

Jan Mot

Introduction

Jan Mot's contribution to the section 'Back to the Future' of Artissima XYZ, 2020 (online) is centered around an outdoor installation by David Lamelas, entitled *Quand le ciel bas et lourd* from 1992. The work can be described as a large sculpture built on an inclined surface and consisting of a trapezoidal shaped, steel roof under which 3 rows of 8 trees are planted. With time, the trees grow over the structure, almost hiding it, while other trees die because of a lack of light and water, leaving a void. The concept for this work was developed in several drawings and paintings during the 1980s when Lamelas was living in Los Angeles. But it was only on the occasion of an exhibition at the Royal Museum for Fine Arts in Antwerp, commemorating the 500 years of the so-called discovery of the Americas, that the work could finally be realised.

Quand le ciel bas et lourd is a work that deals with the relation between nature and the industrial society as well as with questions of oppression, struggle and censorship. As often in Lamelas' oeuvre, it combines a conceptual and minimal aesthetic with political issues. Looking at *Quand le ciel bas et lourd*, two earlier works in particular by Lamelas come to mind. The first is his acclaimed film work *The Desert People* (1974) in which the question of the native American is central. Half road movie, half documentary, it portrays 5 young americans who speak about their experience of living with a tribe, the Papagos. The final monologue is by Manny, a Papago, who speaks in English, then Spanish and finally in Papago. The film culminates in a tragic car crash, as if the co-habitation of native and non-native americans is doomed. The second work is *Dos espacios modificados* which Lamelas made for the Bienal de Sao Paulo in 1966. In this piece he changed the shape of the cubicle that was given to him to show his work and doubled it by using aluminium beams and sheets, creating a second rectangular space without walls. Just like *Quand le ciel bas et lourd*, it plays with perspective and the point of view of the beholder as much as it raises the question of our spatial experience and understanding.

In two texts that are included in this presentation, the work *Quand le ciel bas et lourd* is further contextualised. The first essay is by Benjamin H.D. Buchloh and was written for the catalogue of the exhibition at the Royal Museum for Fine Arts in Antwerp, entitled 'America, Bride of the Sun' (curated by Paul Vandenbroeck and Catherine de Zegher, 1992). A second one is by Pedro de Llano and deals with different works for the public space that Lamelas created in 1990s. It was written for our gallery's newspaper on the occasion of the exhibition 'On Kawara - David Lamelas' (Brussels, 2019).

David Lamelas's work is currently included in the collection presentations at the MoMA and the Metropolitan Museum (both New York City). A solo exhibition will open in June 2021 at the CGAC in Santiago de Compostela (Spain), curated by Pedro de Llano.

Quand le ciel bas et lourd pèse comme un couvercle
Sur l'esprit gémissant en proie aux longs ennuis,
Et que de l'horizon embrassant tout le cercle
Il nous verse un jour noir plus triste que les nuits ;

Quand la terre est changée en un cachot humide,
Où l'Espérance, comme une chauve-souris,
S'en va battant les murs de son aile timide
Et se cognant la tête à des plafonds pourris ;

Quand la pluie étalant ses immenses traînées
D'une vaste prison imite les barreaux,
Et qu'un peuple muet d'infâmes araignées
Vient tendre ses filets au fond de nos cerveaux,

Des cloches tout à coup sautent avec furie
Et lancent vers le ciel un affreux hurlement,
Ainsi que des esprits errants et sans patrie
Qui se mettent à geindre opiniâtrement.
- Et de longs corbillards, sans tambours ni musique,
Défilent lentement dans mon âme ; l'Espoir,
Vaincu, pleure, et l'Angoisse atroce, despotique,
Sur mon crâne incliné plante son drapeau noir.

Charles Baudelaire, Spleen, *Les Fleurs du mal*