LEANDRO ERLICH: ORDI CHARNELLE

Essay by **Adrian Dannatt**

“Allegories are, in the realm of thought, what ruins are in the realm of things.”

Walter Benjamin

One might start, like Martin Heidegger, with the house, that embodiment of our existential act of “being in the world,” and then one might walk around it, slowly, surprised, baffled, delighted, asking “what is this and why?” These are the questions art asks us to ask. The house of Leandro Erlich as it stands in Buenos Aires, in Montevideo, or even in Paris where it bows toward us outside the Gare du Nord like a drunk butler, like a tourist attraction gone wrong, some damaged homage to a perilous, perhaps even dangerous domesticity. In English there is the term “lean-to,” which describes a small building of shanty construction, a hand-made shed to be handed down through generations of squatters or amateurs. Erlich’s anti-monument is precisely a lean-to in this sense, not only in its quite literal inclination but also its status as something both temporary (like all public art) yet permanent (like every home, or at least every home in the memory of those who have lived and loved there). Not only is it a highly effective work, ripe with poetic resonance at the merest first glance while racing for the train, but it also acts as a perfect starting point to consider Erlich’s oeuvre in its totality.

For one could begin by defining Erlich as an “architect,” the very profession of both his father and brother. But an architect who practices in every possible way other than the actual construction of buildings, a builder, rather, of psychological spaces, liminal ports of entry, and extended physical reflections on our bodies in this world. Ettore Sottsass always called himself an architect whatever the varied scale or material of his work, regardless of the fact that he did not create so much as a house until very late in his career; likewise, those many “paper architects” who have only ever worked in drawing, collage, sculpture, writing, or education can proudly stand as exemplars of the fullest potential of that profession. One could think of Erlich as an architect by every other possible means, indeed precisely the sort of rebellious architectural student who is encouraged by his teachers to go into the field of art instead; an architect whose notion of “building” is more informed by psychology and philosophy rather than practicality or profit, lost in the richer realms of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s villa or Heidegger’s hut.

Walking through Buenos Aires to Erlich’s studio, one discovers the manifold unfolding layers of the civic carapace, the variant socioeconomic and historic zones, all predicated on an eccentric if not anarchic individuality. There seems to be no official built style nor even planning permission or, if there once was such a thing, it has by now happily vanished under decades of corruption and ingenuity. Everyone builds what they want, small private houses of hilarious incongruity, Swiss chalets, Bavarian villas, miniature Belle Epoque palaces; however tiny the scale, they remain the direct expression of the fantasy lives, imaginary grandeur, and aspirational exotica of their owners and creators. In fact, Erlich’s house outside the Gare du Nord could be inserted into one of these quiet, dusty Buenos Aires residential side streets and look completely at home, it’s very drooping, leaning tilt the natural result of municipal subsidence or shoddy foundations. Once infected by his imagination, the whole of his native city becomes Erlichian, a dream capital hovering between psychoanalysis and literature, here where personal “phantasm” becomes built reality.

Inside the giant echo of his studio, an industrial building now converted to the manufacture of deception and revelation, one can witness how Erlich-

the-architect comes to embody, quite literally, the dreamt domain of his exterior reality, his former home city, even. Here where Jacques Lacan is as celebrated as Jorge Luis Borges, our architect has built an elevator for ghosts, a reflection on those vampires without race, this “mirror-stage” that is both a stage for actors, for anyone who enters this arena, and a temporal stage, the time it takes for us to adjust to our own vanishing, our shocking absence.

We “reflect” on our presence here in the cage-of-being, that most straightforward self-presentation, as we step into a standard elevator, like in a scene from so many films, a staple movie action, only to discover we have become the “other,” that our glass has given way to emptiness, opened up to the other person instead, as if our identity has been switched upon stepping into this space. Like the famous mirror-stage scene in the 1933 Marx Brothers film Duck Soup, we are here dazzled, amused, and amazed by the magical transformation wrought on the very fabric of daily reality; but any laughter is tinged by the slight ring of extinction, the faintest sense of our own eventual “disappearance,” which stains this uncanny act.

Likewise, our judgement is “clouded” by the artificial weather, fictional meteorology that Erlich has spun, like cotton candy, like an informational diagram, paper cartoon, from the very heavens. Taking the high clouds of German Romanticism or indeed the very different English Romanticism of J. M. W. Turner or John Constable, symbols of transience and transformative ephemerality, Erlich has conflated these symbols with the data “clouds” of digital technology as well as those threatening heralds of advancing global warming, to suggest a different climate all his own. These clouds are ancient, old as the world yet also entirely new, harbingers of a looming reality, dark, ominous as any coming deluge. We fear these maybe the very clouds of Walter Benjamin, “But a storm is blowing from paradise . . . this storm is what we call progress.”

Erlich is expert at playing with our sense of position within the surrounding world, reversing assumptions, switching verbs and tenses, so we are no longer watching but being watched, no longer subject but object, acted upon rather than playing the role of the lead actor. This reads akin to Vladimir Nabokov’s trick of turning the physical environment into the dominant participant and all human agency to passive voyeurism; in Nabokov’s paradoxical prose, objects behave as if they have souls—they live, move, and react to their surroundings. A chair reaches out to the person about to sit, shadows of trees race across the lawn, all objects are animate.

For Erlich as for Nabokov, buildings and cities and furniture are the active agents, they move around the characters, not the other way around. Here Erlich’s scudding clouds reverse themselves, we are their subject rather than master, their spectacle owns us not the usual vice versa; we are all at the whim of the weather forever now. As Rainer Maria Rilke writes: “The last house of this village stands as alone as if it were the last house in the world. The road, that the little village cannot hold, moves on slowly out into the night.”

Staying in Buenos Aires, one might posit Erlich’s clouds and houses as akin to those conjured by that city’s poet-dreamer Xul Solar, whose utopian capital, the imaginary “Vuel villa” was based on the 1934apparition of a single zeppelin over his hometown, “a city which someday might appear on the horizon, peering out from the clouds, that is a floating villa, drifting or navigating through the air, a flying villa.” No wonder Borges wrote, some thirty years later, that Xul “just does not accept reality.” A phrase

that might as pleasingly be applied to Erlich, who despite his long career as an uncompromisingly international artist, long resident in France as well as Uruguay or New York, shares some of the guarded romanticism of Argentina's Nuevo Realismo, like Julio Cortázar letting Paris somehow blend into Buenos Aires, the cities shifting back and forth between each other, allowing an always open window in this search for the magical and transcendent in everyday life.

Erlich's art is rooted in the city, the man-made, formulated upon our capacity to create, to inherit what we take from the real world, this built reality, then to step out from that and by some mental jiujitsu, sleight of hand, reverse all assumptions and certainties, and make us see anew. For him, everything comes from the human mind, from us, a three-dimensional version of George Orwell's astonishing statement, "nothing exists outside of human consciousness," which requires as much contemplation as any koan. For Erlich, the presence of what we ourselves make is as strong as any presence of nature, and in defining these boundaries of reality in the last one hundred years, we became our own masters at creating reality, a house as real as any stone or dishwasher, our highway cars no more real than the river.

There is a door that is a painting of a door and a clock that is a circular canvas painting of a clock, where time is unreadable, as in a dream, acknowledging that time is a fact but the way we state it is entirely conceptual, nothing but human. The artist tries to help us reclaim such objects, the supposed building blocks of our everyday world, everyday normality, for ourselves, our own purposes, a small personal liberation that remains inherently radical. The young Karl Marx put it another way: "Only when the objective world becomes the world of man's essential powers—human reality and the reality of his own essential powers—can all objects become for him the objectification of himself, become objects which confirmand realize his individuality." Thus, in Erlich's liberated objects, we sense the revolutionary intoxication that led those street fighters of 1789 to shoot at the clocks of the towers above them throughout Paris, to boldly try to assassinate fixed consensual reality, clock-time itself.

Erlich's aim is to make us "see where things stand," whether this takes a fake broken mirror and a broom-stick or carved shards of passing clouds, is an explicit action, with no trickery and no Surrealist whimsy. Here is where they start and where they end, children, adults, situations, all taking their place in the role of viewer, to move fast from seduction while yet aware that perception itself is not just a matter of playfulness but remains a matter of interpretation. We live on certainties that we turn to stone as rules, never questioning who first said what "makes up" our life. This is what it first took to recognize the world and codify it, listening to the grown-ups who give you all the necessary information, explain reality, abolish that initial magic. To save us from this, to return us back to childhood wonder, Erlich proffers, like Lichtenberg, "a bladeless knife that lacks a handle.

"In this white screenplay we are back within the realm of the actor, the velvet proscenium arch, staging a new Michael Fried's debate on sculpture and theater, showing outside the boundaries of what art is still supposed to be. This is not illusion, nothing but reality itself, art playing "reality" forever. Erlich sees that we tend to forget we created the objects that make up our reality, we take them for granted, which is why he uses these same existent objects, "re-made readymades" in the art of transforming people's expectations and experiences—the impulse of desire that makes you go somewhere for some reason. As spectators we

are invited to play act our role within Erlich's ultimate scenario, just as for the author the "other" is you yourself. Here the mediated space has a script but we are not told by the artist-director what the play is or your role within it, just as if you as an actor come out onto stage—all your words and movements are interpreted by your experiences as much as by the playwright themselves.

It is perhaps hardly surprising to finish our tour of Buenos Aires finding ourselves in a building that Erlich did indeed create himself, redeem from the street, a corner labyrinth where he personally constructed his own first home, having fallen in love with its decrepit brick wall, its wild plants growing out from every crack, its secret central courtyard. In the end, it becomes clear Erlich really is an architect, in every sense, having actually built his own world, here on the most domestic scale as well as out in that public space that eventually became part of his universe, due to institutions and museums. This clandestine structure, hidden from every angle but within, was once his home and studio and now, so appropriately, it is an extraordinary book shop open to the public only by appointment, known only to the literary connoisseur as a laboratory of fictive potential, a story storehouse.

As if in a parenthesis, the Erlich aesthetic lies somewhere between literature and the new machine age, between the texture of the old paper page and the smooth computer screen, his games of language worthy of the Oulipo translated with algorithms, worthy of CAD architecture, that many storied house on Rue Simon-Crubellier now reimagined and redesigned by Daniel Libeskind. Just for the fun of it, for the sake of completion, to discover the deeper Cabalistic potential of these two words, I run the name "Leandro Erlich" through a French-language anagram system and find the following: "REND LOCAL HIER, ORDI CHARNELLE, ARCHI RONDELLE, RIRE DONC HALLE, ALLER DONC HIER, CRIER HOLLANDE."

No, not functional architecture, but rather an embodiment of the meanings and dreams attached to our old childhood homes, those we should never actually visit again, only save as memories, those panels/doors/houses disguised by "what lies behind" (lies). Here, Erlich himself made the staircase, winding up through the courtyard like some crooked offspring of Piranesi and M. C. Escher, he laid railway tracks as beams, put in concrete, made his own chimney. And still, from outside one has no idea how it looks inside, the secret space of an old house that only on entering lets you discover the rich, wide interior. Herein Buenos Aires the artist builds whatever house is wanted, beyond code or fixed rules, to do whatever pleases, unleash your imagination, everyone an architect. Imagine thus broken glass and no reflection from the window outside, an exterior garden morning/interior still, a stage set and screen test, one smashed blue window, a remembrance of glass, the stained memory of the last image this window saw. See this reflection on the wrong side reflection, a doubled mirroring as some ghost in the window of a shrink, the shattered "still" of a psychoanalyst's large pane. A skylight with scudding video clouds, the last blind window of brick installed into a wall of glass, broken. The curtain falls, the reels flutter and loop, the matrix jams, pixels stutter, to essay so, and so end.