



Life as
Activity:
David Lamelas

DAVID LANELAS
time AS ACTIVITY

The work is divided in three diferents parts of four minutes each.

- I. DUSELDORFFBETWEN 11,25am. and 11,29am.
- II. DUSELDORF BETWEEN 3pm. and 3.pm.
- III. DUSELDORF BETWEEN 5.pm. to 5.4pm.

Why? The work is sowing continuously.

? What hapend in the screen means nothing, just is the seleccion of four minutes in in three diferents ~~parts~~ moments of the activity of the city where Prospect is taken place.

? Twelf minutes selected between twenty four hours-activity.

Every accion spend certain time, enclose certain and specific time, The activity in a city is given for a lot of accions what hapend to the same time, limited by and conditioned ~~in-a-ee~~ to the twenty four hours of activity. week activity, month activity, year activity.

The activity of the city is given by a united of accions what hapend in a certain time, limited and conditioned by TIME.

The work show three diferents fractions of that activity, enclosed in twelf minutes of the happenings of this town.

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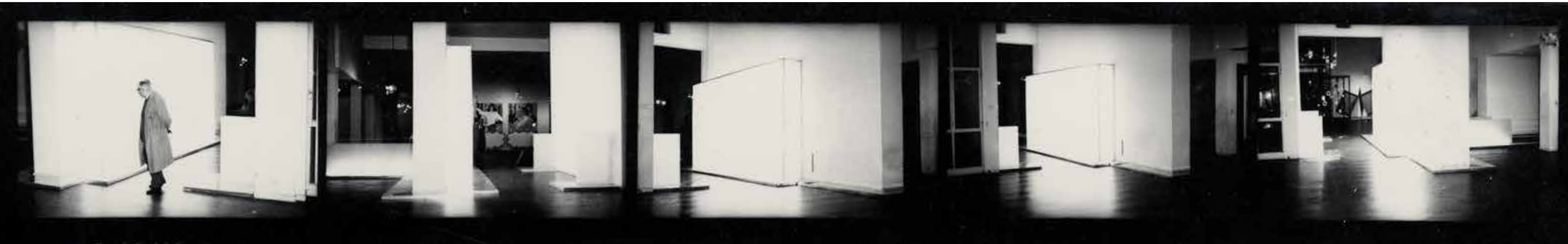
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Connection of Three Spaces, 1966: “A gap from real time”

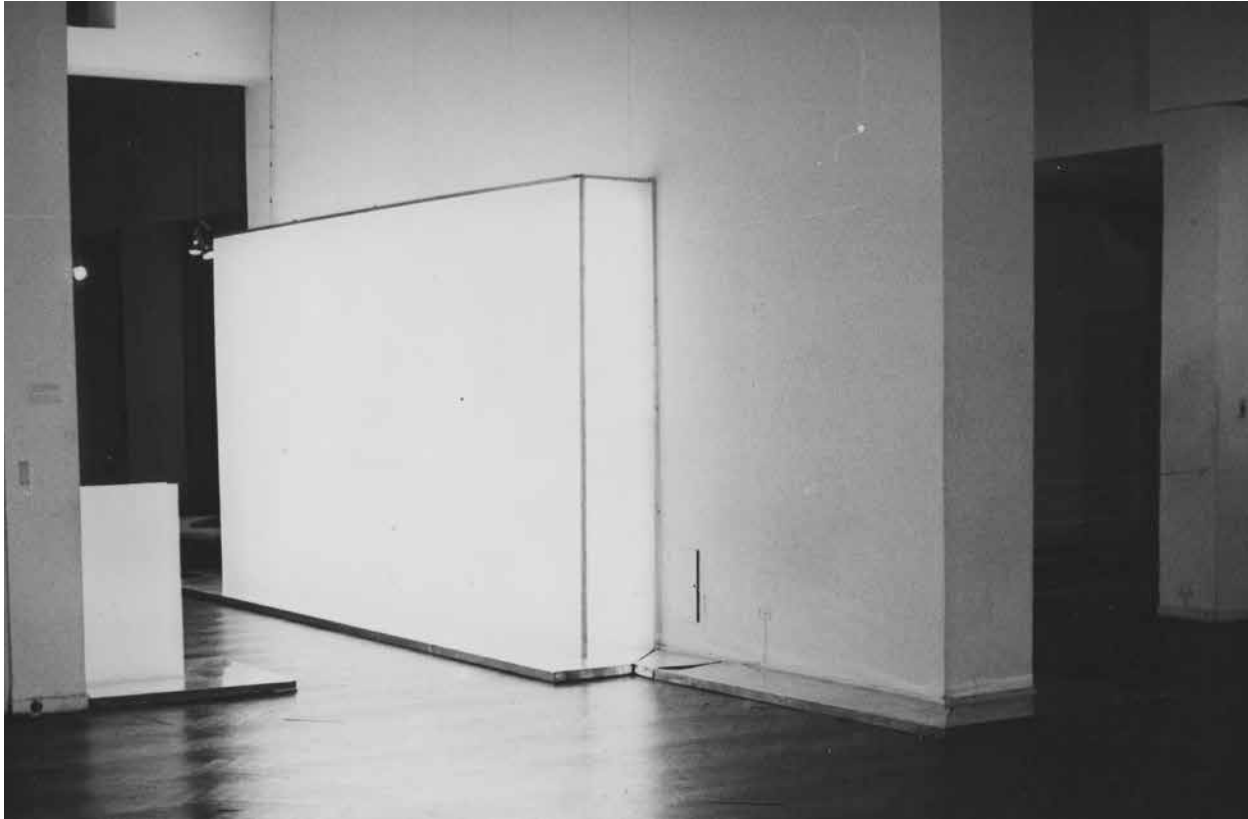
RE'AL CHRISTIAN

Fig. 30
Conexión de tres espacios
(*Connection of Three Spaces*), 1966, milk glass, aluminum, fluorescent light tubes. Panoramic view of installation at Premio Nacional Instituto Torcuato Di Tella, Buenos Aires in 1966.

We are long past the era of the television sign-off, when the day's programming would cease and the picture on our screens would revert to static. The 1982 film *Poltergeist* perhaps best depicts this bygone experience (fig. 33). In the movie's opening scene, a young girl with platinum blonde hair sits just inches away from a television screen after the day's programming has concluded and the screen has filled with static. As the film's plot progresses, the screen takes on the role of an intercessor that connects the girl's family with an

ethereal netherworld. Acting as a bridge between physical and metaphysical spaces, the static of the screen—often thought of as a void—becomes something more.

In David Lamelas's work the screen is often present, not because of its content, but because of the mesmerizing materiality of its projected light. One of his earliest light-based installations, *Conexión de tres espacios* (*Connection of Three Spaces*) (1966) simulates the sensation of sitting close to the white noise of a television screen (figs. 30 and 31). The sculpture is comprised of



tall, rectangular, frosted glass boxes outlined with aluminum frames and interiorly lit with fluorescent lights. First presented in October 1966 at the Torcuato Di Tella Institute in Buenos Aires,¹ the installation marked a dramatic departure for Lamelas, whose previous work often favored a brightly colored Pop aesthetic.² Doing away with pigment, the artist worked with industrial materials, echoing the interest in primary structures shared with his contemporaries in Buenos Aires and abroad. The artist placed the light boxes in different rooms throughout the Di Tella galleries, thereby extending and connecting disparate spaces. As the fluorescent lights radiate through the monumental glass boxes, the objects, light, and materials seem to flow into one another, filling the corners and reflecting off the white walls of the gallery space (fig. 32). With an enveloping quality that Miwon Kwon calls the “tangible reality”

of site-specific works, *Connection of Three Spaces* reads as a physical manifestation of immaterial light.³

In the 1960s, the Di Tella Institute was an incubator for experimental works in new media. Created in 1958, the institute took its name from Siam Di Tella, the largest manufacturer of small-scale technology in Argentina at the time—or in Lamelas’s words, the “General Electric [of] Argentina.”⁴ Lamelas, along with other artists in Di Tella’s orbit—including Marta Minujin, Raúl Escari, and Roberto Jacoby—found innovative uses for these media technologies. In 1967, Lamelas used CRT television sets produced by Di Tella Electronics to create *Situación de tiempo* (*Situation of Time*) for *Experiencias Visuales* (*Visual Practices*), an exhibition of experimental works organized by Di Tella director Jorge Romero Brest (fig. 34).⁵ The artist placed seventeen television sets on tables

Fig. 31 (top)
Detail of *Conexión de tres espacios* (*Connection of Three Spaces*), 1966, milk glass, aluminum, fluorescent light tubes. Installed at *Premio Nacional Instituto Torcuato Di Tella*, Buenos Aires in 1966.

Fig. 32 (bottom)
Detail of *Conexión de tres espacios* (*Connection of Three Spaces*), 1966, LED light strips, acrylic, wood, and aluminum. Installed at University Art Museum, California State University, Long Beach, 2017.

Placing lightboxes and aluminum strips in three spaces of the galleries, Lamelas first installed this work in a group show in Buenos Aires, and has recently, between 2011 and 2017, installed it with flat screens in multiple configurations, including at the University Art Museum. In each iteration, it responds to a specific architectural context, employing materials available in the given site.

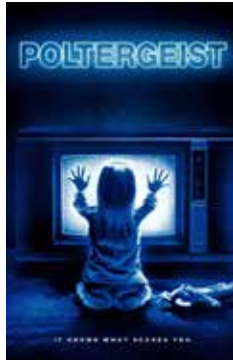


Fig. 33
Publicity poster for the film *Poltergeist*, directed by Tobe Hooper, story by Steven Spielberg, 1982.

that bordered the walls of a large, darkened room.⁶ Each set was turned to a non-channel, which produced static. The bright light, fuzzy movement, and low hum emanating from the screens render both the readability and functionality of the technology moot. Keenly interested in the theories of Marshall McLuhan, whose declaration that “the medium is the message” interprets media through form rather than content,⁷ Lamelas calls our attention to the material qualities of media technologies, be they glass and metal or light and radio waves.⁸ Since its inception, television has been one of the most passively consumed media. Its stream of information makes critique difficult and renders us passive observers who succumb to the set’s absorptive effects. Not unlike the omnipresence of contemporary flat screens, Lamelas’s light-based sculptures simultaneously captivate and numb the viewer, pulling us into a psychic space that wavers between delight and discomfort. With *Connection of Three Spaces*, Lamelas seemingly shows us the void—a medium without a subject, or a light emanating from a frame—but he transforms the void into a space in between narrative actions, an interstice that connects our discontinuous encounters with the real world.

Our understanding of *Connection of Three Spaces* is entirely dependent on our active engagement, a delicate pact that Lamelas himself intended. “In my development from painting to object and, finally, to space,” he later recalled, “I had always limited myself to a specific area. For *Conexión* I decided to work with the preexisting architecture. The basic concept was to create a work that was not perceived immediately as a whole, but as fragments of information.”⁹ While this work engages in institutional

critique,¹⁰ it also meditates on our experiences of the art object itself. Lamelas pushes sculptural and architectural boundaries by dividing the object into three parts. As the viewer must navigate these three parts by simultaneously walking and looking in order to perceive the work as a whole, it becomes, in Lamelas’s words, “a mental construction” (figs. 30, 31, and 32).¹¹ The gaps between the individual light boxes create moments of visual disruption, but our encounter with the work does not begin and end with each individual object. The spaces in between these objects become part of the work itself, as our physical and perceptive experience of each element is extended across the exhibition space.

The blurred boundary between visual and perceptive disruption plays an important role in Lamelas’s practice, as he often explores the devices with which narrative is constructed through perceived continuity. In *Signaling of Three Objects*, for instance, he references the act of “signaling,” or signifying meaning by activating a field in London’s Hyde Park (1968) by positioning blank panels around a tree, a lamppost, and a chair (fig. 35). Like *Connection of Three Spaces*, the work is physically separated into three sites—with little to no subject matter, each site acts as a liminal space, a container for potential action. These works set a precedent for later film, video, and photographic works in which Lamelas exposes the fluidity of narrative-making by staging moments of disrupted actions. Rather than presenting his films and videos as singular entities, he often presents stills derived from these works in juxtaposition with their moving counterparts, suggesting a manual disruption—or discontinuity—similar to *Connection of Three Spaces*. The stills



Fig. 34
Situación de tiempo (Situation of Time), 1967, 12 television sets. Installed in *Experiencias Visuales* in 1967 at Instituto Torcuato Di Tella, Buenos Aires. Filling a gallery with televisions manufactured by the Siam Di Tella corporation (a funder of the Instituto Torcuato Di Tella), Lamelas also included a sign in his installation that instructed viewers to watch the sets for a full eight hours, the length of time that the galleries were open and of a typical workday.

capture individual moments of the narrative, often displayed in differing sequences to disrupt their linearity, and by extension the information signifiers from which we derive significance. Lamelas’s exploration of active/passive consumption is portrayed in his narrative ruptures, the jarring effects of which pull the viewer into active engagement.

With elements of discontinuity, Lamelas turns our attention to perceptive disruption. In early experimental film,

intentional ruptures or “flickers” highlight the gaps of visual perception, the brief moments in which the eye is incapable of perceiving action. Keewatin Dewdney argued in his manifesto “Discontinuous Films” that the flicker makes reference to the mechanical properties of film projection, a form of light that fascinated Lamelas from an early age.¹² In works such as *Cumulative Script* (1971) (fig. 27, p. 54), Lamelas uses a process of overlapping and repeating scenes to force the viewer to actively participate

in piecing together a rudimentary narrative. Jorge Glusberg observed that in the works in which he pairs moving images and stills, Lamelas contrasts the continuity of film with the nonsequential nature of discrete images, producing “multiple layers of understanding of the same action.”¹³ In manipulating narrative in this way, the artist illustrates how our ability to perceive information is connected to the form through which it is received. Deploying visual disruption and distortion, Lamelas establishes

how a medium can effectively escape knowability; he breaks down the medium’s elements, leaving the viewer to put them back together.

The light boxes of *Connection of Three Spaces*—like the static-filled screens of *Situation of Time* or the missing scenes in *Cumulative Script*—simulate moments of narrative discontinuity, the milliseconds of perception lost in the blink of an eye. Whether these gaps or voids occur during the process of walking from one light box

to another, between changing channels on a TV, or in following narrative actions, they act as bridges between multiple spaces and temporalities. In connecting these gaps, Lamelas questions what semiotic meaning arises when a medium is deconstructed, when matter is made immaterial, and when information is fragmented. By presenting industrial ready-made light, *Connection of Three Spaces* creates “a gap from real time,”

as Lamelas once scribbled in the pages of his notebook.¹⁴ The glowing presence of the sculpture radiates, saturates, and then dissipates when the narrative action is resumed, that is to say when our eye is drawn away from its light. It represents a cognitive gap—like the signal malfunction of a television set—disrupting the flow of real-time, real-world information communication with its seductive luminescence.



Fig. 35
Señalamiento de tres objetos (Signaling of Three Objects), 1968, black-and-white photograph of performance. First executed in Buenos Aires in 1966, this photograph shows Lamelas staging the work in London’s Hyde Park, where the objects signaled were a tree, a lamp post, and a chair. Lamelas was studying sculpture at Saint Martin’s at the time and made this work in response to his professor Anthony Caro’s demand that he make sculpture—and not film—if he wanted to continue in the program.

- 1 *Connection of Three Spaces* was initially titled *Extension of a Limited Spatial Volume* and premiered at *Premio Nacional Instituto Torcuato Di Tella*, held at the Di Tella Institute September 29 to October 30, 1966.
- 2 Pop works by Lamelas include the painted wood sculptures *Pieza conectada a una pared (Piece Connected to a Wall)* (1964) and *El Super Elástico* (1965), as well as a series of works on canvas executed in 1964 and displayed at the exhibition *Pinturas a Carlos Gardel (Paintings for Carlos Gardel)*, 1964) dedicated to the prominent tango musician, Carlos Gardel at the Galeria Lirio, Buenos Aires.
- 3 Miwon Kwon, “Genealogy of Site Specificity,” in *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002), 11.
- 4 Lamelas quoted in “Artists at Work: David Lamelas.” Interview by Neus Miró, *Afterall*, January 1, 2017, <https://www.afterall.org/online/artists-at-work-david-lamelas#.Xt1T7C-ZNQI>. Accessed December 17, 2020.
- 5 *Experiencias Visuales* or *Experiencias 67* was an exhibition of minimalist and conceptual art curated by Jorge Romero Brest held at the Di Tella Institute, featuring artists Oscar Bony, Delia Cancela, Margarita Paksa, Oscar Palacio, Ricardo Carreira, Pablo Suárez, Alfredo Rodríguez Arias, Edgardo Giménez, David Lamelas, Juan Stoppani, and Antonio A. Trotta.
- 6 Valeria González, “David Lamelas 1966–76: The Cartography of an Artistic Tactic,” in *David Lamelas: A Life of Their Own*, ed. María José Herrera and Kristina Newhouse (Buenos Aires and Long Beach, CA: Malba-Fundación Constantini and University Art Museum, California State University, Long Beach, 2017), 69–70.
- 7 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964), 24.
- 8 Lamelas discusses his interest in light, new media, and McLuhan’s scholarship in “Artists at Work: David Lamelas.”
- 9 Lamelas quoted in María José Herrera, “David Lamelas in Buenos Aires,” in *David Lamelas: A Life of Their Own*, 44.
- 10 Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, “Structure, Sign, and Reference in the Work of David Lamelas,” in *A New Refutation of Time* (Rotterdam: Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, 1997), 129.
- 11 Lamelas quoted in “Artists at Work: David Lamelas.”
- 12 See Keewatin Dewdney, “Discontinuous Films” (1967) in *Film Manifestos and Global Cinema Cultures: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Scott MacKenzie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 72–75.
- 13 Jorge Glusberg, *David Lamelas: Fifteen Years* (Buenos Aires: CAYC, 1978), 6.
- 14 David Lamelas, undated notebook with handwritten text in pencil and ink. David Lamelas papers, Sprüth Magers, Los Angeles.