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Art

# David LaMelas Shows What Happens When an Artist Never Stops Moving

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Portrait of David Lamelas. Photo by Sean DuFrene. Courtesy of Sprüth Magers.

“I think sculpture can take any dimension, form, or medium,” Argentinian artist David Lamelas once wrote. “Anything determined by the author as such is a sculpture.” It’s a suitably porous, flexible way of thinking, and one that makes sense given Lamelas’s roughly five-decade-long career, during which time he’s made Minimalist constructions, site-specific interventions, mockumentaries, Pop-inspired sculptures, photographs, and interactive performances. “Fiction of a Production,” on view through January 6, 2019, at the Broad MSU in East Lansing, Michigan, looks at the early years of his practice, and hints at how Lamelas (who rubbed shoulders with Lawrence Weiner, Allen Ruppersberg, John Baldessari, Michael Asher, and too many others to count) deserves a more prominent entry in art history.

Part of what makes Lamelas fascinating is how quickly he ascended to success, and the ways in which he would insinuate himself, chameleon-like, in the global art scenes of South America, Europe, and the United States. He was featured in the São Paulo Biennial in 1967, and went on to represent Argentina, alongside two other peers, at the 1968 Venice Biennale when he was only 21 years old. “Back then, I thought it was a very normal thing,” Lamelas told me, during a conversation this summer at the Broad MSU. “But, of course, a lot of older artists were upset with me.” Not everyone; the work he showed there—a conceptual piece investigating the Vietnam War—earned the positive attention of Marcel Broodthaers, who went on to

earned the positive attention of Marcel Broodthaers, who went on to plug Lamelas in with an entire network of European art world insiders.



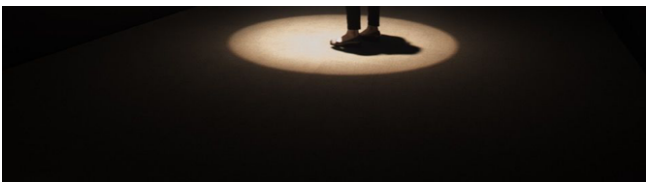
David Lamelas, *Signaling of Three Objects*, 1968. © David Lamelas. Courtesy of the artist and Sprüth Magers.

Lamelas is a character, in the best sense of the word, and he describes his peripatetic career in vividly cinematic terms. After cutting his teeth in Buenos Aires's art world and being showcased in the Venice Biennale, he moved to London to study at Saint Martin's School of Art. He arrived with a few suitcases, little money, and an affection for a city he'd never actually visited before. Lamelas had always nursed a fascination with British culture, and he was also drawn to the work of sculptors like Anthony Caro, whom he would soon study under. "It was the end of the Swinging '60s," he recalled. "That was heaven. My hair grew [and] I became a Londoner."

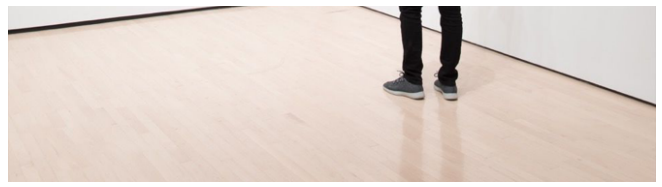
heaven....my hair grew, [and] I became a LONDONER.

Lamelas was in the St. Martin's sculpture department, which presented one problem: He was “not into sculpture,” at least by the basically accepted terms. “They gave me space as a studio, and the young, British artists were still working with metal, with plaster, with wood—you know, with *materials*,” he said. This sort of conventional approach wasn't too interesting to him, and London's social life was calling him and his circle of friends: “Forget St. Martin's,” he thought, “we wanted to go to Soho!” He was working on some film projects, but not producing much in the way of physical objects. Caro finally asked him to explain himself—“*I never see you at the studio—what are you doing?*”—and Lamelas answered him by embarking on a work that, more or less, could be considered sculpture. It involved placing a series of metal rectangles around trees in Hyde Park, poetically cordoning them off, and then photographing the arrangements. (A rebooted version of the same concept is situated outside the Broad MSU's Zaha Hadid–designed building.)





Installation view of David Lamelas, *Limit of a Projection I*, 1967, for “David Lamelas: Fiction of a Production” at the MSU Broad, 2018. Photo by Eat Pomegranate Photography. Courtesy of MSU Broad.



Installation view of David Lamelas, *Corner Piece*, 1965/2005, for “David Lamelas: Fiction of a Production” at the MSU Broad, 2018. Photo by Eat Pomegranate Photography. Courtesy of MSU Broad.

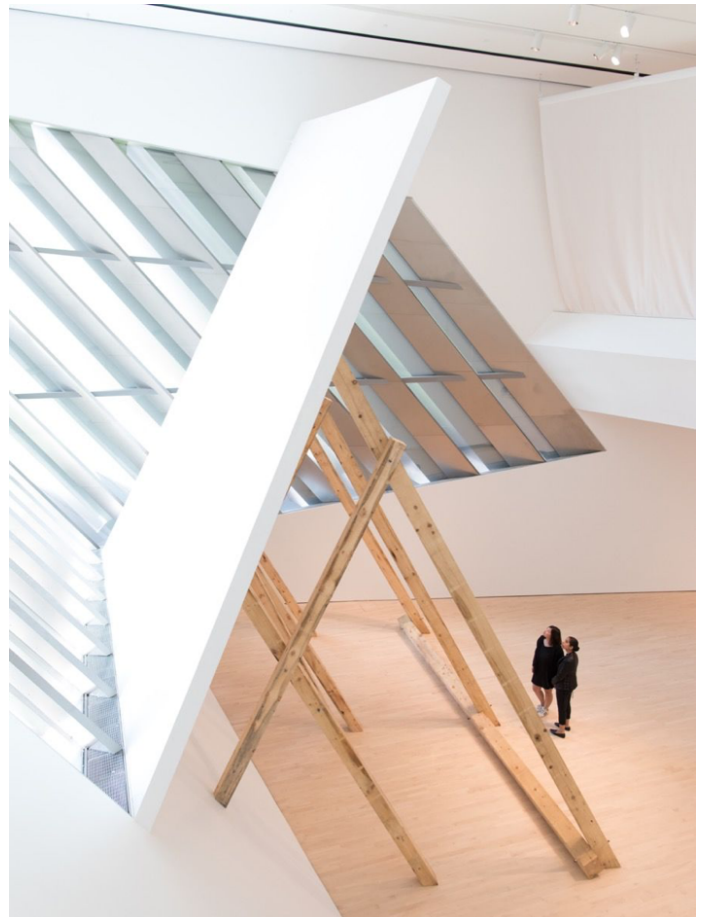
From there, Lamelas kept moving—geographically and stylistically—developing what Broad MSU curator Carla Acevedo-Yates, who organized the exhibition, calls his “nomadic practice.” After becoming a Londoner, Lamelas relocated to Los Angeles in the 1970s, where he proceeded to reinvent himself anew. He spent a solid span of years focused on film, even trying to break into the more experimentally friendly Hollywood system of the day. The decade resulted in a number of faux-documentary films (in which Lamelas played the part of a crooked dictator being grilled by a news reporter) and *The Desert People* (1974), a funky piece in which a group of supposed ethnographers share their experiences with a Native American tribe.

Living in the Venice neighborhood of Los Angeles, Lamelas found himself a little too comfortable with the lifestyle—“I became like a beach bum,” he said—and moved once again, in the late 1990s, to New York. And now, at the age of 71, the artist is one of those people constantly between places. “He’s very elusive, in the sense that you don’t know where he is at a certain time,” Acevedo-Yates said. “He’s always moving around.”

While it can be a Sisyphean task to boil Lamelas’s output down into a tidy whole, the Broad MSU exhibition—focused heavily on works made in the 1960s—showcases an artist always willing to take risks, to dabble and experiment with forms and concepts. “Lamelas thinks artworks have a life of their own, outside of the artist’s intent, their own consciousness, awareness,” Acevedo-Yates said. “The idea keeps evolving as time changes.” She described him as a pioneer, working with “architectural interventions, site-specific interventions, all these things—before they were named.”



Installation view of David Lamelas, *Study of Relationships Between Volume, Space, and Gravity*, 1965/2008, for “David Lamelas: Fiction of a Production” at the MSU Broad, 2018. Photo by Eat Pomegranate Photography. Courtesy of MSU Broad.



Installation view of David Lamelas, *Facing Wall*, 1993, for “David Lamelas: Fiction of a Production” at the MSU Broad, 2018. Photo by Eat Pomegranate Photography. Courtesy of MSU Broad.

In many cases, those interventions were quite simple. *Limit of a*

*Projection I* (1967), on view in the show, is simply a spotlight directed at the floor, casting a cone of light. (A light mist is sprayed into the gallery to render it visible; that wasn't originally required, Lamelas said, since Argentine exhibition spaces decades ago were so heavy with cigarette smoke.) *Corner Piece* (1965/2005) is a basic pyramid jutting out from the gallery's corner, confounding the geometry of the white cube. *Study of Relationships Between Volume, Space, and Gravity* (1965/2008) resembles an oversized, upside-down Flying V guitar, though it's actually modeled on *The Winged Victory of Samothrace*, a 2nd century B.C.E. sculpture on permanent view at the Louvre.

And then there's the show's most ambitious moment, *Untitled (Falling Wall)* (1993), which seems to have pushed the capabilities of the Broad MSU installation team to their limits. Acevedo-Yates noted that it was originally intended for the 1993 Whitney Biennial, but was ultimately not included in the show. Within Hadid's already unconventional architecture, *Falling Wall*—an expanse of plain white wall that appears to be propped up by lengths of timber—possesses a precarious drama.

With such variety in his practice, it can be tricky to categorize Lamelas in any sense. "I think of David as just an artist, without any specific qualifier, meaning not a conceptual artist, an Argentinian artist, or a cosmopolitan artist, even if these terms have been widely used," Acevedo-Yates said. "His work is very intuitive, a result of a direct and personal experience of the world around him. It is common for David to compare his work to friends or friendships in

general: Some you keep for a lifetime and grow together; others you have brief but meaningful experiences with, then part ways.”

Scott Indrisek is Artsy’s Deputy Editor.

## Further Reading in Art



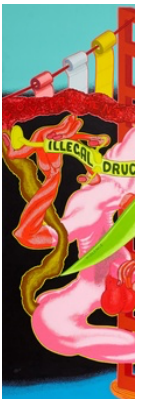
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