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Article

David Lamelas

Restaging Past Art to Foster Reinvention

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DAVID LAMELAS IS AN ARTIST WHO HARNESSSES NOSTALGIA INTO A PRODUCTIVE FORCE THAT PROVIDES—for both the artist and society—insights into the present. Such insights are revealed by the constant restaging of his works, from his early career during the 1960s in his birth city of Buenos Aires to his current active projects. With each restaging, Lamelas seems acutely sensitive to new spaces and new audiences, whose viewing necessarily alters the potential messages of the pieces. These pieces range from object-based Pop Art to Light-and-Space installations and from film to conceptual environments. Yet a common theme weaves throughout: the idea that art should never stagnate. I suggest that this theme exists because Lamelas views his art as possessing a life of its own in which meaning accumulates and shifts over time. As with any life, change necessarily occurs not only from within but also from without. Interactions with each new audience or generation revise perceptions, both the self-defined and socially-derived. Lamelas's art projects, though revived through public nostalgia for his work, transcend time, and thus challenge perceptions that nostalgia hinders newness. In this essay, I aim to explore the extent to which the concept of time in Lamelas's pieces manifests as both a celebration of nostalgia and a challenge to stagnancy. To support my claim that Lamelas's restagings foster awareness of the constant potential for newness, I will primarily focus on the reinstallations of Lamelas's pieces: *Office of Information about the Vietnam War at Three Levels: The Visual Image, Text, and Audio* (1968), *Time as Activity: Düsseldorf* (1969), and *Situation of Time* (1967).

Lamelas's view of art as ever-dynamic pieces parallels the artist's lifestyle, which has been one of constant fluctuation. In their studies of Lamelas, Inés Katzenstein and Maria José Herrera describe the artist as a traveller, who has spent much of his career exploring outside his native Argentina. Herrera calls Lamelas a nomad who, after a length of wandering, revisits his former locations to inject freshness into past ideas.¹ It is in this sense that Herrera claims Lamelas continually reinvents himself. For Katzenstein, however, Lamelas's travels are less about self-reinvention and more about outer perception. Travelling to places such as Buenos Aires, London and Los Angeles, Lamelas assumes temporary vantage points, thus becoming the outsider. Katzenstein proposes that Lamelas uses his outsider role in these locations as 'a new point of departure'.² He is an observer, even in his home city of Buenos Aires, never immersing himself within a particular social structure but rather experiencing the here and now without the limits that are part of belonging to a group.

Despite different interpretations, both Herrera and Katzenstein seem to view Lamelas as an artist who is in constant flux—a flux that allows reinvention and also critical distance. During an informal interview with California State University, Long Beach (CSULB) graduate students in March 2016, as part of his preparation for the forthcoming exhibition of his works at the CSULB University Art Museum, Lamelas reinforced this interpretation. With regards to his travel he stated, 'had I stayed in Argentina, I would have stayed the same [...] Why be just one thing when you can be whatever you want? Why limit yourself just to be yourself?'.³ Such a perspective necessarily shuns stasis through a constant embrace of newness and reinvention, an outlook that also imbues Lamelas's art.

Accordingly, Lamelas dismantles in his art the idea of the object and other potentially static forms of art. Having entered the art world in the 1960s, Lamelas experienced a post-Perón Buenos Aires that was again cultivating local cultural exploration as well as international scientific and artistic exchange, chiefly through the Di Tella Foundation which, according to John King, aimed to 'promote Argentine art at home and abroad, and to offer a flexible museum which would host travelling exhibitions from Latin America and from the rest of the world'.⁴ With this flexibility, artists working in styles ranging from Neo-Figuration, Pop, Kinetic, Op art, and Geometric art intermingled. Performance arts and happenings became more prominent, while the movement away from institutions and objects gained momentum, leading to increased experimentation in Conceptual Art. Lamelas began his career in this atmosphere of flux, which perhaps led him to shun fixed states, fostering his openness to newness and constant reinvention—'why be just one thing?'.⁵

The dismantling of objects in Lamelas's works was similar to that of many already-established Argentines. Alberto Greco rejected the object in favour of living art, Rubén Santantonín created pieces that he called 'cosas' or 'things' that resembled the physical materiality of the lived experience, and Oscar Masotta promoted happenings that prioritised events rather than objects and, later, anti-happenings that went so far as to reject physical spaces. Lamelas contributed to this shift towards the conceptual through the deconstruction of objects, for example in his *Limit of a Projection I* (1967), in which a cone of pure white light is created by an unseen overhead light source. While Lamelas's work aligns with Conceptual Art, he nonetheless manages to avoid strict categorisation—not solely from the definitions determined by institutions but also by the artist, the audience, and perhaps even time. If a happening is an event, grounded in an instantly passed lived experience, *Limit of a Projection I*

could be considered an event that extends beyond the limits of any singular projection or experience; with each new interaction, it becomes a new event. Similarly, if a 'thing' is a creation grounded in artist intent and viewer reception, *Limit of a Projection I* perhaps offers the impression of 'thingness'. However, in the absence of a visible light source or tangible object, the work becomes less a 'thing' than a conceptual experience which, in turn, will vary from one viewer to the next. With each restaging, Lamelas's works become reimagined, defying fixed meaning or definitive classification.

In the artist's essay, 'My Approach to Work in 1968,' Lamelas states that his products 'take on meaning from the time they come into existence, whether they are understood or not'.⁵ In other words, art assumes a life of its own. Meaning does not derive from the artist's intention, nor is it solely determined by the audience. Understanding is inconsequential. Instead, once in the world, the product has the potential to create impact; and Lamelas aims for that impact to constantly morph. At CSULB, Lamelas expressed that his work should keep moving, that he hoped each of his artworks 'would leave me behind. It's not about me. It's about itself [...] It's not my piece. It's itself. It evolves in time'.⁶ I would argue, however, that such evolution does not leave the artist behind, as change in his art seems to instigate change in the artist as well. With self-reflection and renewal, Lamelas keeps pace with his work through his own evolutions. Moreover, the audience may use Lamelas's works to revisit a past time, losing themselves in nostalgia, thus being left behind. However, a new experience may also be prompted, dependent on the time and place in which the product now exists. This is exemplified in Lamelas's *Office of Information about the Vietnam War at Three Levels: The Visual Image, Text, and Audio*, an installation at the 1968 Venice Biennale that helped to establish Lamelas's international presence.

By the time Lamelas had created this piece he had moved from Argentina, where the cultivation of the art world as envisioned by the Di Tella was coming to an end. A growing distrust of institutions, paired with increased government censorship of political art, had caused the Di Tella programs to fold and many Argentine artists found themselves seeking support elsewhere, often on an international level. Lamelas had relocated to London where his work in Conceptual Art became his primary mode of artistic communication.⁷ In *Office of Information about the Vietnam War at Three Levels*, Lamelas created a room that featured state-of-the-art, high-end Olivetti office furniture, to examine the glamorisation of war while news of the conflicts was transmitted through communication devices, translated by a live reader into four languages. According to Lamelas, this piece 'was not presenting an object. [It] was presenting information'.⁸ Although the furniture functioned as a criticism of the comfort enjoyed by those who experienced the war only by listening to reports, the furniture was secondary to the primary concept: to expose a system of information transmissions. This concept, however, is in constant flux; its impact, as I will show, is dependent upon variables of time and space. This may be why Lamelas has previously claimed that the installation is not political. The politics is not inherent in the work; it is instead the placement of the piece in time and space that determines its function. It is due to these variables that the art continues to morph, as if a living being, rejecting stagnancy while prompting a stimulus for reassessment.

In its original time and place, the installation was necessarily politically charged since the Vietnam War was ongoing and the casualties and hardships reported by the translator were in progress. In an attempt to minimise these political references, the organisers at the 1968 Venice Biennale renamed the

piece to *Office of Information about a Chosen Subject*.⁹ However, when the installation was restaged at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, as part of the exhibit ‘Transmissions: Art in Eastern Europe and Latin America, 1960–1980’ (September 5, 2015 to January 3, 2016), the variables of time and space proved to alter the piece’s impact through generational distances from the Vietnam War, as well as from 1960s technology. According to Lamelas during his CSULB interview, he had suggested that MoMA restage the work by using modern furniture to maintain the concept of privilege, safety, and comfort at the receiving end of the devastating news of war. However, MoMA curators wished to preserve the piece’s historic integrity by installing period furniture and equipment, identical to the original Olivetti staging. This decision affected the piece, enhancing its aura as an artefact from a distant war experience, which is now observed and considered rather than lived. The new impact was still strong and purposeful, albeit drastically altered from the original. Moreover, the impact upon the artist himself similarly shifts. In its meticulous attempt to recreate the past, MoMA acquired the informational texts used in the 1968 installation; upon listening to the new translator’s live reading of original reports from Vietnam, Lamelas found that he could not physically remain at the reading for more than ten minutes. He reflected, ‘I was young [at the time of the 1968 installation]. I didn’t realize the horror of the war, but now [...]’.¹⁰ This seems to epitomise Lamelas’s objectives: to create art that continually invites audiences to revisit a past event, be it artistic, political, or cultural, while also making them aware of shifts not only in the world around them but also within themselves.

In other works, such as Lamelas’s films, he pretends to capture time in order to demonstrate that time cannot, in fact, be captured—thus negating the concept that a restaging can ever fully satisfy nostalgia or provide any true sense of escape. A past may never be regained. Time can never be controlled: it transcends any attempt to contain or limit it. Viewers experience this free flow of boundless time in Lamelas’s *Time as Activity (Düsseldorf)* (1969), which shows three silent, non-narrative recordings of passing time in three different locations within Düsseldorf. This short film was re-screened at the University of California, Los Angeles, Hammer Museum exhibit, ‘Making Time: Considering Time as a Material in Contemporary Video & Film’ (February 4 to April 29, 2001). Lamelas designed the piece to be shown by a projector that is present and exposed in the screening room to function, according to Lamelas, ‘as a time projector, projecting another time than the real time’.¹¹ The viewers would thus be fully aware of the process of time passing on a screen, as they themselves spend time watching the past spending of time. Despite the absence of a narrative, there is a keen sense of progression. Curator of the Hammer Museum exhibit, Amy Cappellazzo, explained that Lamelas’s works ‘are not intended to add to the viewers’ knowledge or even visual repertoire, but to create the context of a kind of self-analysis by providing them with a new way of looking at their own familiar activities’.¹² Thus, the allure of watching Düsseldorf and its society of 1969 is not in the capturing of a past, but rather in the way viewers are drawn into an examination of the manner in which they themselves experience time.

Katzenstein further observes that *Time as Activity (Düsseldorf)* demonstrates ‘that time remains identical to itself. Activity is a mechanical repetition of things that circulate without resonance, an inconsequential homogenous routine fundamentally opposed to the heterogeneity of history’.¹³ In other words, by watching activity recorded in three distinct locations in Düsseldorf the viewers can observe that, no matter how much activity varies,

time is the commonality—unwinding the same in each location, just as it progresses in the current viewers' own location. Activity occurs but has no effect on time's advancement. In this regard, time is a living canvas upon which activity may cast shadows but never leave its mark.

This is one of Lamelas's most compelling contributions. He consciously transforms art into a concept that can travel through space and time. In Lamelas's works, art is limited only temporarily as the most current audience tries to capture and define it; but then it moves on like a nomad, morphing into a potentially fresh identity, determined by its newest situation. Perhaps the ultimate goal for Lamelas is that art becomes like the stream of milk featured in his film *To Pour Milk Into a Glass* (1973), a stream that eventually flows freely, unrestrained as its glass receptacle cracks and breaks over time. One might observe that in shattering the confines, time can progress a substance into a new state of being, thus allowing for new potentials and possibilities. However, without these past confines new possibilities—the beauty of free flowing limitlessness—might not be perceived. Thus the restagings, spurred perhaps by a sense of nostalgia, may function to activate new perceptions of a potential future.

Creating awareness of this potential is, I believe, a motivation for Lamelas. For example, in the installation *Situation of Time* (1967), Lamelas created a large dark space with seventeen 60s-era televisions, switched on but receiving no signal and thus defaulting to snowy static visuals and sounds. The experience, Lamelas said, was that there was 'nothing else in the room except the darkness of the room, which was invaded by the light emitted by the TV sets'.¹⁴ According to this description, Lamelas framed *Situation of Time* into a conceptual project of conflicting dualities: darkness invaded by light, nothingness filled with sensation, a signal-less emission transmitting a meaningful experience—art. These contrasts emphasise the freeing of art from the object and even from the artist. There is no designated programming; the signal is empty. However, in that emptiness there is a fullness of potential and of alternate modes of experience, all of which are individually determined. In this regard, *Situation of Time* is about an observer living in the moment by responding to stimuli, a wide spectrum of potential negative and positive reactions.

In the re-creations of this piece at the Kunstverein in Munich (1997) and the National Museum of Fine Arts in Buenos Aires (1999), curators decided to use modern television sets in the installations.¹⁵ While maintaining an original element of the project that included state-of-the-art technology as a testament of modern communication and social control, the 90s-era televisions, when denied a signal, did not render snowy randomness or senseless sound but rather defaulted to a blue screen. Thus the work morphed into a more advanced technological version of its original self, yet one with reduced stimuli. During his visit to CSULB, Lamelas commented that he initially supported these new versions of *Situation of Time* because they continued to comment on the latest products of modern life. He also stated in regards to his works, in general, 'I'm interested in my work to remain, not to disappear'.¹⁶ Aligned with the modern experience of mass media and with the latest technology, his art surely survives and continues to explore technological possibilities for the future. However, this focus on modernization at the expense of stimuli also caused Lamelas to once again revise his view of *Situation of Time*.

In the upcoming CSULB exhibit, Lamelas was pleased to know that this latest reinstallation of *Situation of Time* would use vintage televisions that would

again revert to snowy static. The return of these augmented stimuli again shifts the scope of viewer reception, prompting Lamelas to ask if such an installation is about emptiness or fullness. After a pause, he answered, 'It is full. Space is fullness'.¹⁷ It is perhaps in reaching this definitive conclusion that Lamelas risks finally limiting his art. In this one moment of revisiting the original staging of his piece, he concluded that *Situation of Time* is really about the stimuli filling an experience. There is little doubt, however, that Lamelas will eventually shift his position once again, moving on to the next interpretation as his art continues to evolve.

During his visit to CSULB, Lamelas reflected on his approach to art. He characterised himself—and all humans—as possessing antennae, receivers that capture ideas. In this way, Lamelas is not unlike a television. His channels will change; his reception might weaken to a blur or alternatively reach high-definition clarity. This will always be determined, however, by the moment in which he is receiving signals and the moment in which he broadcasts his message. His next broadcast may pick up an old signal, a nostalgic one from a half century past, but the projection of this signal will almost surely take a new form.

In closing, one of the most striking moments during Lamelas's visit to CSULB was when the artist re-engaged with an image of one of his earliest pieces, *El Super Elastico* (1965), a colossal sculptural installation. As I watched Lamelas contemplating the image of his work, I felt as though I were witnessing the reunion of lifelong friends. Old stories resurfaced, and Lamelas reminisced on details such as the stretchy cartoon character that inspired the piece, the selection of bold primary colours that were modelled on athletic uniforms, and how he created the piece with no money, no studio, and no prospects for profit. This revisit stirred memories as well as wonderment, as Lamelas marvelled at how his younger, less intellectual self, had created such a complex piece—a Pop work while simultaneously a deconstruction of Pop, both landscape and figurative, minimalist yet space-altering, and sculptural yet conceptual. In his amazement, Lamelas once again reconsidered his own view and thus exposed a new perspective—maybe his younger self was an intellectual after all. Maybe his older self is now able to discern the hidden capacity that he had once been too young or too close in perspective to recognise. It is this reassessment of past times, as manifested in his art, which distinguishes Lamelas and his works. Through the continuous updating of persistent motifs and reinstallations of past exhibits, Lamelas uses nostalgia as an opportunity to reassess his art, and by extension his audience and himself.

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NOTES

- ¹ Maria José Herrera, 'Introduction', in *David Lamelas: Buenos Aires* (Sáenz Peña: Universidad Nacional de Tres de Febrero, 2011), pp. 4–25 (p. 4).
- ² Inés Katzenstein, 'David Lamelas: A Situational Aesthetics', in *David Lamelas Extranjero Foreigner Étranger Ausländer*, ed. by Beatriz Eugenia Mackenzie (Buenos Aires: Malba-Colección Costantini, 2006), pp. 76–82 (p. 76).
- ³ David Lamelas, interview by Catha Paquette, Long Beach, March 10, 2016, recording by Yukiko Hole.
- ⁴ John King, 'Argentina 1956–1976: Art and Cultural Development', in *Art from Argentina: Argentina 1920-1994*, ed. by David Elliott (Oxford: The Museum of Modern Art, 1994), pp. 66–75 (p. 68).

- 5 David Lamelas, 'My Approach to Work in 1968', in *Listen Here Now! Argentine Art of the 1960s: Writings of the Avant-Garde*, ed. by Inés Katzenstein (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2004), p. 247 (p. 247).
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Katzenstein, pp. 76–79.
- 8 Lamelas, interview.
- 9 Herrera, p. 8.
- 10 Lamelas, interview.
- 11 Amy Cappellazzo, 'David Lamelas: Time as Activity (Düsseldorf), 1969', in *Making Time: Considering Time as a Material in Contemporary Video and Film*, ed. by Amy Cappellazzo (Lake Worth: Palm Beach Institute of Contemporary Art, 2000), pp. 62–63 (p. 63).
- 12 Cappellazzo, p. 63.
- 13 Katzenstein, p. 80.
- 14 David Lamelas, 'Self-Awareness', in *Listen Here Now! Argentine Art of the 1960s: Writings of the Avant-Garde*, ed. by Inés Katzenstein (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2004), pp. 247–249 (p. 249).
- 15 Herrera, p. 5.
- 16 Lamelas, interview.
- 17 Ibid.

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- , 'Self-Awareness', in *Listen Here Now! Argentine Art of the 1960s: Writings of the Avant-Garde*, ed. by Inés Katzenstein (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2004), pp. 247–249