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Outside the frame. David Lamelas talks with Fay Nicolson



• David Lamelas, *Signalling of Three Objects*, 1966 (installation view in Hyde Park, London, 1968)

LONDON, JUL. 2009

The following interview with David Lamelas is reprinted here on the occasion of the artist's show at the gallery, opening on the 2nd of April. Among the works in the gallery is *Limit of a projection II*, an installation that hasn't been shown since it was part of the legendary exhibition 'Beyond Geometry' in the Instituto Torcuato di Tella (Buenos Aires) in 1967.

Fay Nicolson: In reading about your work in articles and reviews it seems that many people struggle to place your practice. In his article for the September/October edition of *Frieze* in 1997, Stuart Morgan said 'Lamelas' art must be considered as that of a permanent outsider because he falls be-

tween structures, movements and national-ity'. Do you agree with this statement?

David Lamelas: No, I don't agree with the idea of the outside because when you are outside you are inside of that outside. But I do like the idea of playing with the 'inside' and the 'outside', maybe it is to do with the fact that I have always lived in different countries. I have always felt like an outsider even as a little child, but it's not because I am in England, Italy or Argentina, I felt like an outsider even in Argentina, I have always been out of the norm (let's put it that way). For example; as a very young kid most of the kids played football and I didn't, I loved to go to museums or concerts, so I was always outside of my group, it's part of who I am.

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Opening
2/4, 14–19h

Exhibition
2/4–14/5

DAVID LAMELAS

LIMIT OF A PROJECTION II

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FN: I suppose that could be what led you to being an artist in the first place.

DL: Yes, probably. It was my only rescue. And then I learnt that being outside is not so bad because from the outside you can look inside.

FN: I would like to talk about your piece called *Office of Information about the Vietnam War at Three Levels: The Visual Image, Text and Audio* that was shown at the Venice Biennale when you represented Argentina in 1968. This office installation received information about the war from the Italian news agency ANSA throughout the biennale. This choice of work could be seen as artistically and politically radical. How did people respond to it at the time?

DL: People responded in very different ways. The Argentineans involved in the biennale hated the piece. I shared a pavilion with a painter and for them that was art. The curator didn't do much to assist me and the Argentinean Embassy was supposed to help me financially but didn't. Luckily, I managed to find sponsorship. I approached ANSA who paid for the line connection from Rome to my office, Olivetti gave me the office furniture and telex machine, and so the Argentinean Embassy only had to pay for the construction of the office. After the biennale they kept forwarding the bills to me in England, I was furious! I wrote to the consulate and said that I was representing Argentina and that they should pay. So I had to go through that pressure as they had no idea what my work was. But I was very lucky that a few people were interested.

My office space was separated from the art world behind glass; there was a desk, a telex machine, a tape recorder and an assistant. She picked up the newspapers that came from the telex machine, stuck them on the wall and read them to the visitors of the exhibition through telephone systems. So, it was a whole system of communication. One day I was cleaning the glass and this man came to me and asked 'who made this work?', I told him it was me and he said 'I find it very interesting, my name is Marcel Broodthaers'. We talked for about fifteen minutes and then he left and returned with three friends; Anny De Decker, the dealer of the Wide White Space Gallery, which was (without me knowing) probably the only conceptual art gallery in Europe, Bernd Lohaus, the German sculptor, and Isi Fiszman, a Belgian collector. After discussing my work amongst themselves Anny came to me and said she was curating a show at the Künsthalle Düsseldorf and that she would like me to take part in it. So that piece was a connection between me and the European art world. So I didn't start like a student in

St Martins, I started like a professional artist and that propelled me faster into the art world.

FN: Yes, and at that time you were still only twenty-one! In the catalogue 'David Lamelas: A New Refutation of Time' published in 1997 you said 'I was interested in using information relevant to everyone but not connected with art. I did not make a statement about the Vietnam War but about the way people receive information'. Although the content of this information, the war itself, was in one way irrelevant. Do you think it gave the piece a particular potency by offering a dramatic antithesis to the event of the biennale?

DL: Yes, and that is exactly why the piece was ignored by so many people, they were afraid of the title! In fact, the Argentineans and Italians altered the title; well they both used the sub title. So the piece according to the Venice Biennale official catalogue was *Newsroom at Three Levels of Information* without using the words 'war' or 'Vietnam', and I only realized that a month later when the catalogue was printed.

FN: That piece and others, such as *Analysis of the Elements by Which the Massive Consumption of Information Takes Place* made in 1968 deconstruct the phenomenon of absorbing information. Why at that particular time were you interested in analysing the ways information is disseminated and consumed?

DL: Because it is always something that has interested me. As a child I remember my father would arrive at lunch with a newspaper and when he took a nap after lunch I would read it. One of the things that always impressed me was that this printed matter, which consisted of text and photographs, provided information that could have been the subject of fighting between members of the family; someone would take one political point of view and someone else would take a different point of view, another person was interested in the cinema listings, another was interested in the fashions, and my mother was interested in the recipes. So it was interesting that people were picking up different segments of that printed matter. But all it was was text and photography, and I realized it was something I wanted to analyse because it was such a simple thing that created such a phenomenon. I was interested in this from a young age, and very early I became interested in art magazines. My favourite part of the newspaper was the Sunday edition because it had a page about art. Many of the exhibitions featured were far away from Argentina so I really learned about art through printed matter, I never saw

the originals. Art has always been a phenomenon of information for me.

FN: Yes, I understand. At the moment I am living in a small village and experiencing art through other mediums such as magazines.

DL: Yes, but when you are away from the centre of everything you have the privilege of looking at things from far away so you can analyse them more; less involvement and more thinking, I guess.

FN: Originally your practice was three-dimensional...

DL: No, originally it was not, it was a piece of charcoal. I had a very traditional art education; I started drawing classes when I was seven. We began with black charcoal on white paper, and then moved onto pastels, then watercolours, then oil, and then we moved to sculpture. When I was thirteen/ fourteen we worked with materials such as plaster and wood.

FN: So when do you think you found your practice and began making the work you wanted to make?

DL: Never, until now I am still trying to figure it out! I have never found the answer, that's why I keep doing it. At the school of fine art we had sculpture on one day, painting on another, etching on another and then on one day we had theory and art history. I liked them all but the most interesting to me was history and theory. I had a great art history teacher who used to show us a lot of movies about art. And then I realized that these different types of art taught by different professionals who were all stuck up in their own practice, were all the same. So immediately I wanted to get away from the idea of artists as just sculptors, or painters or draughtsmen/women. So art is about the thinking process, and that came very early in 1964/5. And when I made a work called *Connection of Three Spaces* that was the ultimate result of all the thinking I had done before; of how to get rid of the traditional phenomena of consuming art.

FN: Your piece *Signalling of Three Objects* 1966 is work that still seems quite contemporary.

DL: Well, in order to talk about that piece I have to return to what came before it. I got rid of the object, an example of this was *Cone of Light; Limit of a projection*. This was just a spotlight in a dark room, and usually spotlights are used in museums or shops to show a precious object. I got rid of the precious object and showed the medium; the light, and how this projects through space. That was for me the ultimate where I made a piece without volume, something you

couldn't touch or take away, you just switch it off! And so finally I made a piece that didn't exist!

FN: And no storage!

DL: Yes, no storage. Ever since I was little I wanted to travel, so I was always trying to make work that was easy to move with. Then I found out that ideas are the best way because they don't weigh down your suitcase! One year after *Limit of a projection* I made *Connection of Three Spaces*, the actual work happens in three rooms. One of the things that worried me about traditional art, or even contemporary works (which at the time were Rauschenberg or George Segal), you still had an object and your connection with that work was all at one moment, in one vision you got it (or you didn't). My idea was to have a piece that was only constructed in your memory and was separated between three different rooms so that you didn't see the work all at once. You saw part one, part two and then part three, made a mental construction and then in your mind you had the full piece. I always liked the relationship between art and the context in which it was shown, then I realized I was working with the room. In fact, many people standing inside the work itself said 'Where is the piece?' so it was like camouflage as architecture. Because of that came the idea for *Signalling of Three Objects*; the idea that you can point out three objects in everyday life that can become art objects. When architects want to determine space they make a dotted line (which is space graphically speaking). I constructed flat pieces of metal that were symbols, they were not sculptures. They were the opposite of a Carl Andre or Richard Serra sculpture, (which is about the object, the weight, the relationship between the metal and the floor). This was nothing like that. It was just a way to mark out and show what was inside the area. I never kept any of these pieces together, had I kept them they would have become 'sculpture'. After each show they were abandoned because it was not about the parts it was about the concept.

FN: Was *Time as Activity* your first film?

DL: Yes, and that was the piece of work I made for the show curated by Anny De Decker at the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf.

FN: I have seen *Time as Activity* (Düsseldorf). It consists of three four minute sequences, each showing a static, unedited shot of the city. I know you have repeated *Time as Activity* in different cities...

DL: Later on, twenty years later.

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Tino Sehgal commissioned for Tate Modern's Turbine Hall in 2012



• Tate Modern's Turbine Hall. © Tate Photography

LONDON, 3 MAR.

Tate announced that Tino Sehgal will undertake the annual commission for Tate Modern's Turbine Hall in 2012. To be unveiled on 17 July that year, Sehgal's new work will be the thirteenth to be commis-

sioned in The Unilever Series, and after Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster it will be the second commissioned project by an artist represented by the gallery. The exhibition will be curated by Jessica Morgan and will be part of the London 2012 Festival, the finale of the Cultural Olympiad.

FN: What were you trying to achieve in this project?

DL: Well, with the Newsroom about the Vietnam war, what really interested me was the space that news travels through to get to us. You have an event that happened in Vietnam, that information had to travel to the main office (let's say Reuters in London), and then from this centre of information it was transmitted to TV stations, radio stations, newspapers, and then sent to your house. So there were different steps that this information moves through before it gets to you. For me this was sculpture because it was about space and volume. *Time as Activity (Düsseldorf)* was the same but through film, I wanted to represent the activity of the city in three different segments of space, and the space would be represented by film, like a space capsule. This film showed three different moments of the working day between 8 am to 5 pm, capturing the city's activity and freezing the space.

FN: Do you see the recordings as pure documents of time?

DL: No, not as pure documents, it's about space, it is not a documentary. It was about capturing that moment, the volume of that frame. It was like a cube of space transported.

FN: Many of your films are self-reflexively aware of the limitations and conventions of film. For example, *To Pour Milk into a Glass* focuses on the relationship between a container (a glass) and its contents (milk) and is a metaphor for the way the frame of the camera attempts to contain a subject. It concludes with spilt milk and a shattered glass, which implies the failure of the frame as a device. Why are you drawn to filmic or photographic mediums despite their inherent failure to represent 'truth'?

DL: Even though it was imperfect it was the best medium I had found. I am a visual artist and within the visual arts cinema is the most practical medium to communicate ideas. I did not want to make cinema then, I wanted to make cinema later on, but at that time it was the best way to communicate my ideas.

FN: So we are going back to the notion that the idea is the art.

DL: The idea is the art and the film is the representation of that idea.

FN: I am interested in your methodological approach to undertaking some works. For example in *A Study of the Relationships between Inner and Outer Space* (made at the Camden Arts Centre in 1969) you adopt

an almost scientific approach to making this work; the film is divided into sections in which you collect different types of evidence regarding the architectural, infrastructural and geographical formation of the building and the surrounding environment. Why did you adopt this rigorous, methodical approach?

DL: Well, at the time I was thinking about things in a methodological way and I wanted my work to be completely void of imagination, of my artistic tendencies. I wanted my work to be something that I wasn't, independent of my own aesthetics. I had to do something that was rigid so it wouldn't have my own aesthetics. I always wanted my work to be made by another person so it wouldn't have my own personal choices. I still feel that way. I usually like to work with people that have their own ideas and let them be. I just provide the concept.

FN: It's like a move towards trying to be objective.

DL: Or being neutral.

FN: How does this relate to the aesthetics and methods of other conceptual artists operating at that time; such as Hanne Darboven or Sol LeWitt?

DL: At the time I was making these works I didn't know about those artists. I found out about their practice in 1968-70. At that time my own dogma had already been made, from my own innocence, in a way. I suppose we are all connected in one world. In 1968 or 2009 we may be thinking in one way, but in Africa, Argentina or Canada there may be another person thinking the same thing, because the phenomena of thought are not exclusive to one person. There are things connected throughout the world, we are just capturing the concepts, we are just receptors, like radios or computers, we are not inventors, really.

FN: I am interested in your installation at the Instituto Torcuato Di Tella.

DL: Yes, the Instituto Di Tella was an avant-garde art institution that you could compare to what the ICA is, or was at one time.

FN: In your piece *Situation of Time* (made in 1967) you used seventeen identical television sets donated by Di Tella Electronics.

DL: Yes, I borrowed seventeen TV sets from Di Tella Industries (the company that funded the institution), I displayed them as art in the large space and the TV sets were tuned to what I called 'a non-existent channel' so there was no reception. The TVs were working but they were not a provider

of information they were only a provider of light coming from space. So it was an abstract phenomenon, you could compare that in art, traditionally in painting, as a reference to Malevich.

FN: In relation to this piece Benjamin Buchloh has said 'Lamelas ingeniously collapsed the corporate sponsor's technological contribution into a critical reflection on the structural changes of the public sphere... (and) anticipated... the era of corporate sponsorship and control'. ('Structure, Sign and Reference in the Work of David Lamelas', 1997). Was it your intention to critique the way institution functioned and was funded?

DL: Obviously. It's intrinsic in the work itself.

FN: How did the Di Tella Institute react to this?

DL: Well, those kinds of works at that time were like Chinese; a lot of people speak Chinese now but in the mid 1960's not a lot of westerners spoke Chinese, so it was like showing Chinese. They accepted it but they didn't get it. They still don't get it. It was like showing something that they had no connection with and most of the other artists in the show didn't appreciate it, the people who understood it were very few. I would say the curator of the show did, and a few others, but it was very much like my *Office of Information about the Vietnam War*, it was not main stream, it was a tiny stream!

FN: It's interesting, you were illuminating the structures that were in place; for example how information is disseminated or transported.

DL: And I was making work that was out of code, out of the system. Even within the most avant-garde systems of the time, I was kind of outside. That's why when I moved to London I felt rewarded because for the first time I felt that I was communicating with people who were really getting me; not only my work but me as a person.

FN: I found that as well, I think it's because many people come from other places to be here.

DL: It's totally international. You don't have to be one way. But in Argentina you had to be one way to be accepted. If you are not one way they don't know how to place you. In a metropolis, such as London or New York (well, not necessarily New York, as it has a structured way of being which is dictated by the art market) but London at that time was more underground, more about ideas, you could be black, white,



• David Lamelas, *Analysis of the Elements By Which the Massive Consumption of Information takes Place*, 1968, Installation view at Wide White Space, 1968

whatever and be regarded as something of interest. That's the phenomenon that this city still has. More than Paris, or Buenos Aires, in which you have to be one way, or New York, in which you have to be part of the art market or else you are nothing! Now it's slightly different as we are into the art market and arts economy here. Maybe now with the credit crunch we can be free of that again! Perhaps the monetary crisis is a blessing in disguise!

FN: I am interested in your relationship to written fiction, as a lot of your work address notions of fiction.

DL: That came later in life, for example you asked why my piece at the Camden Arts Centre has this scientific structure; it's almost like a medical report, but even though it is very non-fictional, I realized that through the phenomena of cinema even that becomes fiction in the end. I realized that in the system of perception there are crossovers and that's when I became interested in the notion of fiction, because it's another phenomenon of consuming information.

FN: I think one of your pieces, *Film Script (Manipulation of Meaning)* made in 1972, really explores this idea.

DL: *Film Script* is the first time that I used fiction as the subject of my work, I did this because fiction is another way to read reality. In a way, it was quite early on, because now in 2009 there is almost no divide between reality and fiction. If you look at what has happened in the last few days with Michael Jackson; the reality is that this man passed away but suddenly fiction took over, it's a new person we are creating. When he was alive the media loved to criticise him and suddenly the same person is looked at as a god. Politicians use the phenomena of fiction as reality, as you would have seen very recently in politics.

FN: Yes, and in entertainment we have reality TV shows, and then shows that spoof reality TV shows...

DL: Leaving London was a very strange move for me, I moved from cosy London to a very unfriendly Los Angeles, and one of the reasons I did it was because I wanted to be confronted with Fiction on a large scale.

It was a huge shock for me, from which I am still trying to recover, but I immediately started to make art videos using the same structures as commercial American television.

FN: You have made two pieces of work that appropriate or reference texts by Argentinian writers; the first in 1970, *Reading of an extract from Labyrinths* by J.L. Borges and the second in 2000, *The Invention of Dr Morel* which relates to a story by Adolfo Bioy Casares...

DL: Borges and Bioy Casares have a lot in common, first of all, they came from the same generation, they were extremely good friends, they wrote books and screenplays together. Even though they were independent from each other they shared similar concepts and ideas. What both of them have in common with me, and why I was interested in using their ideas, is that they are both interested in manipulating the abstract; time, space and reality. It's funny, I never read Borges in Argentina, I read him in London. I became interested in him here because I had distance. Yet again returning to this idea of distance. In Argentina he was too close to me, part of the culture that was too much around me. From here I could look at him like a foreigner, from far away. It's like looking in a mirror, from close up you can only see the pores, but you don't want to see the pores, you have to move away to see the person, the two of them provided me with that experience. *The Invention of Doctor Morel* is in reality very close to the idea of *Film Script*.

FN: What are you working on now?

DL: Tomorrow I am going to Vienna to redo a piece from 1967, and two weeks ago I finished a new video in Los Angeles. And there is another work – In 1969 in London I made a piece called *Rock Star*, it was about photography, how documentary crosses so fast into fiction and the phenomenon of stardom and media manipulation. It was very simple; a black cloth, light directed to the camera, me on top of a table with a guitar and a photographer taking pictures. That particular series was just sleeping in a suitcase in London for about twenty-five years. Then the photographs were revived about ten years ago and two years ago they were bought by the Metropolitan Museum of Art. That was great for me because that was the end of it.

FN: You could say goodbye to them.

DL: But then I realized that I didn't want to say goodbye, I wanted the work to continue. So recently I photographed myself as an

