

In the extreme polarisation between the urge to equate aesthetic operations with factual information and the withdrawal into self-reflexive tautological thought that defines conceptual art at the end of the 1960's, David Lamelas chose to occupy a position of deliberate undecidability, continuously shifting between the linguistic dimensions of structure and reference. Already in his first exhibition in Europe in 1968, when he represented Argentina at the XXXIV Venice Biennale, his installation at the pavilion circumscribed both the limitations of the tautological model of modernist self-reflexivity, and the limits of the institutions of art. By introducing the continuous flow of information on the developments of the Vietnam war supplied by news agencies and a telex machine into the pavilion, he turned the exhibition space literally into a newsroom: a secretary read the incoming news via a microphone to the viewers and recorded them simultaneously on a tape recorder for the entire duration of the exhibition (60 days), thus constructing a sedimentation of factual information and an exact historical record of the time period during which the 'work' and the 'exhibition' occurred and in which they literally coincided.

Entitled Office of Information about the Vietnam War; at three levels: the Visual Image, Text and Audio, both the complexity and the didactic clarity of Lamelas' work frustrated traditional aesthetic expectations and led to a relative failure of signification for the art world audiences of that moment. The installation ruptured first of all the discursive framework of conceptual art by introducing a model of language as communicative action, rather than a model of language as self-reflexive structure or as one of irreducible difference. [When Hans Haacke shifted at about the same time within his own development towards this radically different language theory, his work was met with equal scepticism: in fact one of his earliest explicitly political works, his contribution to the Prospect exhibition at the Kunsthalle Dusseldorf in 1969, constructs an almost identical integration of a seemingly formal procedure with a radically different set of language operations introduced into the institutional framework]. And at the same time the installation criticized the institutional framework of art by challenging the self-declared silence and the neutrality of the exhibition (literally by invoking sound as an aspect of representation, and metaphorically by activating the space as a function of information). In linking the exhibition/institution directly with the functions of public and political information and communication, Lamelas constructed not only a dialectic between the aesthetic and the factual, but he also reconstituted the lost political dimension of artistic institutions, reminding us of their origins in the bourgeois public sphere.

Beyond these obvious challenges the work posed a number of questions (perhaps not only unanswerable, but even inaudible at the time), questions not just concerning the relationship between the 'disinterested' aesthetic structure and the institutional frame, between linguistic self-referentiality and the instrumentalized languages of ideology and 'information', but the work confronted its audience with the challenge of a Western hegemonic institution by an artist from the cultural 'margins' of Latin America, which seems to have been another reason why the work was 'overlooked' at the time.

Clearly the work must have provoked the defence mechanism of Western art audiences to protect themselves, first of all, against political questions as a matter of aesthetic principle. If, however, a political critique was articulated by a member of an unknown marginal artistic community, it had to be dismissed all the more urgently since the legitimacy of challenging Western hegemony itself had to be refuted. [In the same manner that David Medalla's work at Documenta V in 1972 remained largely 'unseen', since it constituted in a very similar way a contestation of the credibility of Western hegemonic culture by an artist from a 'third world' country.] Looking at Lamelas' work now makes us realize (more than twenty years after its definition) that in the audience's resistance, behind the guise of an aesthetic concern for high cultural purity and disciplinary autonomy, there operated an actual insistence on hegemonic superiority and the legitimation of continued ideological and political domination.

A second work, produced a year later for the Camden Arts Centre in London, raises a similar range of questions, and once again its relative obscurity reveals the inability of audiences and critics of the Sixties and Seventies (let alone those of the following generation) to situate Lamelas' work in an

interpretative context.

Invited to install an exhibition at this institution, Lamelas suggested instead to use the available resources for the production of a short black and white film, entitled *An Investigation of the Relations between Inner and Outer Space*. The very substitution of a film production (modest as it was in terms of technology and budget) for an exhibition project, appears now as a programmatic decision in favour of a radically different perspective on both the institutional framework, the technical means of production and the distribution form of the work. As in his Venice Biennale installation in the preceding year, Lamelas deployed relatively advanced technology (film and sound recording) within the space traditionally reserved for static high art objects. However, it was a functional and communicative technology that was deliberately not neutral and value free, but that stood in almost programmatic opposition to the futile emphasis on traditional industrial production in 'minimal' sculpture where the discrepancy between industrial technology and the high art discourse of sculpture had ultimately remained on the level of a design problem. We should remind ourselves that in the mid-Sixties, with the minimalist's widely celebrated 'advanced' methods and materials of industrial fabrication for sculpture, one was in fact confronting a rather naive and romantically limited integration of industrial production within the high art object. By contrast, Lamelas deploys not only film and video technology as the primary media for his exhibition substitute, but he also uncovers within the film itself a catalogue of technologies that determine daily life in a very substantial and possibly complete manner: starting once again from an almost parodic performance of modernist self-referentiality by measuring the entire space of the exhibition and making the camera travel along all of the neutral white architectural surfaces that constitute the exhibition space, the film lists in a lapidary, almost statistical litany, in ever widening circles, the spatial and technological, the social and the institutional spheres that constitute the viewers' social identities - just as much as that of the subjects depicted in a shared continuum of technologies, urban organization, media technologies and transport systems. The film concludes in an almost grotesque climax, expanding the oppositional concepts of inner and outer space to a literal pun : a series of casual interviews conducted with anonymous pedestrians - by accident and foresight - on the day of the first manned landing on the moon (which happened to be the day the interviews were filmed).

It is against this factographic and political background of Lamelas' early works that one should consider the new sculptural installation at the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Antwerp so as to resist an all too easy metaphorical reading, a disorientation that the work's conception seems to have consciously laid out for the viewer. The sculpture seems to appear at first like a renewal of late 1960's Arte Povera aesthetics and devices, almost as though aesthetics' structural juxtapositions along the axis of nature/culture opposites had crossed over into outdoor monumentalization, a tendency - it is crucial to emphasize here - that Arte Povera had been careful to avoid. Yet it soon becomes evident that the readmission of more traditional rhetorical forms (such as metaphorical constructions) in Lamelas' work is not merely the tribute to the newly conventionalized practices of art production, nor does it seem to be the price paid by an artist (who had turned his back on traditional artistic production procedures and distribution forms from the very beginning, and who has produced mostly film and video work over the last twenty years) to be readmitted into the institution of art and its traditional categories - even though it seems that sometimes no price might be too high to open the doors of the Museum to the present. But just as unconvincing would it be to argue that the enigmatic installation of a field of trees that will grow up under a shield of steel hovering over them like a shadow of extreme protection inevitably thwarting growth, eventually deforming and crippling them (in the way that traditionally in aristocratic horticulture fruit trees were grown in decorative formations like the espalier) would inscribe itself within a fairly recent tradition of sculptural works that - out of ecological concerns with romantic/remedial intentions - have incorporated trees or micro-ecologies into the conception of sculpture: from Joseph Beuys' 10,000 Oaks at Documenta VI in Kassel in 1978 or Michael Asher's proposal from the same year to plant an alley of trees instead of constructing large outdoor monumental sculptures for the urban

sculpture renewal exhibition in Munster, onwards to the more recent works by Katharina Fritsch or Meg Webster. It seems rather that Lamelas' work constructs a particular historicist hybrid of the two sculptural conventions that of a romanticization of the simplicity and universal availability of natural means and resources as sculptural raw materials, as for example in the work of Richard Long, and, that of the continuing (and increasingly hollow) rhetoric of large scale sculptural site specific projects produced with tremendous industrial means which lack the simple tools to recognize their inability to situate their claims as public sculpture in the ruinous public sphere. Lamelas' installation entangles these two - mutually exclusive - sculptural conventions, and positions them in an allegorical interdependence of failure : neither the heroic rhetoric of the industrial construction (its origins having become finally evident as the origins of ecological devastation), nor the remedial concerns of a romantic commemoration of nature (and its mere ecological tokenism), could serve any longer as paradigms for contemporary sculptural constructs without acquiring immediately the features of fraudulence. Lamelas' installation seems to accept the necessity of a return to the sculptural traditions of the 1960's as a inevitable presupposition for his allegory of these failed heroic paradigms, their abused and obsolete strategies returning into the present as an involuntary and solely credible 'esthetique du mal'.

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