



LIMINAL

LEANDRO ERLICH

MALBA



The View / La vista, 1997
Foto: © Leandro Erlich Studio

PRESENTACIÓN

El 20 de septiembre de 2015, el Obelisco de la ciudad de Buenos Aires amaneció sin la punta. En pocas horas la noticia circuló por todo el mundo. Los medios informaron que no se trataba de ninguna obra de reparación: la cima se había "trasladado" a la explanada del Malba y, por primera vez, era posible visitar su interior. *La democracia del símbolo* fue el primer proyecto que Leandro Erlich realizó para el museo, una obra *site-specific* en dos partes sobre un tema en el que llevaba trabajando varios años y que finalmente pudimos concretar. El público tuvo entonces la posibilidad de acceder a una vista privilegiada y normalmente oculta de la ciudad.

Cuatro años después, tenemos la alegría de presentar *Leandro Erlich. Liminal*, la primera exposición antológica de Leandro en toda América, que el artista eligió realizar en su país natal. Esta vez reunimos veintiuna obras, producidas a lo largo de más de dos décadas, que se despliegan entre la explanada y dos niveles completos del museo. Seleccionadas por Dan Cameron – curador invitado actualmente radicado en Nueva York –, son una importante muestra del carácter lúdico y a la vez reflexivo de la propuesta de Erlich.

Inquieto y siempre motivado a correr el límite, en esta ocasión Erlich sumó una última obra, también concebida para la fachada del Malba. En el contexto de una nueva crisis económica y social para nuestro país, el artista "pone en venta el museo" junto con todo su acervo material y simbólico. Nuevamente desconcierta y genera múltiples preguntas.

Erlich tenía veintiséis años cuando exhibió su piscina (*Swimming Pool*) por primera vez en 1999, y dos años después la mostró en el envío oficial argentino de la 49ª Bienal de Venecia (2001). Su trabajo ya se había expuesto en importantes circuitos internacionales, y a partir de ese momento su reconocimiento no hizo más que crecer. Hoy es sin duda uno de los artistas contemporáneos más celebrados de la escena global.

Quiero agradecer el trabajo conjunto realizado entre el Estudio Erlich y el equipo del museo, así como a las galerías que nos brindaron su apoyo. También deseo destacar la relación creciente de respeto y amistad que hemos creado con Leandro desde que nos conocimos, y que hoy celebro con entusiasmo. Mediante esta nueva colaboración, el público local y visitante tiene la oportunidad de experimentar – de manera intensiva – el singular mundo de este gran artista argentino.

Eduardo F. Costantini
Presidente, Fundación Malba

INTRODUCTION

On September 20, 2015, the Buenos Aires Obelisk woke up without its tip. The news soon traveled around the world. The media reported that the tip was not undergoing repairs, but had been “moved” to the esplanade of Malba where, for the first time, its interior would be open to the public. *La democracia del símbolo* [The Democracy of the Symbol] was the first project Leandro Erlich produced for the museum, a site-specific work in two parts on a theme he had been working on for a number of years. The public had the opportunity to get a privileged and normally hidden view of the city.

Four years later, we have the pleasure of presenting *Leandro Erlich. Liminal*, Leandro’s first anthological show in the Americas (the artist has chosen his native country as its location). On the museum’s esplanade and in two levels of gallery space, the exhibition brings together twenty-one works produced over the course of more than two decades. Selected by Dan Cameron – New York-based guest curator – these works demonstrate the playful yet reflexive nature of Erlich’s art.

A restless artist, Erlich always pushes limits. This time, he added to the show a new work conceived specifically for Malba’s façade. In the context of Argentina’s current economic and social crisis, the artist “puts the museum up for sale” along with all of its material and symbolic holdings and, in so doing, once again disconcerts us and raises critical questions.

Erlich was twenty-six when, in 1999, he exhibited his *Swimming Pool* for the first time. Two years later, it formed part of the Argentine exhibition at the 49th Venice Biennale (2001). His work had already been exhibited in major international venues and, since then, it has ceaselessly gained recognition. Erlich is, unquestionably, one of the most celebrated contemporary artists on the global scene.

I would like to thank the Estudio Erlich and the museum’s team for their joint effort, as well as the galleries that provided their support. Since the time Leandro and I met, we have had a relationship of respect and friendship – and that, for me, is cause for celebration. Thanks to this most recent collaboration, local and visiting viewers alike will have the opportunity to experience – intensively – the singular world of this great Argentine artist.

Eduardo F. Costantini
President, Fundación Malba

To fully internalize Leandro Erlich's art and attain the maximum benefit from its effects, the artist must first succeed at enticing us to cross a threshold. Rarely if ever is it sufficient for the public to gaze at Erlich's work from a safely objective distance. Instead, the work requires from its viewer a willingness to venture across that sometimes invisible but always perceptible boundary which typically acts both to protect the artwork from the corrosive effect of our oily fingerprints, and also to protect us from bumping our heads or shins on any of its protrusions. Because in Erlich's case a willing suspension of disbelief is the ideal state of mind with which to experience his art, it stands to reason that we should first put some symbolic but real distance between ourselves and a world in which objects and situations possess fixed and defined meanings. An excellent starting point is the site-specific artwork that Erlich has created for this exhibition at Malba, which can be taken as an ideal case study for how his art manages to identify and then enforce this notion of a parallel reality that must be shaken off and left behind, but only after it has taken root in our collective imagination. The work consists of a prominently located "For Sale" sign that impedes the conventional view of the museum's façade in order to provide quantifiable details – precisely those a prospective buyer would require in the event of a serious negotiation – about the museum as a physical entity, as well as its substantial art collection, which is at the heart of Malba's international status.

Although it should probably be self-explanatory that an art museum would not be able to host an artist's mid-career retrospective and simultaneously announce that the entire premises are being put up for sale, that artist is nonetheless counting on basic human nature to rush in and fill the information vacuum anyway, even in spite of the fairly obvious clue that the "agent" to contact about the sale happens to have the same name as the artist whose exhibition is currently on view. Even so, the shock of seeing something that would signal a catastrophic turn of events might understandably gain a foothold in the collective imagination of porteños simply because Erlich has introduced this work at one of those anxiety-inducing moments in Argentine economic history when such a development will inevitably brush up against some citizens' darkest fears about the stability of the presiding political system. A natural response, upon realizing that the sign is only an artwork, and not a terrifying portent of the near future, is to feel relieved, but with an accompanying shiver of fear, and perhaps a small amount of resentment at having been tricked into accepting an unreal reality.

Although, in this particular case, Leandro Erlich hasn't tricked us by physically luring us into a distinct physical space, he has done something that is actually slightly more transgressive, which is to push

ERLICH
PROPIEDADES

VENDE

EXCEPCIONAL PROPIEDAD

7455 m2 / APTO TODO DESTINO

- 3 salas de exhibición
- 680 obras de arte (Tarsila, Frida, Diego, etc)
- Cine, Auditorio, Biblioteca, Tienda y Bar
- Terraza de 218 m2 / Parking
- Piscina climatizada

+ 54 11 4808 6500

For Sale, 2019

the debate about what is real and what isn't real out of the museum's sanctioned spaces and into the streets. If living in a world where Malba is up for sale seems troubling, then how much less troubling is it to live in a world where an artist can make an artwork which pretends that Malba is for sale, knowing full well that his fellow citizens possess far too much critical intelligence to fall for such a trick? We might even argue that one sign of a healthy social infrastructure lies in the capacity to make a public artwork purporting to signal the collapse of society, while not actually risking the possibility that someone could so seriously misinterpret the work as to create a panic. Of course, the frisson of Erlich's piece is related to a secondary risk, which is that a very small percentage of people are, in fact, going to see the sign, or an image of the sign, and take the work's meaning at its most literal. For all of these reasons, and others, Erlich has actually succeeded at getting us to see the venerable institution of the art museum as a kind of material phantasm of itself: something that might indeed be here one day and gone the next, but is not in any immediate apparent danger of doing so. He has touched on that part of our collective imagination that does not fear the actual outcome of a

Window and Ladder – Invisible Billboard, 2019



scenario so much as the mere possibility, even hypothetical, that it might occur. To put it more simply: if our most treasured art institutions can be bought and sold like baubles, what does that say about the rest of our cultural institutions, and by implication ourselves?

The second outdoor work by Erlich, *Window and Ladder*, has a history which suggests an even more fearless attitude towards deploying art to tell an unpopular truth about ourselves. The work at Malba is based on a prototype first created and shown in 2008 in New Orleans as part of the *Prospect.1* exhibition organized (by this writer) within a broader societal effort to contribute to the cultural rebuilding of the city in the wake of the devastation three years earlier from Hurricane Katrina. Although many of the participating artists in this pilot edition of what eventually became a triennial wished to root their works in a vision of what had befallen their host city, Erlich's instinct was considerably bolder than anyone else. Touring areas of the Lower Ninth Ward that had been hardest hit by onrushing waters when nearby levees buckled and collapsed, Erlich chose a site within view of the newly repaired retaining walls, near enough to adjacent structures so that it was pain-



fully clear: this had been a neighborhood of houses in close proximity to one another. It was also the neighborhood with the greatest density of flood-related fatalities from the catastrophe.

What *Window and Ladder* depicts is a moment in the midst of a disaster when events that seem almost unimaginably terrifying are revealed, but have taken place with no regard for our desire to perceive them differently. The lifesaving ladder has been positioned just where it should be, snugly under the window frame and securely against the brick, but the house from which the inhabitants need to escape is gone. What has taken place here? Did those who lived here manage to get away in safety, leaving the ladder behind in their haste, or is the end of the story that the house was washed away with its inhabitants

still inside? We can never know the answer because, as the sculpture reminds us, we got there too late, and the damage has already been done. At first glance, it seems to border on insensitivity that Erlich, a stranger to New Orleans, would introduce such a viscerally disturbing image into a city that was still very much traumatized by what had befallen its people in very recent memory. However, this is precisely the point at which his foundational understanding of and appreciation for how people see art as a type of fiction enabled him as well to accomplish something that art rarely is capable of: confront a festering pain by bringing it to the surface, thereby making it so obvious that its presence cannot be denied. Sunlight is often referred to as the best disinfectant, and while today, more than a decade later, there are a handful of permanent sculptural remembrances of Katrina scattered around New Orleans, the one that seems to sum up the feelings of many natives about the best way to memorialize this historical rupture is Erlich's *Window and Ladder - Too Late to Ask for Help*, which was acquired by the New Orleans Museum of Art shortly after *Prospect.1*, and is viewed every day by hundreds of visitors (or more) that gravitate to its much-beloved sculpture garden.

Considering the dramatic history of *Window and Ladder*, it's striking how the significance of the work shifts within the context of Argentina at the present moment, and in so doing pushes it closer to the "For Sale" sign. Much like in the case of a natural disaster, economic turmoil invariably results in unemployment, poverty, and homelessness, which *Window and Ladder - Invisible Billboard* crystallizes in much the way it also did with flooding and loss of life in its earlier manifestation. The two situations – New Orleans in 2005 and Buenos Aires in 2019 – , while entirely different in terms of causes and repercussions, generate similar shared moments of astonishment that hitherto steadfast laws of nature and civilization can be rendered inoperative with such force that we can't even discern the direct impact, only the damage left in its wake.

Past the museum entrance, the descent to the lower gallery has been transformed into a two-tier experience of what is arguably the work of Erlich's which is best known on an international level: *Swimming Pool*. Conceived as a final project for his Houston Residency, it was developed for the Venice Biennale and later installed permanently at the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art in Kanazawa, Japan. *Swimming Pool* is a textbook case of a work of art whose embrace by the public is so fervent that crowd control measures can become a serious problem. It is also a work that, like *Window and Ladder*, possesses a tragedy at the core of its meaning. The work is defined by its emphatic visual divided between upper and lower levels, which correspond to the rim of a swimming pool where people typically stand around, and the bottom of the pool, where

Shattering Door, 2009



people also happen to be standing around. The absolutely crystal clear knowledge that we are neither watching our fellow humans drown themselves nor standing around watching us drown does not seem to impact the behavior of people who find themselves under the work's spell for the first time, at which point they invariably behave as if this double tragedy is exactly what has transpired. That we are being entertained by either a representation of our helplessness or of our heartlessness feels oddly liberating, as if suddenly other inhibitions can also be cast aside, the better for reverting to the savage impulses that seem to be continually bubbling away just below civilization's veneer.

This impending chaos, in essence, is how we might define the liminal, which is typically defined as that which is occurring between what

Swimming Pool, 1999



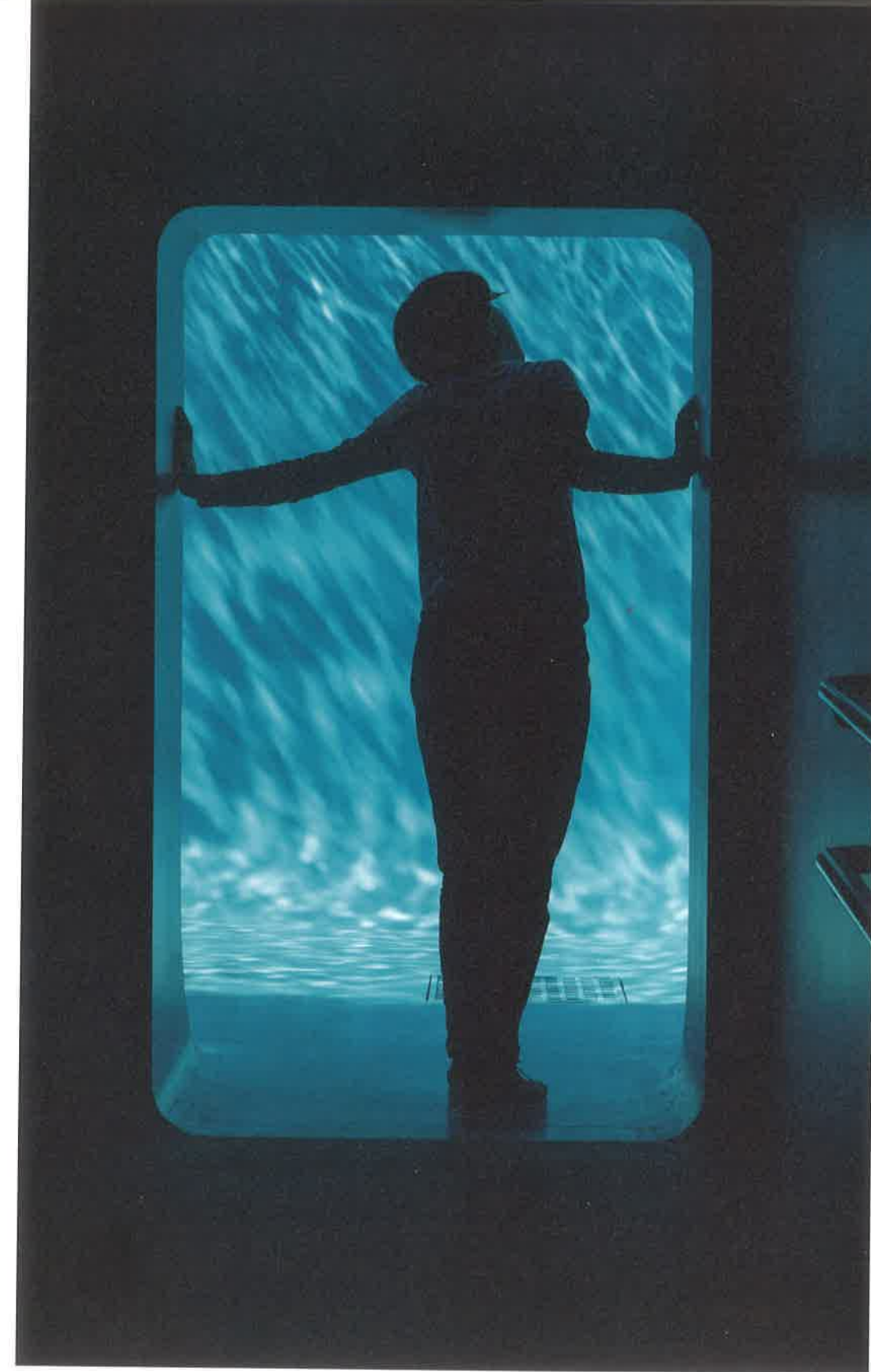
just happened a moment ago and what is about to happen a moment from now. On a narrative arc, it consists of being on the verge of entering into a specific destination or state of existence without ever fully getting there, in large degree because of the continual displacement of the immediate future with the very recent past. To hover at the liminal edge of an experience suggests being perpetually caught between a prior reality that has just been shed and a new reality beckoning at close range, but which would leave us stranded if it were possible for us to linger perpetually at the threshold of where we find ourselves. Ram Dass's famous dictum of heightened consciousness implores us to "be here now," but the unasked question in this formulation is why would such a direction be necessary in the first place. Is there some characteristic specific to human consciousness that makes it so challenging for us to grasp that a continuum of time requires that past, present and future all co-exist, tightly bundled together? Erlich's work suggests that, despite our collective conviction that our instinct is to re-center our physical and mental selves within a more sprawling framework of temporal and spatial reckonings, the truth is that many of us engage

in a continuous, unfolding guessing game about our daily patterns and routines, wherein situations that in some cases might only be real within our dreams nonetheless cast a spell of enchantment over our waking selves. Because humans are easily bored with certain kinds of repetition in our lives, we are constantly weighing alternate scenarios in our mind – the inescapable “What if?” question –, even when we are not fully conscious of doing so. This why the accumulated impact of experiencing multiple Erlich works within a single exhibition setting leaves 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 advisable.

Adjacent to *Swimming Pool*, a more recent work, *Port of Reflections*, is set in a darkened isolated space, within which two rowboats with oars appear to be resting on a body of water at night. The setting is indicated by subdued lighting and the apparent ripples across the surface, which are not meant to be entirely convincing, but just convincing enough to mildly distort the reflection of the boats and oars. Here Erlich provides all of the visual data that we need to understand that the work is a perceptual trick – the “water” is obviously a visual effect incorporated into the metallic surface –, but this revelation barely slows down the immense satisfaction that derives from allowing ourselves to perceive it the way the artist wants us to, simply because Erlich knows that it is also what we want to see. In this case, his most effective tool is the viewer’s own confirmation bias, defined as the sometimes powerful tendency to search for and interpret facts in the way that confirms pre-existing beliefs, and rejecting interpretations that don’t fulfill those desires, regardless of their plausibility.

Another of the arsenal of tools Erlich employs to lure us into a perception that the “real” world is markedly different from how we had imagined it is his often uncannily convincing evocation of the everyday. Down to the smallest detail, every aspect of his painstakingly reconstructed quotidian façade appears to be drenched in verisimilitude, thereby enabling him to more easily turn the tables on us as soon as we drop the psychological defenses that tend to kick in whenever we are confronted with the unknown. But by wrapping mystery and enigma inside a layer of the predictable and mundane – essentially an act of camouflage –, Erlich succeeds in amplifying our surprise when the twist at each work’s core is revealed.

At the same level in Malba, we find a group of commuters on a subway car, visible through a door next to the elevator, that would appear to enable us to join them if we wished to. Not surprisingly, even the sheer conventionality of peering into a car full of apparently bored passengers is set in place in order to momentarily delay the



Port of Reflections, 2014



realization that this location and these characters couldn't occupy this space at all. Although we are quick to grasp that the actual setting cannot possibly be real, this rapid assimilation of the work's "truth" constitutes the first (but hardly the last) moment when we fully comprehend that what lies before us is a fabrication of reality, but the sheer ingenuity that Erlich has directed toward perfecting this illusion generates a

Port of Reflections, 2014



secondary response, which is to continue enjoying the vision of normalcy long after the deception has been exposed. Apparently, our species also possesses the capacity to appreciate the visual trappings of conventional daily life, even in the wake of our discovery that we're being fooled by appearances, because the effort to construct a simulacrum of normalcy appears to outweigh even the implicit knowledge that we cannot rely on such visions to function as full-blown substitutes for what we know to be the non-augmented version of our everyday lives.

Subway touches on an apparent contradiction within the hidden recesses of the human imagination, which is the near limitless enjoyment we gain by watching other people go about their daily tasks, even when our behavior seems to border on sheer voyeurism. If we are permitted to continue our observations of others without being discovered in the act of spying on them, and thereby avoid any social cost for doing so, there is little if any incentive for ever averting our eyes. For most of its existence as a domestic pastime, television has attracted its significant audience share in part by creating the impression of providing a virtual window, through which you could peer into the intimate lives of

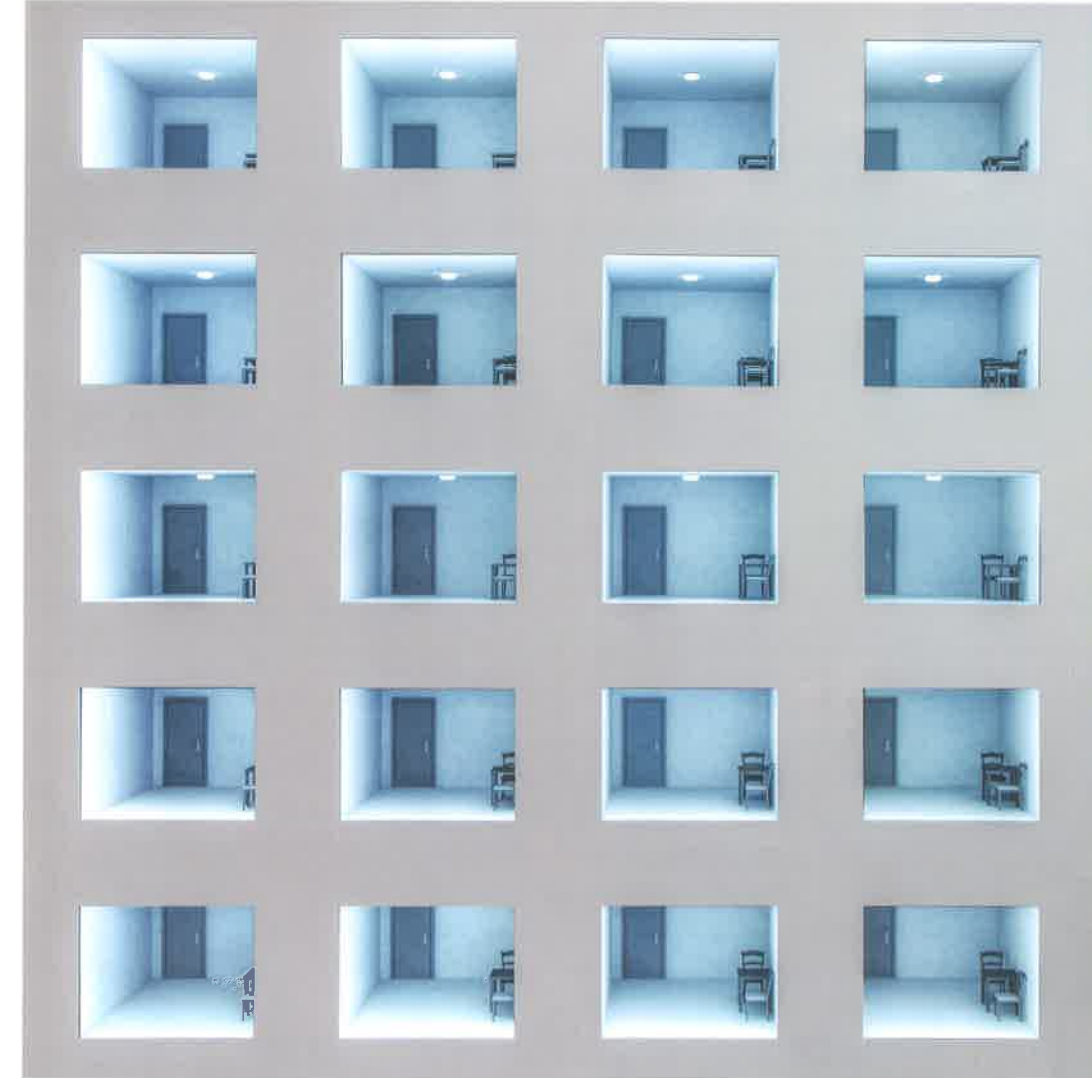
Subway, 2009



make-believe friends, family and neighbors, as well as “real-life” people and communities on the other side of the planet. In Alfred Hitchcock’s cinematic masterpiece *Rear Window*, the protagonist – played by James Stewart – , who eventually becomes convinced that he has witnessed a crime, is also the quintessentially unreliable narrator: a recuperating invalid who spends his days becoming increasingly drawn into the lives of his neighbors, whom he watches surreptitiously from the safety of his own home (sometimes with the lights turned off and the blinds drawn). A keen observer of human nature, Hitchcock built his story on the unspoken premise that we know the behavior of Stewart’s character is both wrong and irresistible, and in our identification with his character, we also tacitly acknowledge that each of us is capable of violating our neighbors’ privacy in much the same way as he is doing, which is why Erlich’s pair of installations based on the universal human impulse to spy on each other, *The View* and *The Room*, are irresistible, albeit in entirely different ways.

To experience *The Room*, we first enter a gallery in which a grid of twenty-five monitors set into the wall appear to be surveying a room in which not only does nothing seem to be happening, but the differ-

The Room (Surveillance II), 2006/2017



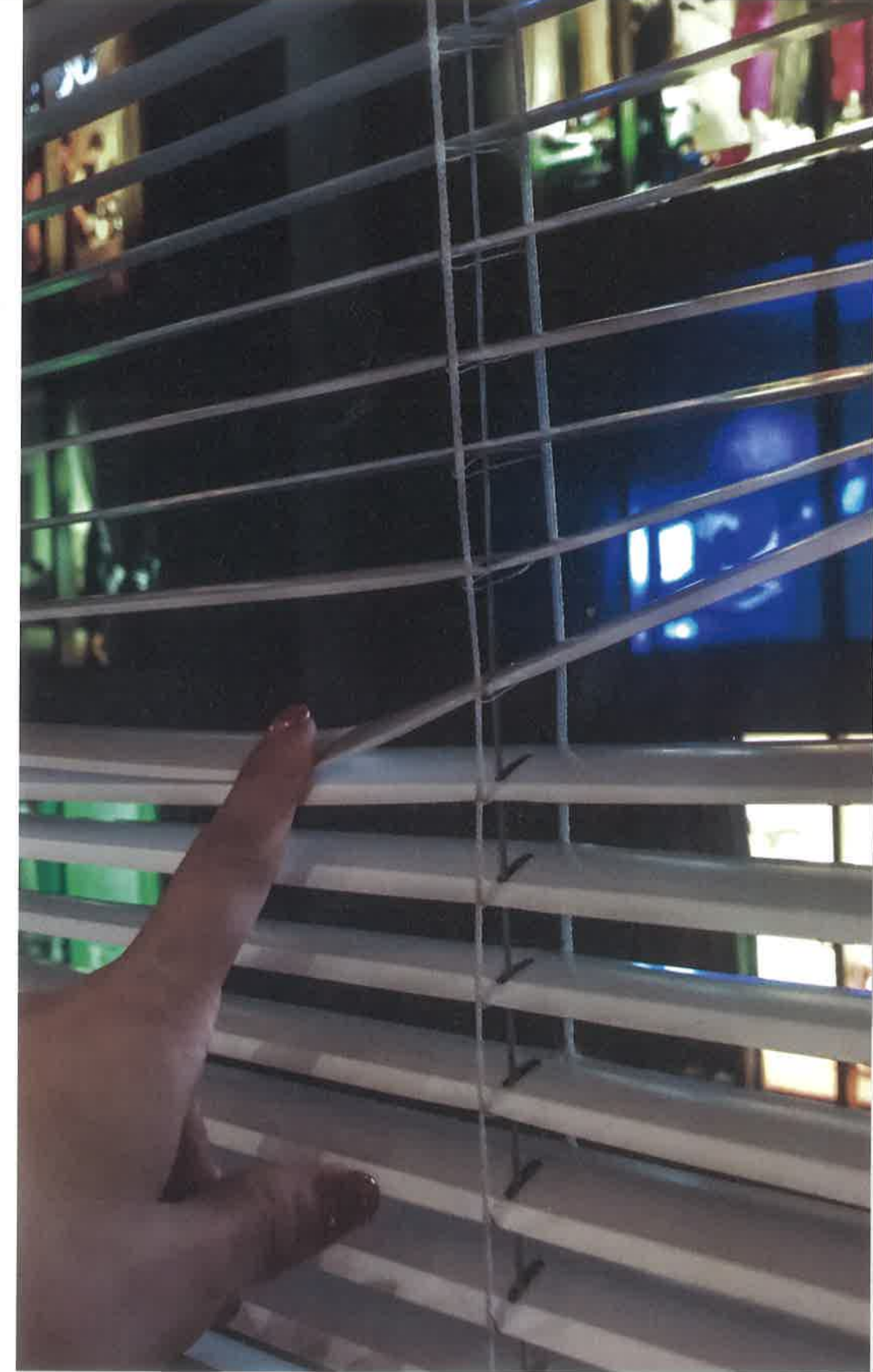
ence in our angle of vision from monitor to monitor is the same as it would be if a single camera was adjusted to correspond to each monitor in exactly the position it currently occupies. In one sense, the work embodies an exercise in creating two-point perspective, but it registers more acutely as an illustration of the degree to which a hyper-vigilant society will distort the typically human need for safety and reassurance, so that nothing at all can move without its movement being detected. With the more beguiling installation of *The View*, we confront two adjacent windows 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, only in this case they are

all actors who have been taped by unseen cameras with 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 and nothing ever will, 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.

If unlimited free time and a bottomless sense of curiosity would qualify as the essential requirements for any of us to devote an afternoon peering unseen at the daily lives of others, an entirely distinct set of skills would be called upon if we spent every day of our lives navigating unfamiliar cultures and social landscapes. With nothing predictable and anything capable of surprising us, we would soon become adept at manifesting a form of radical empathy that would in turn permit us to intuit the meanings of certain situations and occasions without needing to have them explained. The belief that we are actually capable of such deep identification with others is at the root of the universal human fantasy that we become capable of inhabiting the lives of other people, if only for a very limited duration.

Two of Erlich's most complex interactive installations rely on another standard trope of surveillance – the two-way mirror – to activate a pair of adjoining rooms of the same size in such a way that visitors entering the first room come face to face with what appears to be a very large window looking into a second room which is an apparent duplicate of the first. While the first room is intended to be 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. With *Classroom*, visitors are seated at black wooden benches and tables which, in reflection, appear to be old-fashioned desks and chairs in a decrepit wooden classroom that also looks like it has either been the site of a recent student uprising, or was simply abandoned. Anyone standing at one side or against the rear wall of the first room will find the reflection of themselves positioned in front of a blackboard, presumably ready to pick up the lesson where it was left off. The installation *Hair Salon* is based on an arrangement that is configured somewhat differently, by having two identical rooms, each with two rows of identical swivel chairs and hair products facing away from each other. Four of what appear to be mirrors along one row are in reality open windows through which one peers unknowingly into the opposite room, which has a row of actual mirrors installed along the far wall, reflecting both rooms back at spectators expecting to see their own faces. Because half of the spectators/participants position themselves in front of an actual mirror, where they see the backs of heads of the other people in the room, while half sit at windows through which

The View, 1997/2017



Classroom, 2017



they see a room that they expect to be seated in but are not, the multiple reflections create the illusion that people who are facing away from the spectator nonetheless seem to be gazing into the room directly at her or him, or they are walking around what looks like the same space she or he are currently occupying, when in fact they are on the other side, presumably as pleasurably disoriented as the spectator is.

Although the illusions sustained by works such as *Classroom* and *Hair Salon* are not by themselves visually complex, that such minutely calibrated mirrored environments are rarely encountered in daily life helps make their simplicity that much more psychologically compelling, and their playfulness more infectious. The nonsensical effect is presumably amplified if one has not been in a classroom or a hair salon in a very long time, so that the visual premise of having the power to simultaneously occupy two entirely separate spaces can be more than sufficient to lend participants a sense of license to act out the roles that seem to be intrinsic to the environment, even after the adjacent friend who a moment before seemed to be gazing meaningfully at one's head turns out to be a total stranger in the adjacent room.

Six Cycles, 2018



In such cases, the actual displacement of the socialized, so-called "performing" self onto a parallel, adjacent space where such behavior can emerge as a form of self-expression, to be observed with seeming objectivity by oneself and others, allows as well for a small but critical self-detachment, which in therapeutic environments is deemed particularly effective in permitting the subject to embody performative

Hair Salon, 2017



roles without the consequences that such behavior might incur in a different setting.

While some resistance might exist to the notion that Erlich's work could convey a type of healing benefit to his viewers – or, to use the contemporary jargon, that it is a tool for wellness –, the present emphasis on liminality suggests that he is fully aware of the potential for his art to engage realms of perception and cognition that are closely connected to our sense of orientation within the world, as opposed to simply registering the aesthetics of its beauty. This idea is borne out with certain static works, such as *The Cloud*, wherein Erlich brings us behind the scenes in a figurative sense, first by proposing that the shifting image of a cloud can be translated into a row of several receding planes of glass, onto which various stages in the transformation of a single cloud have been printed. While standing in front of the entire group enables the illusion of depth and mass to take its full effect, somehow the spell is maintained even when a cursory examination reveals that the panes of glass exist separately from one another, leading one to reasonably conclude that the components of the work should not

The Cloud, 2018



really be sufficient to produce such a convincing illusion. In other words, nothing about the presentation of these “clouds” as photographic images of gaseous forms lined up in fine cabinetry appears to detract from the stunning visual impact that derives from seeing them in place. This effectiveness of the overall visual spell seems connected to the basic illusory qualities of photography, which can record light and color with scientific accuracy, and may also, as the pioneering photographer Eadweard Muybridge learned through his experiments with stop-motion photography, be manipulated to record the passing of time in small increments. When those accumulated images are arranged in chronological sequence, the effect borders on the cinematic, even though we are seeing them from left to right. Erlich's technique is similar, but uses our memory of previous encounters to play off a cloud's quality of edgelessness in such a way that the layering of photographic images amplifies our visual fantasy of the center of the cloud as puffy and solid-looking, while its wispy edges trail off into nothingness. Evidently, capturing that visual aspect of a cloud's appearance is enough to at least partly trigger the range of sensate and contemplative responses that we would have to the actual presence of a single cloud in the sky, despite our full awareness that what is in front of us is finite, artificial and as distinct from the material reality of a cloud as possible. Our eyes are not fooled so much as we are indulging our desire to be seduced by an illusion that we know cannot be genuine, but bears enough of the trappings of the real to generate an emotive reaction.

El avión, 2011



The work *Night Flight* is rooted in a similar impulse to re-position something that is deeply familiar to us within a setting where its appearance is at best incongruous. To anyone who travels with any degree of 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 happens to be awake when the other passengers are sleeping, the awareness that one is traveling at unimaginable speeds, several miles above the earth's surface and quite often against the natural rotation of the planet, has to be actively suppressed, its place taken by a sensation of ennui and listlessness that is at least partly attributable to the varying rates of oxygen and carbon dioxide within the plane's cabin. Even in such circumstances, the appearance of the earth's surface at night from the window of a passenger jet is nothing less than extraordinary, and what Erlich's work successfully captures with pinpoint accuracy is the unique combination of wonder and bored restlessness that is one's invariable traveling companion in this situation. And because the design of airplane windows is so specific to place and circumstance,

Night Flight, 2015



the mere insertion of such a vision into a museum setting can generate an emotional effect not dissimilar to the rush of memory triggered by Proust's *madeleines*: one's mind is suddenly free to attach itself to any free-floating recollections that happen to be connected to a previous experience with looking out an airplane window at night. A secondary accompanying sensation to *Night Flight* might be surprise at encountering oneself in a public setting, face to face with a visual experience that one associates with solitude and restless wandering.

The majority of Leandro Erlich's works consider various disruptions and dislocations that take place when the psyche is released within social environments, so it is striking to consider the spectrum of engagement with self and others within his artistic trajectory, be-

ginning with those artworks, such as *The Cloud* and *Night Flight*, that focus instead on the self in a state of relatively contemplative solitude. They can be enjoyed in the company of others, but their poignancy lies in the degree to which they cast the spectator as a co-participant in the enactment of weighted metaphors for loneliness (“I wandered lonely as a cloud”). A slightly more elaborated way station on the path towards socialization, in which the solitary figure watches others from a presumably unseen vantage point, is rendered by works such as *The Room* and *The View*, which are equally accessible to solitary or group appreciation. At the furthest extreme are *Swimming Pool*, *Classroom* and *Hair Salon*, which are left in a somewhat inert state without the constant presence of other people circulating through the work, stopping to figure it out, and discussing it among themselves.

Among the works whose position along this spectrum is somewhat flexible is the deliberately unobtrusive *Lost Garden*, which fits snugly into a triangular space, and seems to offer spectators nothing more complicated than a view onto an arrangement of potted plants within a brick-lined patio-type enclosure. Although it is clearly identifiable as a triangular structure from the exterior, a disconcerting moment nonetheless occurs when one peers inside either of the windows and sees one’s own reflection at an oblique angle, while someone standing at the adjacent window would appear to be looking right at you from the window directly in front. Once your sensory tools have made a provisional adjustment to this arrangement, however, the perceptual puzzle begins to deepen, because there does not seem to be any apparent doubling or distortion of the plants within the contained space. The inherent perceptual contradiction lies in the space reflecting back to us both an image that we know is accurate yet appears implausible, and an image that looks completely normal but whose very existence we would be foolish not to question. This may or may not lend *Lost Garden* the characteristics suitable to serving as the type of contemplative space that a secret garden would represent, but it does quickly differentiate us from our own reflection, permitting us to see ourselves anew as lovers of nature, on a quest to extract the deepest meanings from the most unlikely sources.

Voyeurism as a feature of the alienation implicit to urban life is a consistent subplot throughout Erlich’s oeuvre, and his first successful effort to frame it within another evocation of an impossible space is *Neighbors*, which has the unassuming appearance of a conventional apartment door, mounted to a freestanding base in such a way that one side appears to belong to the interior of an apartment, while the other is seemingly part of a common hallway space connecting the other apartment on the same floor. Each side of the door has a peep-

Lost Garden, 2009



hole, presumably for security purposes (although it’s hard to imagine why someone standing outside the apartment would be justified looking in). No matter which side of the door one stands on, however, 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 and with the perspective reversed (i.e., windows, elevator and fire extinguisher on alternate walls), which leads even the most astute viewers to question why they can’t also see the magnified eyeball of the other person peering in from the other end. Meanwhile, and not by accident, the only logical explanation to this conundrum – that the peepholes look onto two entirely separate miniaturized spaces – is precisely the one that your internal sense of visual continuity attempts to reject, because it doesn’t match what our eyes “believe” they’re seeing.

Considered within the full trajectory of Erlich’s artistic development, such impossible spaces that cannot truly exist in the real world appear to represent the essence of how the experience of liminality is isolated and framed by our interactions with his work as a whole. For

Neighbors, 1996/2017



the sake of argument, let's even posit that at the precise moment in time when our perception of Erlich's work shifts, and we can suddenly see things very differently than we had only a moment before, we have undergone a direct experience of the liminal. There is no perceptible before or after, nor can the liminal moment itself ever be re-created, since the sudden jolt of clarity that what appears to be true is in fact something else

Elevator, 1995/2017



can never be undone. In *El ascensor* [Elevator], our dilemma revolves, once more, about 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. Nonetheless, despite the clarity with which the work announces that it completely lacks any real function, curiosity draws us in closer, so that at the very least we can take a quick look at what is 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, the realization, one beat later, that such a thing isn't possible, which means that the only way we could be fooled, yet again, is by a photographic image above our heads which is reflected in the mirrored sur-

face below. One suspects that *El ascensor* is also somewhat predicated on the precept that what our imaginations secretly yearn for as we peer inside is, in fact, the glimpse of a secret elevator shaft running below the floor of the museum, because that would serve as proof that the laws of nature have been momentarily suspended, and that perception overrules logic. Each of the two surprises is, in its way, a demonstration of how the liminal acts to correct or undermine whichever is the dominant perspective at the moment: from reality to fantasy, or illusion to revelation.

Cumulatively, Erlich's work acts to consistently undermine the rationalism that typically presides over the realm of visual knowledge, and replace that rationalism with something that at times seems to border on science fiction. In one of the climactic works of the exhibition, *Sidewalk*, he even goes so far as to actualize a fantasy whose essence draws deeply from the dreams of childhood: an entire civilization that lives in a world parallel to this one, and can only be glimpsed under special circumstances. Passing behind a wall that has been constructed a short distance from the permanent wall, the viewer steps into a darkened zone and onto a sidewalk that crosses in front of a long, low-lying aperture that seems to be filled with dirt. Running along the edge between the dirt and the sidewalk is a lengthy puddle of water, in which we can clearly see an upside-down reflection of a row of apartment building façades that visually correspond to what might be on the other side of the wall. Despite the fact that we've just come from the other side of that same wall, where we know beyond doubt there is a fully illuminated gallery filled with art lovers, for a split second the poetic clarity of the image before us outweighs its visual incongruity, and we may even experience a momentary flash of doubt, in which we find ourselves wondering if perhaps somewhere back there we might have taken the wrong turn and gotten lost. Once we have grasped what we are seeing, the sheer extravagance of *Sidewalk's* underlying premise – an entire parallel civilization exclusively visible by studying its reflection on the surface of a mud puddle – begins to seem not simply desirable but necessary, if only because its most lasting impact is not to make us believe in the veracity of Erlich's vision, but to give us some basis for doubting, even for a split second, the dull veracity of the bricks-and-mortar civilization we live within every day. In fact, one of the lingering effects of *Sidewalk* is the difficulty we may face in attempting to describe it to others, simply because the very circumstances seem so out of the ordinary. We may even feel compelled to return for a second visit, in order to confirm for our senses that we actually saw what we think we saw.

Undermining the cultural limitations placed on unspoken rules regarding what we perceive when we look at something has always been a cherished goal of the wonkier flank of the historic avant-garde. To cite

Elevator Pitch, 2012



one of the best-known examples, by creating his sequential paintings of haystacks in 1890 and 1891, Claude Monet's goal was to wield a form of authorship over a phenomenon witnessed by all *plein air* painters (not to mention farmers and shepherds): the colors of everything outdoors change dramatically with the passing of the sun across the sky during a typical day (and throughout the four seasons), so that a scene viewed in early morning light appears nothing like the identical scene ten or even six hours later. But with pre-Impressionist pictorial convention adamant that each view of the pastoral be persuasive as the visual record of a singular event (exceptions were made for pairings), no pre-Monet basis existed to bring such a meticulous study of changes in nature's illumination program to the attention of the salon-going public – most

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of whom appeared to spend the bulk of their waking lives in large cities and indoors. In breaking with convention, Monet's goal was to visualize a phenomenon that seems plainly accurate to us nearly a century and a half later, but his intentions were not clear at all to his contemporaries, despite the fact that the 1891 exhibition focusing on the haystacks was the artist's most successful up to that moment in his life.

Today, we are less concerned with the optics of our everyday world than with conventional definitions of "reality" at a historical moment when it has become far easier to deceive, distract and even brainwash broad swaths of the populace through determination, clever manipulation, and the untamed shores of social media. The need to sharpen one's powers of critical inquiry to interrogate competing representations of the public sphere has rapidly become an urgent cultural necessity, and even that overwhelming majority of contemporary artworks which do not convey any explicit political content or message are increasingly engaged with questions of how alert members of society can know when their perceptions are being manipulated, and what to do about it. While it would be a mistake to over-identify Erlich's work with any self-defined "resistance" against the particular political norms of his time and place, what is undeniable is that he has carefully studied the ways in which people as a whole become unconscious of and desensitized to their surroundings, and he has focused his attention on a single, unwavering message in his artwork, which is that the very basis of consciousness is that one remain alert and constantly skeptical of what our senses are telling us. While taking issue with Erlich's methodology or even his deeper concerns is a valid response, as with any artist's chosen medium, in his case it's difficult not to acknowledge that the keen public interest in his art seems less symptomatic of an era of perpetual selfies, and more part of a growing (if largely unvoiced) conviction that the illusions best forwarded by art in this day and age should also function as tools to inspect and unpack entire systems of belief on the spot. In large part because broadcast and broadband media seem determined to prove that any limits to the human brain's capacity to absorb and withstand continuous bombardment by multiple streams of fast-moving images of persuasion and distraction still have not been reached. If anything, it is reassuring to know that at least one artist at work today is not just engaged in taking his viewers step by step through the process of their own deception, but in making sure they can examine the site of the deception as many times as desired. Erlich's art finally reveals its deepest intentions when the things that make the greatest impression in retrospect are how willingly you were fooled, and the lingering determination that next time you won't be tricked quite so easily.

