LEANDRO ERLICH:

BEYOND THE CONFINES

Essay by **Andrés Duprat**

INTRODUCTION

I met Leandro Erlich when he was a promising young artist at the end of the previous century, and I've had the opportunity to follow his career from its beginnings to the prominence he has acquired as an established and celebrated artist. Trained in Buenos Aires in the 1990s, Erlich began showing his work in exhibitions and increasingly significant art events at a young age. His precocious success led to an invitation to the 1997 Mercosur Biennial in Puerto Alegre, Brazil, and, close on the heels of that honor, he participated in the Whitney Biennial in New York. At age twenty-eight, he represented Argentina at the 49th Venice Biennale, where he achieved resounding success with *Swimming Pool* (1999), a similar incarnation of the work presented in Liminal at Pérez Art Museum Miami. It was my privilege to write the catalogue entry for the Argentine envoy to Venice that year, and I also had the chance to assist Erlich during the installation of this magnificent piece. This experience enriched my understanding of his conceptual framework and creative process. The extraordinary experience in Venice spread word of his name and talent around the globe, opening doors and possibilities that have allowed him to deepen his unique aesthetic explorations and to express his standout voice in the global symphony of contemporary art.

Over the following years, his work found its way to important shows worldwide, from Havana to Busan, Shanghai to Istanbul, Buenos Aires to Paris, Tokyo to Madrid, all of which cement-ed his international reputation and prominence. The anthological exhibition presented in Miami both documents the long journey that he has undertaken as an artist and establishes a dialogue among several of the more significant works he has created previously within a variety of contexts.

The works *Swimming Pool*, *Neighbors*, *Changing Rooms*, *Classroom*, *Lifted Lift*, *The Cloud*, *The View*, *Lost Garden*, and *Cadres Dorés*, among others, reveal the depth of the poetic universe that this artist has created.*Lost Garden*, for example, is an impossible garden located within the architecture of a courtyard, and in Sidewalk, we see an urban landscape reflected in a pool of water. If, in fact, we could consider Erlich's art as fundamentally autonomous and bound to its own interior logic, certain questions still recur throughout his entire opus; for example, the fact that his works modify the perception of aspects of everyday life, thereby creating a visual paradox that becomes a port of entry to his creative universe.

In order to submerge ourselves within these poetics, it's important to lay some conceptual ground work regarding the general state of contemporary art and the social world in which it is inscribed. Any work of art operates within a certain context and, in some ways, forms a response to this same surround. An exploration of the conditions that contemporary art addresses will offer us some clues to better approach and appreciate the power and ingenuity of Erlich's work.

CONTEXT

Contemporary art is a complex universe that proposes a profound interruption of the confines of our conditioned views, a disruptive response to our own lives, a subversion or perversion of the ways in which we inhabit the world. Through this power, it opens a field of felt, conceptual, and existential variations whose unimagined currents possess the singular ability to create significant meaning that can only be formulated by the specific terms that art deploys. It is precisely within this arena that a work of art can speak and enunciate that which is deemed unnameable by more accepted social discourses, such as the so-called humanities.

The most notable element in the recent evolution of the world of visual art is its dizzying mutability, a tendency intensified by the appearance of new formats and media capable of replicating, broadcasting, and expressing whatever the artist chooses to communicate. The scope of these new formats has created certain obstacles for viewers who have not followed the increasing complexity of artistic discourse and who, in turn, have difficulty approaching some works due to a lack of familiarity with contemporary art's internal references and codes. In that sense, no other discipline has distanced itself as profoundly from the general public as those that constitute the vast territory of the visual arts, and this situation stems from multiple factors. The autonomy that painting gradually accrued in relationship to the representative, realist, and concrete mission that defined it up until the rise of the avant-garde movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries laid the groundwork for formal and conceptual experimentation that has proved both rich and complex. Having thrown open those doors, art's very nature was changed, utterly transformed. The experimental mission that art undertook began to demand a standard of knowledge and critical thinking about its own history, which also required the expertise to manipulate the keys to the intelligibility of a self-referential practice that weakened its links with the social world—and former source of legitimacy. The decline of representation prompted by modernity unleashed an inexorable revolution in the language of the arts: Marcel Duchamp and his readymades modified forever our concept not only of what defines a work of art, but what defines an artist, a viewer, and the social circuitry in which art moves.

The discourse of contemporary art became swiftly encrypted and necessitated the presence of a media-tor. The figures of the critic and the curator acquired a swift and overriding importance, acting in essence like an interpretative link between the creators and the audience at large in order to fill the same gap that the work of art opened between itself and the viewer.

And so, we witnessed a new and precipitous decline, one that further distanced our felt contact with works of art and initiated a departure from the particular and unique pleasure of the aesthetic experience, which was in turn supplanted by discourses that needlessly rival the works themselves.

As a consequence, art became the expropriated territory of certain delimited groups predisposed to segregation and whose clear objective was to differentiate themselves from the mainstream. This breach has fostered the prevalence of the aforementioned mediators, now considered inseparable from the field of contemporary practices. This intermediary function is linked to an interpretative role that, more often

than not, falls short. Between the work of art and the aesthetic experience that it proposes, there is often a near-total disconnect.

As modern-day viewers standing before a work of art, our experience is predicated on the need to decode a certain message or to decipher the content that we believe art must contain. The quest for meaning asserts itself. But art is not the realm of answers. The exercise in translation implies the danger of simplifying and trivializing the multivalent readings that any work demands. In this sense, professionalized modes of interpretation tend to impoverish a work of art by fixing it within a didactic and functional sphere, with the objective of facilitating and seducing the viewer's response.

> To treat works of art in this fashion is not wholly irrelevant. But it is, obviously, putting art to use—for such purposes as inquiring into the history of ideas, diagnosing contemporary culture, or creating social solidarity. Such a treatment has little to do with what actually happens when a per-son possessing some training and aesthetic sensibility looks at a work of art appropriately. A work of art encountered as a work of art is an experience, not a statement or an answer to a question. Art is not only about something; it is something. A work of art is a thing in the world, not just a text or commentary on the world.[1]

What's certain is that the phenomenon of contemporary art comprises a fascinating universe replete with diversity, excess, and a defining resistance to definition itself. Much of the artwork that is deemed "difficult" or directly "incomprehensible" tends to offer a promise of renewal, of the simultaneous opening and expansion of what we think we know. It also tends to constitute the only possible way to approach certain themes and to express certain notions with the power of poetry. For all these reasons, we must always defend the subversive quality of contemporary art, its capacity to break rules, to regard (and de-mand that we regard) the world from a different perspective, suspending our habituated patterns in order to emerge—more often than not—transformed by the experience.

On the other hand, we encounter the root-deep difficulty of establishing stable relationships with con-temporary art. Its seductions, rejections, and invocations can place us in a tight spot, a brutal wilderness, an uninhabitable desert. Only then, when every certainty has been suspended, do we begin to accept art as an experience that reveals something along the order of truth; initially this revelation may be about art itself, but it also turns out to include the self, death, time, and, ultimately, ourselves—our constant underlying awareness of what it is to be alive.

To answer art's call requires effort, a peeling back of the known that denies everything, even the customary deference for the areas of circulation that support art's public existence. Because, as we have said, what contemporary art proposes is something akin to experience. And any experience, in the degree to which it involves labile subjects willing to respond to a provocation, can only be apprehended and under-stood—which is to say, absorbed or taken on—when one has lived it fully.

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[1] Susan Sontag, Against Interpretation and Other Essays, copyright 1961, Picador

The stage for the validation of contemporary art was set by figures who became functional and indispensable in creating a circuit of valuation whose pillars have remained the dealer, the curator, and the collector. This triumvirate articulated a system of elites that alienated the relationship of the audience with the art it regards, warping an experience that the average citizen could enjoy with works whose accessibility became ensnared by symbolic values—something that does not happen, for example, with mass phenomena like music. Perhaps this is one of the reasons that the universe of the arts has become isolated from everyday life. This elitist formulation casts an emblematic shadow across the field of contemporary artistic production and its trajectory, as well as conditioning the possible circulation of an artist's work in a definitive manner. This situation has fueled the widespread questioning of these same circles. These phenomena that confine the current state of contemporary art and how it interacts with society at large, the global economy, culture, politics, history—in addition to art's own complicities, paradoxes, mutations, and anecdotes—do not diminish art's power to impact the world. Mercifully, art is only regulated by the values it proposes and, often enough, it eschews even those self-propositions; nothing could be further off the mark than morality, nor does art pretend to be worthy, fair, or even adequate. Art occurs, happens, is, and will always remain inexplicable to the end.

Leandro Erlich's work inscribes itself within these problematics in the sense that it is rife with the exploration of art's relationship to our daily lives, reversing the diagnostic of its inherent inaccessibility and unintelligibility.

WORK

During the first decade of the twentieth century, Marcel Proust published his celebrated novel In Search of Lost Time, in which he describes a famous scene: the young narrator trips on an uneven paving stone, an event that brings his everyday world to the brink of collapse, unleashing a cascade of involuntary memories that flow into a thousand pages through which he recounts his life and era.

In the following decade, during his fictional campaign for the Argentine presidency, the writer Macedonio Fernández proposed the creation of devices that would destabilize the material conventions that underwrite the daily life of ordinary citizens. These inventions included soluble spoons, staircases with uneven steps, extraordinarily heavy pens, double-bladed combs, all designed to inspire a renewed exploration of our mundane existence and how force of habit withers our perception.

The discovery of this estrangement and denaturalization, born of a physical experience but whose reach extends to the deepest level of consciousness, was one of the key elements in the avant-garde aesthetics of the past century and has remained relevant until the present day. Leandro Erlich carries this standard even farther afield. His work enacts felt experiences that send our conventional notions of reality reeling. Although the scenes he creates are haunted by the fantastic, their settings—a swimming pool, an elevator, a hair salon, an indoor garden, a classroom, a window, a staircase, the entire facade of a building—locate us in familiar situations that seem to be unlikely hosts of total unreality. We recognize these shapes immediately and we associate them with their habitual use, but there is something disturbing at work here. The fact that we are in a museum environment should tip us off, but we are

nonetheless unaccustomed to being betrayed by our visual perception. The combined equation that Erlich generates between the world of appearances and its material tools pushes us to the edge of a critical threshold, leaving us disarmed and on the brink. The objects that he presents appear known, domestic, or recognizable, but they are not: they belong to the world of art and, as such, they inhabit their own poetics and their own inherent and useful uselessness. The pool is no good for swimming, the mirrors at the hair salon refuse our reflection, and the elevator takes us nowhere.

The interrogatory power of his work doesn't fizzle when we finish watching, analyzing, and puzzling out its mechanisms. In fact, it has only just begun. Erlich's arenas establish a kind of double life by trans-forming themselves before our eyes into works of art. While appearing to be exactly what they seem, they simultaneously declare themselves to be something else entirely. This intersection liberates multiple levels of meaning and infinite twists and turns in a future built on the very questions they pose. Clearly, Erlich's work does not endeavor to provide answers, but rather to sustain inquiry.

In light of the encryption of the poetics of the contemporary visual arts—which, among other things, has underwritten the presence and proliferation of a diverse range of mediators and pre-eminently intellectual and erudite approaches—Leandro Erlich's art proposes a return to experience: a direct, unburdened, and sensual encounter with the work, without forewords or forewarning. In the same way that we listen to a piece of music or watch a film, we allow ourselves to be swept away by his art and its invitation to dive into experience. Erlich's immediately intelligible visual language, transparent ideas, and careful formulations create an efficiency of exchange that abstains from impenetrability. This practice closes the distance between the audience—usually an abstract supposition, albeit real and substantive—and the productions of contemporary art, creating a connection that is as genuine as it is profound. When we watch a movie, we don't dwell on its fiction; we accept its conventions—the suspension of disbelief—consciously forget-ting that we are in the presence of actors playing written roles both directed and produced by a complex juggernaut. We make an effort to submerge ourselves in this world and inhabit it with intensity. Once the experience is over, our mind will process and analyze what we have "lived," turning over the references, meanings, connections, explanations, and metaphors in a different kind of appraisal. In this way, Erlich fosters a return to "felt experience" by proposing, on one level, that the viewer be swept away by the sensuality of appearances that represent our first approximation of the world, before inviting us to cast doubt upon the particular system we employ to decode reality.

The power of these works of art does not lie merely in their surface appearance, but rather in the "errors or fallacies" that they provoke—what remains beyond or outside of logic. By revealing their mechanisms, the artist invites us to move on from the initial moment of wonder and immediate experience to a deeper realm of silence and observation. Unpacking the scene helps us to reflect on the making of meaning and our construct of reality.

"Nothing is what it is, just as nothing is what it seems" could make a good motto for Leandro Erlich's artistic project. Marked by this paradox, one that keeps the scales from tipping either in favor of substance or of appearance, his art operates in a register in which the material world becomes a metaphor. But a metaphor that speaks to its own reality, a metaphor of itself. This is not the kind of metaphor we are used to, one

that points toward something else by invoking analogies or formal similarities that are more or less efficient. In Erlich's work, an object—a staircase, an elevator, a house, a crowd, an urban symbol, a cloud—acquires portent or transforms itself into an impossible object: not a concrete entity capable of reinforcing its own identity, but rather something that calls into question its own self-concept. Stripped of their habitual functions, these objects become something else altogether while somehow looking just like themselves. That is, the objects in Leandro Erlich's works never show their true selves but rather their impossibility; they refer to their own self-concept, all the while undermining this same identity via the exposure that disrupts their status by turning them into an event. Everything hinges on the separation between the image of the object and the concept with which we attempt to define it. Through the defamiliarization that he achieves as an artist, Erlich undoes our perceptive formulations, appealing to the crisis of reason and the deconstruction of the taxonomy of the world as we know it. His works of art are, in one sense, works of philosophy. Like the ancient Sophists, Erlich arrives at the truth through error. But he is not offering up a mysterious ruse that is impossible to understand; rather, he exposes reality itself as the ruse. By showing the inner side of the stitching, Erlich does not desacralize the mystery. On the contrary, he endows the material world with an otherworldly sheen.

Erlich raises fundamental questions regarding ordinary life. Through the humanizing gesture that accepts reality's unknowability, he lifts the veil of its very guilelessness, transforming the everyday into art.