

Leandro Erlich: Galerie Gabrielle Maubrie - Reviews: Paris

ArtForum, Feb, 2003 by Jean-Max Colard

The globe-trotters of the contemporary-art world remember it still: In June 2001, at the 49th Venice Biennale, Leandro Erlich, representing Argentina (that year exhibiting in the Central Post Office), invited people to participate in a strange experience--to enter a swimming pool fully clothed and immerse themselves, without getting wet, in an enormous empty blue container, its roof a transparent sheet of Plexiglas covered by a thin layer of water. But the story of *La Pileta* (The swimming pool), 1999/2001, did not end there. Viewers could also climb to the upper level of the post office and see the installation from above, where, in a kind of reverse shot, another vision awaited, one that was just as satisfying: Though the fluid and reflective surface, one could see other Biennale visitors moving about at the bottom of the blue pool as if underwater, a chic subaqueous society strutting about, smoking, holding glasses of champagne, seeing and being seen.

The son of an architect, Erlich, who was born in Buenos Aires in 1973, spent several years in the United States, and currently resides in Paris, knows how to create a space and construct an object. But the complexity of his setups obliges us to recount rather than describe them, to talk about the experiences they provoke--a sign that they are based on narrative thinking, that they construct a fiction and inscribe themselves within a time frame that extends well beyond the simple instantaneity of an amusing gag or *trompe l'oeil*. Further proof lies in *El Living* (Living room), 1998/2002, a stunning installation presented this fall in Paris, based on an installation previously constructed at the Kent Gallery in New York. First imagine a small apartment: a simple living room with a sofa, a carpet, a coffee table; on the wall hung a clock and a movie poster. You enter the space alone, and at first you think this is merely the reconstruction of a fairly common interior made up of mass-produced elements. Facing the sofa is a wall composed of two framed mirrors that reflect the living room perfectly. That's where the trouble begins: You can't see yourself in the second mirror. You bring your hand to the frame only to find that it holds no glass; finally you realize you're seeing not a mirror image but another room, an absolutely real, absolutely identical room set up to resemble a reflection: The clock is hanging in the same place on the wall but displays the time backward, the movie poster is printed backward, and so on.

No doubt the power of this installation comes from its being at once very reduced and very complex, simple in appearance yet ultimately labyrinthine. With its games of illusion, inversion, reflections present or absent, this living room, as neutral as the set for a sitcom,

elicits a sense of extreme paranoia, establishing a cinematic --Hitchcockian--suspense: Are you caught in a trap? The artist, for his part, emphasizing the psychological labor with which his installation burdens the viewer, cites not Hitchcock but Roman Polanski's *The Tenant* (1976). And he adds what has become the "relationalist" credo of contemporary art: "The structure engages the viewer in the experience."

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