

DAVID LAMELAS: FOUR PROJECTS FOR THE PUBLIC SPACE (1992-2010)

By Pedro de Llano

A CORUNA, MAY 22 - *To create a dialogue between the work of David Lamelas and On Kawara is a felicitous idea which pays homage to the artists. Less is more: with only two pieces by each artist, the show at Jan Mot (March-April 2019) triggered a series of connections and links which allowed us to better appreciate their respective projects. The exhibition dealt with time of course – a fundamental subject for both artists, which several writers already addressed in different places – and also showed other interesting issues such as the representation of cities, the relationships that people establish with them, and most significantly, the city as a meeting point and a space for friendship.*

The city as an environment to get together is a key subject of one of Lamelas pieces exhibited at the gallery in Brussels: *Antwerp-Brussels (People and Time)*. When he did this work in 1969 – barely a year after his arrival to London thanks to a British Council grant in order to study at Saint Martin's School of Art – Lamelas already had a dense group of friends all over Europe. In this work he portrayed nine of them – artists, dealers, curators and collectors with whom he collaborated on various projects – in a series of black and white images always with the same framing: three women and seven men, mostly walking towards the camera, with determination, in urban contexts in which they appear to be the protagonists. Indeed, they seem to be the sole human presence – except for the photographer himself and traffic. Seven years later, Lamelas did a similar exercise in Los Angeles with his *LA Friends*. The chosen mediums here were drawing and a slideshow. The city didn't feature visually on this occasion but in a caption introducing the neighbourhood where each friend lived: John Baldessari, Santa Monica. Allen Ruppersberg, Hollywood. John Knight, Silver Lake, etc...

This *leit-motif* in the exhibition at Jan Mot with works dating back to the 1960s and 1970s, made me think of the relation of Lamelas with different cities in which he has lived and more particularly, of the projects for public space that he conceived throughout his career. In the 1990s Lamelas created a series of projects for public space which did not always receive the same attention as his “classic” works from the Conceptual years (1968-1975). It is important to recall that these projects don't appear from scratch, but rather with deep roots in different pieces since the 1960s. For example in the second piece included at Jan Mot – *Time as Activity* – which began to exist in 1969 in this German city and currently counts up to eleven versions filmed in cities such as Berlin, Los Angeles or Madrid.^[1] Or *Señalamiento de tres objetos* (1966-68), in which the artist intervenes in a public park transforming a tree, a streetlight, and a deck chair in artworks by surrounding them with rectangular metallic sheets laying on the ground that act as “frames”, enhancing them in their environment, creating a visual and spatial relationship among them, and with the passerby as well.

Projects in the public space became popular in the 1980s and 1990s and were a direct effect of the expansion of the artistic field provoked by Conceptual art in its crucial period between 1968 and 1975. Proof of it is the organization of the first edition of the *Skulptur Projekte* in Münster in 1977. Or *Chambres d'amis*, the memorable exhibition curated by Jan Hoet in Ghent in 1986, in which 50 artists conceived works for private homes, blurring the limits between public and intimate space. Both in Europe and the US these initiatives were essential for the understanding of the evolution of a whole group of artists who began doing immaterial and conceptual art in the 1960s (performances, films, language-based works, etc...) and who were marginalized by the market and many institutions in the neo-conservative era of the 1980s with the return of painting and object-based practices. Vito Acconci or Dan Graham are explicit cases, but also others, closer to David Lamelas in Los Angeles such as Allen Ruppersberg, Michael Asher, John Knight, Dorit Cypis or Maria Nordman – most of whom posed for him at the studio on Sunset Boulevard.

The 1980s were a sort of “desert crossing” for many of these artists. Nevertheless during this decade Lamelas did some of his best known videos in Los Angeles. In these works the city has a relevant presence, although not essential. The city plays more as a background than a leading role. However, video did have an incentive which we can also find in his projects for public space: it’s capacity to reach larger audiences.[2] After this period came another – in the second half of the 1980s – in which Lamelas returned to a practice which is central throughout his career but which stayed somehow in the shadow: drawing and painting. From this period are pieces such as *Inside-Outside* (1984), *Entwurf “Reception Center for Solar Energy”* (1986) and *Los Angeles PM* (1987) in which Lamelas experiments with apparently traditional mediums, but with innovative and original intentions. What is especially interesting in some of these works is the idea of a project carried out through drawing and/or painting. We can see this for instance in a work like *Entwurf “Reception Center for Solar Energy”* (1986) – a sort of sketch for a utopian and deliberately inconcrete ecological initiative which nevertheless turns out to be evocative of the “New Age” trends to which some Southern California artists gravitated in the 1980s. And this brings us straight into the 1990s projects, in which drawing as a conceptual tool appears, together with writing, as a genuine constant in the work of David Lamelas – from the earliest to the very recent.[3]

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The first project I’d like to focus on bears the poetic title *Quand le ciel est bas et lourd* (1987-92). [4] It was produced for the group exhibition *America. Bride of the Sun. 500 Years of Latin America and the Low Countries* and consists of a hovering steel plate in the form of a trapezoid, suspended by three rows of eight pillars. Under the plate Lamelas planted three rows of sycamore trees which seem to converge toward an imaginary vanishing point. The piece was installed in 1992 next to the Museum of Fine Arts in Antwerp (designed by Jacob Winders and Frans van Dijk and opened in 1890) in a surrounding park and opposite of the former location of Wide White Space, Lamelas’ first Belgian gallery. The structure functions as an asymmetric element – dynamic and relatively unstable that contrasts both with the solemnity of the Neo-classical building of the museum and the rationality of the urban axis of the Flemish city which is known in the Zuid neighbourhood as “The Petit Paris” – a reference to Baron Haussmann.

Benjamin Buchloh points out the monumental and architectonic character of this work, as opposed to the immateriality of his previous projects – especially those related to video and TV.[5] The title is borrowed from the first verse of a poem by Baudelaire and intends to be a commentary about the so-called discovery of America (which had its 500 years celebration in 1992), and the oppression suffered by the American peoples (indigenous, slaves, immigrants...) since colonial times until the imperialist episodes of the Cold War, and through the different processes towards Independence in the 19th century.

This particular work has a changing life: in the earlier pictures it’s possible to see the growing young trees sheltered under the metal plate at the same time that limited and perhaps impeded by the lack of light. In other, more recent images, the work seems to “disappear” or hide out: trees – at least those in the lateral rows – have overtaken the structure and grown all over and above. This process reproduces, in an abstract, organic and visual way, the struggle for liberation and emancipation of the American peoples after 1492 – a dialectic in which some win and overflow the imposed limits, conquering freedom, while others loose and stay subjugated and underdeveloped (that’s to say: there were Americas which were more “brides of the sun” than others). Finally, *Quand le ciel est bas et lourd* reminds us as well of an unrealized project by Bruce Nauman from the late 1960s in which he also intended to put a plaque on top of a single growing tree: “After a few years, the tree would grow over it”, Nauman declared in an interview, “and finally cover it up, and it would be gone”. [6] Despite the formal similitude, the intentions and content of both artists are very different. In the context of the current general rehabilitation of the premises of the Museum

of Fine Arts, Lamelas' work will soon be dismantled and reconstructed in the same park close to the original location.

In 1996, four years after the Antwerp piece and amidst of the rise of public sculpture, Lamelas built *Vivienda (Structure)* in the city of Santo Tirso, north of Oporto in Portugal. This work was commissioned by the Museo Internacional de Escultura Contemporânea de Santo Tirso; a project dedicated to public sculpture, propelled in its origins by the Portuguese artist Alberto Carneiro – whom Lamelas met at Saint Martin's at the end of the 1960s. The work was first conceived as a model titled *Vivienda (Living Space)* and it consisted of a structure which makes us think of the archetype of the house; that is, reduced to its minimal elements – four walls that don't touch each other, a door, and a roof. There are differences, however, between the project and the finished work. In the first, we see a living place with leaning walls. They need wooden beams to shore the walls up and to prevent from collapsing. It's indeed a house on the verge of falling apart which brings two references to mind. One by Lamelas himself: his work *Untitled (Falling Wall)*, which he first presented at the Galeria Fac-Simile in Milan, 1993, and a second one of different kind; the infamous scene in a 1920s Buster Keaton film in which the façade of a house falls over the actor – miraculously escaping injury.

In the final version of the work the walls have disappeared and are replaced by a diaphanous metal structure and again surrounded by trees as in Antwerp. The piece is located in the Jardim dos Carvalhais next to a panoramic lookout to the landscape. In the realised version, the house maintains the original scale and volume, as well as the comic detail of a useless door, but it's been reduced to a sort of sketch or drawing in the air which reflects the dynamism of the first idea, in a different way, together with a certain will to deconstruct the notion of "home" which was also present in the beginning. Is this perhaps the home of a nomad like David Lamelas? Or a gathering point to celebrate a picnic with friends?

While Lamelas was installing the work, he noticed its potential to become a *rendez vous* for locals and visitors. That's why in some of the earliest images a pink marble stone bench is missing – which was later added to the work in order to foster its "use". The idea worked and shortly after people appropriated the sculpture, especially retired men who would meet there to chat and play domino. This characteristic of Lamelas' work for the public space –its "use value" – wasn't that common in the mid-1990s. It was probably the Skulptur Projekte in Münster a year later, in 1997, which made widely known and accepted this kind of projects in between sculpture and design, even if some artists like Dan Graham and Maria Nordman were experimenting with these ideas already in the 1980s. Lamelas points out that his work in Antwerp also has this feature. As neighbours got used to it they started to give it different functions: as a protection from the rain, a shelter for people walking their dogs, a hide-out for couples making out...

Nevertheless, the functional or interactive character of Lamelas' public works is never literal but rather at some point between its practical use and the symbolic meaning. A good example is an unrealized project with a critical content which seems even more poignant today. It was one of the proposals he sent to the curators of the Biennial *In Site*, in Tijuana in 1997 and was discarded. The idea would be to build a temporary structure which would act as a stairway and lookout at the same time. From the top of the structure it would be possible to see the US from the Mexican side – the "promised land" for migrants. This proposal involved some degree of irony: paradise can be seen but not touched, shown but not shared. As the son of Spanish immigrants himself, Lamelas tried to evidence, through humour, the injustice which walls and all sort of obstacles represent and impose for those seeking to reach their wishes and access a better life.

After 2000 Lamelas became less involved with projects for public space, at a time the genre itself got into a crisis and the artist entered a new phase in his career. Still he didn't abandon this kind of

practice completely and in February 2010 he accomplished a new piece – very different to the ones before – in Los Angeles. The work was entitled *Think of Good* and was developed for the group project *How Many Billboards*, a MAK Center and Schindler House initiative. In this case, his proposal was to revisit one of his most emblematic works: *Rock Star (Character Appropriation)* from 1974. He re-enacted the photo shoot with a professional photographer, himself posing as an “aging rock star”. On this occasion he edited only one image – worth of Mick Jagger at his best – full of attitude, grabbing a mic, hair slicked back and defiant look. This image was enlarged and printed on the monumental size of a typical Los Angeles billboard, together with the text “Think of Good” – which could well have been taken from one of those self-help, “New-agish”, positive thinking advertising assumed to be characteristic of Southern California culture.

The piece was installed at Pico and Fairfax, two main Los Angeles thoroughfares, halfway from the studio he rented in Sunset Boulevard when he arrived to LA in the 1970s, and Venice where he lived in the 1980s. In fact, both places are symbolically linked to the content of the image: Sunset because it was not far from the Strip, the rogue neighbourhood where all the rock stars performed back in the day at clubs such as the Starwood or English Disco, and Venice, where Gold’s Gym – the iconic fitness center funded by Arnold Schwarzenegger – used to be, becoming an inescapable meeting point for the still bohemian community to which Lamelas belonged, striving to retain youthfulness and fitness with the weight and running machines.

Think of Good is certainly a singular piece because it emphasizes image and representation more than the architectural and participative pieces from the 1990s. Still, all these works share a common approach in which humour and bits of absurdity are fundamental to create a precise and critical relation with urban space. This set of realized and unrealized projects constitute an important contribution to the genre of public art and they let us see David Lamelas work from a different perspective.

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[1] One of the most recent iterations of *Time as Activity* was shot in Athens and Berlin for the documenta 13, 2017. In Kassel was installed at the ICE station Kassel-Wilhelmshöhe, just in the platform through which the passengers left the train and went into the city.

[2] Lynda Morris, “David Lamelas’ Experience”, exh. cat., *David Lamelas*, Secession, Vienna, 2006, p. 19.

[3] It’s possible to note these relations between idea, drawing, project and materialization in many of his drawings from 1965 to 1967 – but even earlier than that in certain unpublished works.

[4] The works in public space by David Lamelas that I have been able to retrace are:

- *Señalamiento de tres objetos (Signaling of Three Objects)*, Buenos Aires-London, 1966-68

- *Screen*, New York City, 1988

- *Quand le ciel est bas et lourd*, Antwerp, 1987-92

- *Vivienda (Structure)*, Santo Tirso, Portugal, 1996

- *A Bridge Between Two Trees*, Zoersel, Belgium, 1996

- Unrealized project for in Site 97, San Diego and Tijuana, 1997

- *Al otro lado (The Other Side)*, inSite 97, San Diego and Tijuana, 1997

- *Think of Good*, in the project *How Many Billboards*, Los Angeles, 2010
- *Time as Activity: Live Athens-Berlin*, documenta 13, 2017

[5] Benjamin Buchloh, “Structure, Sign and Reference in the Work of David Lamelas”, exh. cat., *David Lamelas. A New Refutation of Time*, München and Rotterdam, München Kunstverein and Witte de With, 1997, p. 144.

[6] Joe Raffaele and Elizabeth Baker, excerpt from “The Way-Out West: Interviews with 4 San Francisco Artists” (1967), published online by *Artnews* on March 16, 2018, in honor of Bruce Nauman’s retrospective at Schaulager Basel [<http://www.artnews.com/2018/03/16/archives-bruce-nauman-fishing-surrealism-filmmaking-1967/>] [Last accessed: May 14, 2019]

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