes of glass, where various passages in the cloud's transformation have been printed. Positioning ourselves in front of the entire group enables the illusion of depth and mass to take full effect—a spell maintained even when a cursory examination reveals that the panes of glass rest in separate, parallel slots, leading to the conclusion that the visible components of the work cannot be enough to produce such a convincing illusion. However, the effectiveness of the overall visual spell is connected to the illusory qualities of photography itself, to which we are susceptible as ever. Erlich's technique uses our personal memory of previous idylls to play off his cloud's quality of edgelessness, so that the layering of photographic images continues to feed the visual fantasy that the center of the cloud is puffy and solid-looking, while its wispy edges trail off into nothingness. Our eyes are not fooled so much as we become complicit to being fooled, by indulging a desire to be seduced by an illusion we know is not genuine but still manages to strike an emotional chord.

The work *Night Flight* (2015) is rooted in a similar impulse to reposition something deeply familiar to us within a setting where its appearance is at best incongruous. To anyone who travels with any regularity more than three or four time zones beyond where they live, the inevitability of nocturnal air travel does not detract in any way from its inherent quality of unearthliness. Especially on a long flight, if one awakens while other passengers are sleeping, any awareness of traveling at unimaginable speeds several miles above the Earth's surface and possibly against the natural rotation of the planet has to be actively suppressed, its place taken by waves of ennui and listlessness. In such a state, the appearance of the Earth's surface at night from the window of a passenger jet can be extraordinary, and Erlich's work captures with psychological acuteness the fusion of wonder and bored restlessness that is one's inescapable travel companion on such journeys. With airplane window design so specific to place and circumstance, the mere insertion of this experience into a museum setting is intended to generate a disorienting effect not dissimilar to the rush of memory. One is suddenly free to connect to any free-floating

recollections that happen to be connected to a previous experience with looking out an airplane window at night, only this time on Earth, in a public place with others awake and nearby.

Among the works that consider solitary behavior within a social context is the otherwise unobtrusive *Lost Garden* (2009), which fits snugly into a triangular space, offering nothing more complicated than a view onto an arrangement of potted plants within a brick-lined patio-type enclosure. Although clearly identifiable as a triangular structure from the exterior, a disconcerting moment occurs when you peer inside either of the windows to see your reflection at an oblique angle, while someone standing at the adjacent window appears to look straight at you from the window directly in front. Once your sensory tools have provisionally adjusted to this arrangement, the perceptual puzzle begins to deepen, because none of the doubling or spatial distortion applies to the plants in the contained space. The inherent perceptual contradiction lies in its reflecting back to us both an image that we know is accurate yet appears implausible and an image that looks completely normal but whose existence we are disinclined to question.

Voyeurism, as explored in Alfred Hitchcock' 1954 cinematic masterpiece *Rear Window*, is an extension of the alienation implicit to urban life, and Erlich's first successful effort to frame it within an evocation of an impossible space was *Neighbors* (1996). Its unassuming appearance is that of a conventional apartment door mounted to a freestanding base so that one side appears to belong to the interior of an apartment, while the other seems to be part of a common hallway space connecting the other apartments on the same floor. Each side has an identical peephole, presumably for security purposes, but no matter which side of the door one stands on, the only view is of a long hallway with the neighbor's door expectantly waiting at the opposite end. Two people gazing in at the same time from both sides would actually see the same hallway from opposite ends, with the perspective reversed (that is, windows, elevator, and fire extinguisher on alternate walls), which might lead one to question why they can't also see the magnified eyeball of the other person peering in from the other end. Meanwhile, the most logical explanation to this conundrum—that the peepholes look onto two entirely separate miniaturized spaces—is one that our inherent sense of visual continuity rejects because it doesn't match what our eyes "think" they're seeing.

Considered within the full trajectory of Erlich's artistic development, such impossible spaces represent the essence of how our experience of liminality becomes isolated and framed by how we interact with his work as a whole. There is no perceptible before or after, nor can the liminal moment be recreated, since the insight that what appears to be one thing is really something else can't be undone. In *The Shaft* (2011), our dilemma revolves, once more, around the workaday normalcy of the object itself, which takes the form of a freestanding elevator car in the middle of the gallery, with no architectural attachment to the air around it. Despite the clarity with which the work appears to lack any real function, curiosity draws us in to take a quick look at the inside. What follows is a one-two combination of surprises: the first is a glimpse of what appears to be an endlessly receding elevator shaft extending far below the floor where we're standing, and the second comes with the realization, a moment later, that this arrangement isn't physically possible. Each of the two surprises, in its way, demonstrates how the liminal acts to correct or undermine whichever is the momentarily dominant perspective: from reality to fantasy, or from illusion to revelation.

Cumulatively, Erlich's work acts to undermine the rationalism that presides over the realm of visual knowledge, and to replace that rationalism with something that at times seems to border on science fiction. A pivotal work in the exhibition, *Sidewalk* (2007) conjures a fantasy whose essence draws deeply from childhood dreams: an entire civilization living in a world parallel to this one, which can only be glimpsed under special circumstances. Passing behind a wall constructed a short distance from the permanent wall, the viewer steps into a darkened zone, onto a sidewalk crossing in front of a long, low-lying aperture apparently filled with dirt. Along the edge between the dirt and the sidewalk, a lengthy puddle of water displays an upside-down reflection of a row of apartment building facades that contradict what we know to be on the other side of the wall. Despite this fact, for an extended moment the poetic clarity of the imagery outweighs its visual incongruity. Once we grasp what we are seeing, however, the sheer extravagance of *Sidewalk*'s underlying premise—an entire parallel civilization that can only be seen indirectly by studying its reflection on the surface of a mud puddle—begins to seem not simply desirable but irrefutable. Its lasting impact isn't to make us believe in the veracity of Erlich's illusion, but to give us some basis for momentarily doubting the dull exactness of the brick-and-mortar civilization we live in every day.

The myriad contradictions and perceptual puzzles across Erlich's body of work represent a consistently analytic approach to the realm of sensory perception and spatial orientation. By repeatedly demonstrating for us how easily our sense of where we are and what we're perceiving can be turned upside down, Erlich returns our questioning gaze with a reconstructed image of the world. The contents of this new reality can always return to their prior reassuring condition, but only through a decisive act of will on our part to reconstitute the old reality, this time through a conscious decision to make it so, leaving us newly aware of how our grounding in the material world is perpetually rooted in illusion that we agree by unspoken consensus to accept as the real thing.