

almost existential or ontological—positing philosophical matters. So my question to Liliana is, apart from considerations of serious ingenuousness, or ingenuous seriousness, is there another philosophical support? I'd like to think so, but I'd like to know if it's in line with Heidegger's propositions in his book *Poetry, Language, Thought* where he discusses the transformation of the subject through the experience of art, or art as an ontological transformation. Heidegger's idea is of aesthetic experience as a transformation of the subject in the battle between "the World" and "the Earth." Here we see earthly materials squaring off in battle with the world in which we humans participate and which art takes hold of to produce that spark and that transformation. I don't know if there's any Heidegger behind Liliana's ideology, so that's my question.

LP Well, you all would have to tell me that, because I'm neither a philosopher nor a theorist, and I simply enunciate the things that concern me. I'm not really even saying anything; I just present situations that allow me to think and come to terms with reality. So that's my answer.

Participant My question is this: Where in your life do those little figures come from? Did you relate to them when you were a girl, or had you never seen them before and that was why they seemed so funny to you? What is your relationship to them?

LP Well, I get them at flea markets, antique stores and places like that. When I think about it—because I'm often asked how I choose them—I'd say I know them when I see them, but I have to look at them closely and think about what they're like. What they have in common are their expressions, like they don't understand that much, that they're perplexed. Most are from the time when I was baby, so I'd never choose a Barbie, because I never played with one and there's no empathy there. Some are toys and others are knickknacks. For me knickknacks are a mystery: that someone would take a glass rabbit, put it on a shelf and think that's normal. Now since I'm so immersed in all this, I note that most of the umbrellas have a duck-head and that the salt-shakers are bears; that there are animals everywhere. It's gotten so that now that my house is in the Hudson Valley, where deer still live—and although I moved there long ago—when a deer shows up in my yard, it's like something out of Walt Disney for me. It's the same as the first deer I saw in the movies when I was a girl, so I have to intellectualize the fact that it's an animal, that it's alive and all that.

Participant I just want to ask if you're married.

LP I'm twice divorced, which is to say *no*. Are you making a proposal?

JLB Careful. This could constitute forced labor...

LP Thank you very much.

JLB Thanks to all.

Translated by Michael Parker Stainback.

Conversation

Leandro Erlich and Ivo Mesquita

Ivo Mesquita Now we're going to move on to a conversation with Leandro Erlich, who arrived this morning after a long flight and some of the airport adventures that are becoming more and more common these days, what with the different companies and visas, etc. I'd like to welcome him here and tell you all that I have been interested in Leandro's work since I first met him in Houston in the mid-1990s. This is something that happens nowadays: a Brazilian and an Argentinean meeting somewhere like Houston, when they're practically neighbors back home. I've been following his career since that meeting. [Someone discreetly turns the name plates on the table around, because they have been placed backwards, but Ivo turns them back.] No, no, it's an amalgam of the artist and the curator, an appropriation. They say that we curators are constantly appropriating artists' intelligence.

Let's begin our conversation with an initial description of Leandro's work over the last ten years, and then, given that these projects are installations where the public plays an important role in terms of how the project is presented—always theatrical in appearance and with audience involvement, seducing the spectator through a play of perception and illusion until the entire work is revealed—we will show some videos which demonstrate how these installations work.

Leandro Erlich Thank you, Ivo, for the invitation, and thanks to everyone here. I think it would be a good idea to look at some images before I start speaking, to give you an idea of the kind of work I've been doing in recent years. To begin with, as a sort of an introduction, let me tell you that my work is connected to architecture. The work acts as a scene where the public is invited to interact and to play a determined role. The script for this scene is suggested, in a sense, by the space, but then it is transformed into an experience based on previous experiences and the referential aspect of the work.

I'll start with *The Elevator*, from 1995, because chronologically speaking, it marked the beginning of the work I would develop later. It is a work where the anecdotal... Well, I'm going to tell you an anecdote that led up to this work, and I'm also going to tell you that I come from a family of architects. My father, my brother and my aunt are all architects, but my only interest in architecture is as a lived experience, because I believe that physical spaces are the stages where our lives and our emotions are played out. What happens is that in most cases, we aren't continuously aware of the space where things happen. Perhaps out of an ambition to be hyperrealistic, all my projects are quite large, because it's important that this elevator—now I will explain the work—be life-size: it's not a representation of an elevator but rather the intention of *making* an

elevator. In this case, the French embassy and a certain foundation in Buenos Aires were offering an award to artists. The contest's specifications stated that the measurements of the work, whether sculpture or object, should not exceed 80 by 80 centimeters in area, and 180 centimeters in height. It seemed odd to me: why those exact specifications? As it turned out, the works were going to be displayed on the second floor, so they had to fit into the foundation's elevator. And so it occurred to me to make an elevator to fit inside the original elevator. The only parts of my work that resembled an elevator were the button panel and the door. It had an aesthetic similar to the elevators I remembered from growing up in Buenos Aires in the 1960s. The car was turned inside out like a glove, and the entire interior opened out convexly. When looking in the door through the grate, what you saw was this: for the whole length of the object, I had reproduced a section of the elevator shaft with a mirror above it and another below it, so that the shaft looked like it continued on to infinity.

The work that followed *The Elevator* was another object, entitled *Neighbors*. The door reproduces the interior space of the apartment. On the other side there is a matching door, with an automatic door opener. In the forty-centimeter gap between the two, there are two scale models of hallways. The lens in the peephole creates the impression that you are looking at a real hallway.

IM There is a kind of inversion of architecture here: revealing something that is not seen, like a simulation....

LE Yes, it is a fragment of a space... At one point, I was very interested in the reference that existed in the materials, in the ordinary, the middle class... the whole aesthetic of the work in its early stages was governed by that: for example, it was important to me that it be formic. Another thing that interested me was interaction. There weren't any signs or posters, but people would come up and look through the peephole—theoretically looking at the neighbor's door. As the project develops, I feel that I am taking more control of the work's capacity in a metaphorical or literary sense. It creates a situation. There is something a little paranoid about the idea of a door that doesn't open so that all one can do is spy on the neighbor's door through the peephole. I remember that shortly after this project, I saw Polanski's *The Tenant*, which contains a scene with this image.

Moving on, in 1998 I did a project called *The Living Room*. It was the first installation where my intention was to break with the object's contour, so that the limit between the art object and the architecture would not be clear to the spectator and he or she would feel entirely involved in the space. The work consists of the following: you enter a space and the first thing you see is a mirror, and the second thing you see is another mirror. But the fact is that the second mirror isn't really a mirror but rather, a hole that leads into another room where everything is a duplicate of the first. It is a very simple effect that reproduces the mirror image that would be generated if there were indeed a mirror there. A lot of people went in and right back out again, because why bother looking at a second mirror if they had already seen the

first; but those that ventured further and looked at the false mirror did not see themselves in the "reflection."

Next is *The Swimming Pool* (or *La piscina*, or *La pileta* or *La Piscine*), currently on display at the Twenty-First Century Museum in Kanazawa, Japan, which opened in 2004. I originally came up with the idea in Houston, while I was on a grant, but it was installed on a permanent basis in this extraordinary museum built by Kasuyo Sejima.

IM It is a kind of movement from the representation of architecture toward an integration with architecture.

LE Yes, exactly. I don't know if it gets the idea across. It is a very simple work: a pool without water, and a large sheet of glass that holds a few centimeters of water over it, creating the impression that it is full of water. To get inside, you have to go underground, creating another image from within.

IM But there is a seductive effect—as in all works of art. It hooks the viewer by involving him or her in the work.

LE Yes. Next is *Rain*, an installation that I did for the Whitney Biennial in 2002. There is an interior and exterior space. When you enter the space, the water begins to circulate, and you can hear the rain but not see it. Every time you hear thunder, the space lights up and you see drops of water suspended in a very abstract scene. It is like the space dividing two buildings that stand very close to each other.

Next is *The Ballet Studio* at the Shanghai Biennale. I spent a month there preparing this piece with some performers who do Tai Chi. This is something I would like to emphasize because, like *Tourism* in Havana and *The Tower* in Korea... well, I have been to a lot of biennials, and each time I am invited, it is an opportunity to develop a dialogue with the context.

IM There is no pre-proposal concept. It is developed on the spot like in the residency model.

LE Yes, exactly. The residency model.

IM Because yesterday, we were talking a lot about the residency model and about artists, as a condition for the production of contemporary art.

LE Definitely. Until recently, it was never possible for me to create these works without institutional support. I did one work per year, and that was it. *Eclectic* is a work from 2002 that echoes the idea of *The Living Room* to a certain extent, but in a glass-works. I did *The Tower* in Busan. It was the first time that I had been invited to do a project in Asia, in South Korea to be exact. This project was inspired by the architecture of modern towers and the laughable hypothesis of a hole through the Earth connecting both hemispheres. It's easier to understand in the video.

Bâtiment is a project I did in Paris in 2004. It involved a mirror set at a forty-five-degree angle reflecting a building, which was really nothing more than a stage set that people were asked to walk across. I swear I didn't ask the people to do the things they did—what you can see in the videos. Only twenty people could be on the set at

a time, so the 5000 people who attended this one-night-only event stood in line for a long time, and while they were standing in line, they thought about what original thing they were going to do when on the set. Two months ago, I was invited to do a similar project in Japan, at the Shido Summary Biennale. I was interested in re-creating a building from the area. All I can tell you about this project—because it was exactly the same as the one in Paris—is that I was invited to a region three hours from Tokyo, in the mountains, and I told them that I wanted to copy a building from the area. They gave me a tour through some typical buildings, the ones they thought were the nicest. There was a lot of discussion about it, and they were surprised when I chose the kind of architecture I did, which was like ninety-five percent of the architecture in the region. It was interesting for me, because once again, I saw that art had the power to define what was beautiful, to define beauty. Utilizing an architecture that no longer exists in that region, a Japanese wooden house, because now all the houses are sheet-metal, with a rectangular window, another square one, one large and the other small, or round, and that's how people live. I thought there was beauty in that, and I thought it was important that the people of this community be confronted with their own house, not with a "nice house." At another biennial, this time in Cuba, I did a project in collaboration with another Argentinean artist, Judy Wartein, in 2001. It was a photographic set where we invited the public—both locals and people from the art world—to have their picture taken in the snow, with Fidel Castro's soldiers.

IM There was a strange story about the project: the military didn't approve....

LE Yes. The third day, a colonel arrived and, seeing that there were soldiers, he said, "You don't have permission to take pictures of them." We made an exchange, giving them one Polaroid and keeping another. Cuba has an extraordinary public for a project like this, because there is a very playful element there, and of course, the reference to a certain political situation. This landscape, which was impossible in the Caribbean, was also impossible for political reasons. In that sense, there was a hint of political subversion to the project; but for us, the intention was always linked to the situation of the people. When we reached Cuba, people would say, "Oh, Argentineans—*El Che*," and then they would sing the song "Che Guevara." As if a distance had always existed. When we began the project, we were all playing the same game, and the tourist-local relationship no longer existed. The thing is, the colonel came to us and said, "You don't have authorization to take pictures of soldiers in uniform." We told him that it was an art project, but he kept on saying the same thing. We showed him photographs from previous days, and he said, "This one is of General Aníbal. Well, then. Can I come back with my nieces?" That was the spirit of the whole project.

The Doors was a project for the São Paulo Biennial of 2004. It only lasted for a day because the doors broke. You would go into a dark room and see light coming through the cracks around the doors, but when you opened one of them, you found yourself in another dark room: the light was inside the door itself. These are all different

searches related to moments and things I think about, trying to incorporate certain metaphors. Someone told me that it had to do with the saying, "The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence." To me it had more to do with the impossibility of grasping time, the idea of opening something and only then becoming aware of that impossibility, because what you were looking for was no longer there.

IM It also has to do with the fact that in the context of the biennials, one might think that it is a kind of passage toward another artist, and there was this irony, that there was no passage, because of the saturation of the biennials, or something like that.

LE That's the good thing. The critics always make a work out to be more interesting than it is. Liliana was talking about this a while ago. Obviously, what we produce originates in a strong intuitive charge and we operate under certain theories, because the work clearly didn't turn out the way it did by accident. But it seems to me that play turns into theory when art history and criticism are able to see things that the artist simply doesn't see, or did not consciously plan, or because the artwork has the magic and the possibility of resignifying itself. A few more works: *An Invisible Man Walking*; *The Psychoanalyst's Office*, which is the subject of another video; *The Staircase*, which is a staircase lying on its side, providing the stereotypical image of vertigo.

IM There are always certain elements of your work that refer to the idea of vertigo: the staircase, the elevator, the tunnel, the pool seen from underneath....

LE This particular project was shown in London along with the elevator I mentioned earlier. It had an "Out of Order" sign on it in this case. The joke was that the elevator was broken, so people had to take the stairs.

The View was originally from 1997, but a new version was shown at the Italian Pavilion of the last Venice Biennale, at the invitation of María de Corral. It's a work on video. Something odd happens to me with video: all my work has a perceptual element, but to me, it's important that this value be decoded in experience. Movies and video—I'm a huge movie buff—both contain fascinating things in perceptual terms, but there is also a certain inaccessibility in terms of knowing how things work, how they are made. I think that this is also a way to activate intelligence. Unless we are computer programmers, we don't know what's inside a chip, or how visual effects work in a movie, or anything like that. In this case, I was interested in using video because it made a clear reference to something cinematographic—something like Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, which presents a voyeuristic situation. It contains scenes that I filmed at my parents' house with friends and non-professional (not-at-all-professional!) actors, and we created a silent film. The work was shown in a window, without sound, and you tried to figure out what was happening in the scenes during that ten-minute loop.

Eau Molle, or *Soft Water*, consists of things that I did during the three or four years that I lived in Toulouse, France. It is a photographic impression of a digitalized image of water. I made a mattress out of it and filled it with water. It is lit from underneath,

and when people walk around it, the water inside produces movement in the static waves from the photograph.

IM Windows, water, tunnels, vertigo, theater. Let's watch some videos.

LE The videos I've brought are not art—they're just slapdash documentation that I found last week. In my conversations with Ivo in São Paulo a couple of weeks ago, it occurred to me that it would be fun to watch them. So I quickly edited these home videos together. I don't have Parkinson's, but the camera moves a lot. Some of the videos had music, so I've made some video clips. Sorry, some of the music is terrible.

[The videos are screened.]

IM Thank you, Leandro. Now we'll move on to some questions. I wanted to ask you something: you present a lot of projects in Asia. How do you feel about this? To your mind, what is it about your work that Asian countries like? You've been to Japan eleven times, I believe.

LE Yes, it's strange. To me, long before I ever traveled there, Asia was always in every aspect like a fantasy, a mystery, something that intrigued me. There are two important factors that should be mentioned in regards to Asia and Japan. One of them is the massive support I was given by the former curator of the museum in Kanazawa, Yuko Hasegawa. She was the one who invited me. She was able to have the pool installed on a permanent basis in this fantastic museum created by Kasuyo Sejima and her architecture firm. It was important to me, due to the enormous risk taken by any institution when backing a young artist. I created the swimming pool when I was only twenty-six. When it was shown in Venice, I was still quite young. There are three permanent exhibitions at this museum. One is a work by Anish Kapoor, the second by James Turrell, and the third is *The Swimming Pool*. I think it was a huge risk, and because of that, my excitement is not only about the fact that the work had been made into a permanent installation—this would obviously affect anyone. Rather, the most incredible thing is to have someone helping you, on an institutional basis, to create your own utopia however you see fit. They had seen the first version of *The Swimming Pool*. I made it myself, taking four months to do it, and it was a great learning process. However, it couldn't be an in-ground pool. The fact that a work can find better modes of expression allows people to appreciate all aspects of that work. For this year's work, *The Building (Bâtiment)*, there was a similar situation: "We'll help you do this project in the best possible way."

IM This raises the question of how these projects are funded. You work in an institutional space, where there is a certain investment made to produce the work, so it is no longer independent of the market.

LE Unfortunately, I think my work was too independent of the market. These were unsellable pieces. *The Tower* is in a dump somewhere. Many of them were destroyed along the way, but I was lucky to be able to do them in the first place. The first

Swimming Pool was destroyed, because storage was more costly than the materials used to make it. My point is that in my case, I can keep doing the large commissioned works as long as I continue to do smaller pieces in my studio. But I need backing to be able to realize the larger projects; otherwise, they could not exist. The amazing thing about Japan is that the Japanese are practically groupies, like baseball fans. Every time I go to Japan—and I understand very little Japanese—they seem to be talking about *The Swimming Pool*, which they call *pool*. A lot of words come from English, so every time I'm introduced, I hear the word *pool*. Everyone has heard of my swimming pool, and they ask for my autograph, as if I were Mick Jagger. The culture fascinates me because there is a large degree of refinement and intelligence, as well as everything that it has generated: for example, Japan's influence on minimalism. It is a very delicate culture, and I am very happy that they like what I do.

IM Thank you, Leandro. Let's go to the public for some questions.

Participant Do you work with your dreams? What is the function of impossibility in your work?

LE I don't actually work with my dreams, though there is perhaps something dream-like about my work. I almost never remember my dreams, and when I do, they are terrible dramas. But speaking of dreams, what is interesting is that we question what is real in them. I am interested in that process, hence the reference to the oneiric. Someone once said that my work was reminiscent of Magical Realism or Surrealism. Of course it is: I'm from Argentina. But I wanted to die when I heard that, because the point is that anything in art that entails a questioning of reality is Surreal, but I myself am not interested in Surrealism. I create works and I want them to be as hyper-realist as possible. Of course, as long as everything is altered, and there is a reconstruction of reality, in a more utopian sense.

IM You also have a *Psychoanalyst's Office*, which is also connected to a world that is neither Magical Realism nor Surrealism, but has to do with the Lacanian and French psychoanalytical tradition, whose ideas Argentina helped to spread.

LE One of my favorite museums in Paris is the Musée des Arts et Métiers. It contains reproductions of the experiments that scientists had been developing since the Enlightenment. An anecdote: in the eighteenth century, Léon Foucault did an experiment to measure the speed of light (which is reproduced in the museum). The experiment consisted of a table with a series of mirrors, and another mirror rotating at 12,000 rpm. There was no electricity, so he had to manually rotate the mirror at that precise and constant speed. He worked with a musician who developed a bellows with a flute that played a constant A, as measured by a tuning fork. As long as the flute was playing this note, Foucault knew that the mirror's speed was constant, and he could thus carry out his calculations. I imagined Foucault leaving his room to go have a beer, and walking down a street lit with oil lamps just after he had discovered the speed of light, however approximate. There was something in this construction of

thought and the structure that allows one to rethink things and understand how they are made that provoked a feeling of optimism in me. I think it provokes a lot of optimism in the participating public. There is a very playful element, but at the same time, it's about the ability to recognize how the device functions. I don't work on the basis of the illogical element that a dream can have, but on that of the most absolute rationality.

Participant I'm surprised by your works' ability to dislocate the gaze, and for a brief moment, they transport me into an inhabitable virtuality. The break with perspective and the ability to reflect ourselves enabled me to live on a screen for a moment, in that space that can be both inhabitable and very suited to this era. And the project in Japan, the last one, seemed almost dangerous to me: standing there, constantly looking at yourself in the mirror, can make you lose your awareness of the here and now, or project you to the other side of what you see and it opens. I thought it was very enlightening and rich in significance.

LE Thank you. I like danger.

IM We talked earlier about deception as a negation of temporality.

LE There is something about the optical, the perceptual, that interests me for precisely that reason. I feel that it has a certain timelessness. These visual effects, everything to do with perception, can be articulated in the retina without getting old... Maybe *The Psychoanalyst's Office* won't say anything to anyone tomorrow, because we'll all be taking pills by then. But what happens in that glass where one does not become a ghost seems to have a degree of timelessness. The furniture is old-fashioned. The same thing is going to happen with *The Swimming Pool*. Maybe in the future, pools will be silver, and it will be hard to recognize one as an ordinary, everyday pool from the space where you live. But I feel that what it articulates in an optical sense—looking at people underwater—will continue to be articulated in a similar fashion. Perception evolves in human beings, but much more slowly than knowledge or aesthetics does. The first people to watch a movie thought they were going to be run over by a train. But today, the evolution of the perceptible is slower than cultural or aesthetic evolution. That's very interesting to me.

Participant (Allan McCollum) I'm curious why you did a psychoanalyst's office and not a barbershop or a hotel room, something like that.

LE It's important to point out that psychoanalysis in Buenos Aires is as big as baseball in the United States.

IM They say there's one psychoanalyst for every ten people.

LE You take a cab and the cabdriver says, "What's wrong? Are you stressed out? Aren't you being a little paranoid?" It's rampant. You hear it in a lot of café conversation. It forms part of our cultural identity in Buenos Aires. This project was not done in Buenos Aires but in France, another place where psychoanalysis is a very important mode of thought—especially in Paris, beginning with Lacan. I did this project early last year, and another point is that—as with other artworks—you begin to insert yourself, to establish situations that involve personal issues. I wasn't doing psychoanalysis, but I

did begin to reflect on my life, on my own existence, on what I wanted. They're just anecdotes that in the end have no relevance to the fate of the work, but I do believe that artists filter our lives and our understanding of things into their art.

When you're creating art, the intuitive component is vast and almost magical. Someone once told me—I wasn't aware of this myself—that there is a term in psychoanalysis that defines the moment when a patient or any person no longer needs psychoanalysis. It is the end of psychoanalysis. They call it *defeating your own ghost* or *transcending your own ghost*. You might say that I based this work on that notion. That isn't quite the truth, but it's an interesting idea to contemplate.

Participant What you said about some of your unsellables really resonated with me. I get the impression that your work is made to last, so I suppose you envision your art as enduring rather than ephemeral—it only has to find its own place. I'd like to know whether you have any other kind of work that can circulate more easily, or what your passage through the markets is like.

LE It is a subject of interest for me, but in truth, there are works that are much more collectible. When I was working on a grant in Houston, Allison Green—the museum's contemporary art curator—said to me, "Leandro, your work is really good, but haven't you thought about doing collectible work?" Honestly, I have developed work that collectors have purchased, and that has allowed me to make a living and continue to produce. But at the time, I told Allison something I believed and continue to believe: I'm interested in creating the works that I feel a need to create. I don't have a bad relationship with the art market, but I demand a lot of myself, and I don't produce in large quantities. What you have seen here is the product of eleven years of work. There are not many pieces, and to me, that's the point. That's how I am able to work. The works are large-scale. *The Elevator* couldn't have been a little box. Just imagine: it had to have the same dimensions as a refrigerator.

Participant As someone who is not an artist but is familiar with Lacanian psychoanalysis, I found *The Psychoanalyst's Office* to be very interesting and very surprising, because over the space of ten to twelve years, Lacan developed certain ideas regarding the mirror stage, which leads precisely into a fabrication which, when interpreted, is very enigmatic: the translucent mirror. The moment at which one is able to have both the mirror and a gaze that can traverse the mirror and find the real. This is exactly what you have created here. It is something very noteworthy, and it is a treasure for those of us who are interested in the field. I want to ask you a question: during your dialogue with Ivo, you spoke of a certain point of invisibility in the artist that is not the same as that of the critic. There is a critical visibility and vision that is not the same position as that of the artist in terms of visibility. Your piece problematizes visibility in different ways: with the mirror, perspective, illusions, tricks. My question is this: do you think it is possible to build a bridge between your problematization of visibility in the work and your own invisibility when working?

LE I suppose I do. In any case, I'm surprised by the question you've posed, and it seems to me that the visual artist works from a position of invisibility, and the reiterative situation of the reflection probably hides what you have said. I had never thought about it in those terms. What I was thinking about is exactly what's happening here—the work's possibility of posing a question rather than generating a response. This is something related to the meaning of art: doing something not only to be either praised or destroyed, but to contribute something. The manner of making that contribution is by having a receptor that can take the work and then make its own contribution. From my point of view, I have a very optimistic outlook with regard to the possibility of evolving: what you are proposing was there, in the work. As for Lacan, it's true: Lacan had some experiments designed to illustrate certain subjects: the rose as the illustration of desire, for example. He had a kind of a hologram resembling a rose that he generated by means of a concave mirror, to illustrate the fact that desire did not lie in the object but in the subject—wanting to capture something hard to grasp that was always going to be repeated that way.

IM Thank you, everyone. We'll have a short recess to move things around up here, and return in fifteen minutes.