

DAVID
LAMELAS

Office of Information
about the Vietnam War
at Three Levels:
The Visual Image, Text
and Audio, 1968

A conversation between
David Lamelas with Sabine Breitwieser and Andrea Viliani
held on the occasion of the opening of
David Lamelas. I Have to Think About It. Part II

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Fondazione Antonio Dalle Nogare



A conversation between David Lamelas with Sabine Breitwieser and Andrea Viliani on *Office of Information about the Vietnam War at Three Levels: The Visual Image, Text and Audio, 1968* Fondazione Antonio Dalle Nogare, Bolzano, 2023, Ph. Ivo Corrà

Andrea Viliani: This conversation celebrates the opening of *Part II* of the solo retrospective *David Lamelas. I Have to Think About It* at the Antonio Dalle Nogare Foundation.

When invited by the Foundation to conceive a retrospective exhibition project, the first sentence David Lamelas uttered was “*I have to think about it.*” A retrospective exhibition indeed involves looking back, making selections, gauging one’s own research, bringing together the community of spaces, times, works, and people that have contributed to this very research. We have to think about it, and how we get there. In Lamelas’ case, in particular, space, time, works, and people, and thus the way we perceive and imagine the world all together, living our lives in the context in which we have lived it (which, in Lamelas’s case, has been and is that of art) are the very subject matter of this research. Additionally, looking back also means imagining how to re-create those spaces and times, how to re-present those works, and evoke those people; which in his case are often connected to the exhibitions he has conceived and realised as an artist, in various cities around the world since the mid-1960s. For these reasons, a retrospective like *I Have to Think About It* also serves as a context for new reflections, new insights, and new decisions. For instance, how to re-present works that were situated in specific spaces and times, in a condition defined by the people who took part in institutional contexts and equally defined historical conditions? Re-presenting these works years later, in a different place and interacting with a different audience and community, entails the possibility, or rather the necessity, that something about them will be lost, that something cannot be replicated, and therefore, that the work must inevitably require one or more variations.

For these same reasons, at the beginning of *Part II*, we decided to ask ourselves questions about these aspects that artists and their curators face with every retrospective. In particular, we decided to focus this conversation on one work, one of Lamelas’ most important and debated ones: *Office of Information about the Vietnam War at Three Levels*. The three levels of the title are the visual, the textual, and the auditory - and that is the image, the word, and the sound: the three ways in which information is mediated. So, we will talk about this work, but we will also be talking about what it means to produce and mediate information, how information is shared and interpreted, and therefore, how it is received and processed by the public in its collective dissemination. Moreover, there is a *Part II* to this exhibition also considering the fact that when Lamelas “thought about it,” he decided that the exhibition would not only occupy all possible spaces in the Foundation, but also all the possible time in its programming - that is, a space and time that are not usually used for an exhibition but, by extending the exhibition itself in space and time, coincide with the space and time of the institution. It completely fills it

1 The speaker conducted this part of the conversation in Italian.

with the reflections, insights, and decisions that the exhibition implies. This has allowed time and space not to be given for granted by the institution and its public, but rather to be perceived as such, elements integral to their experience and cognizance. This also required that even the intervals of the exhibition, its *in-betweens*, could become variations of the exhibition itself. On September 15, in the same room where we are now to enact the very first of these *in-betweens*, a re-enactment of the performative action *1416m³* was presented, which was originally performed at the Kunsthalle in Basel in 2014; in it, four violinists at the four corners of the room, as in the original room of the Kunsthalle, progressively moved towards the center, where a baritone (originally a tenor) sang the characteristics of the space that the musicians were simultaneously playing. Following today's conversation, in the coming months, other *in-betweens* will happen: a presentation by co-curator Eva Brioschi of the activity of the WIDE WHITE SPACE Gallery in Antwerp and its relationship with the community of artists of which Lamelas was also a part; the screening at the Film Club in Bolzano of Lamelas's film *The Desert People* (1974); and the re-enactment of the performative action *TIME* (1969) at the Monte Pana in Val Gardena. On each of these occasions, the possibility will be tested for the work and its discourse involving the public to be re-presented in forms that are both analogous and different from the original or previous versions, as has happened in the exhibition, including the work we will be discussing today.

So, now I give the floor to the artist to tell us how *Office of Information about the Vietnam War at Three Levels* was originally conceived by him in 1968 at the Venice Biennale. And then to Sabine Breitwieser, who reconstructed the work on the occasion of its acquisition by the MoMA in New York.

David Lamelas: ... Many thanks...Thanks a lot... Thank you... Well, I would start from talking about me in relationship to this work. Since I was very little, four, five, six, eight years old, I have always liked two things: arts and newspapers. My father used to buy a paper every day, so when he arrived from work at about one or two o'clock, the first thing I ran to was the paper and the first thing I looked was the art pages. So, newspapers have always been a way for me to keep myself informed about the progression of the art world. But I also was very interested in the front page, which was quite often violence and war, and my first recollection of war is when I was about five years old, in the city of Buenos Aires, Argentina. We started school at eight o'clock. Between eight and one o'clock, I remember we had a minute of silence to the dead in the Korean War. So that was what happened for a long time because the war never ended. It somehow influenced me a lot. Then, I was invited in 1968 to represent Argentina at the Venice Biennale. Before, I was a so-called "minimalist sculptor". My idea was to take the art out of the object, as life itself, the phenomena of daily events, they are art too. When I was invited to the

Biennale, I was at the limit, I had just left the object behind and I was moving ahead. At the same time, within my group of friends in Argentina, who were writers and artists, we were paying attention to the means of information. And, by the time I got to design the piece for Venice, I decided not to use an object but to use, as my work, the means of information. Since the Venice Biennale was an international event, and the scene was no longer local, I had to do something international. I decided that the most important news internationally was the Vietnam War, that was then affecting the entire world. My idea was to bring to the Biennale something that was not really art, but something real, and then I presented that project to the committee in Argentina and, somehow, it moved on. It's quite amazing, let's not forget the political context in Argentina in 1966-67: it was the beginning of a very strong dictatorship, which lasted 30 years. So, it was quite a miracle that I was allowed to do this. They didn't really understand what it was all about. The only thing is, when I saw the catalogue... they changed the title, which officially became *Office of Information about a Certain Subject*. They took away the "Vietnam War" but, even if the "Vietnam War" was not mentioned at the Biennale, it was the "selected subject" of this work.

It was my first time in Italy. I took a plane from Buenos Aires to Rome. Why did I go to Rome? Because Rome was the center of information in Italy, and Rome-based ANSA was (and still is) the main Italian news agency, so I had to deal with ANSA. I arrived in Rome without literally knowing anybody, but someone gave me the phone number of a woman reporter at ANSA, who was an artist as well. She connected me with the bosses at ANSA, and through them I achieved the cable connection between the news agency in Rome and my small pavilion at the Biennale: I actually became a client of ANSA? Their news were arriving in my portion of the pavilion, which was properly an office. I had to build an office, so I contacted Olivetti and we got to loan from them the office furniture. Why Olivetti? Because I noticed that, at that time, the offices where information was transmitted were always highly designed. The design was a big part of the information phenomenon, and Olivetti provided the furniture for all the real ANSA offices. So, Olivetti was a big part of my piece, which was very interesting too because I think Olivetti was a corporation with a huge international enterprise, the one of newsrooms furniture. Once the cable was connected and the furniture was done, I had an assistant who, speaking four languages, translated to the audience all the messages that arrived to our office. The idea was to also expose the phenomenon of information. That is why the office was behind glass: I was exhibiting the means of information, I was abstracting the phenomenon of information, detaching myself from the Vietnam War, in a way. The important thing was to realize how all information, especially political information, is manipulated by news agencies, reporters, broadcasting platforms, embedding a certain ideology. But I really wanted to take this

out of ideology, that's why everything happened behind glass windows, like an object that you cannot touch.

When I left Argentina, it was the beginning of the riots against the military, and when I arrived in Italy it was the politicized Venice Biennale of 1968. There were riots everywhere, I remember sitting in Piazza San Marco and suddenly hundreds of carabinieri arrived and we were hiding inside the coffee shops and the curtains were railing down. It was incredible. By the time we got to the Biennale - before you got to the Giardini you got to that bridge - at both sides of that bridge there were people kind of screaming against us: "*Fascisti! Reazionari!*". I was really younger than they were, there were people in their 20s and 30s, so to be called "*fascista*" by them was quite impactful for me. Anyway, I worked on things that I still don't understand today, like how ideology works.

We started talking with Sabine about this piece many years ago and, among other things, I told her that these people in their 20s and 30s who were screaming "*fascista*" didn't realize that I was fighting as well, but from the inside the Biennale. When they got this work at MoMA in New York, Sabine said: "David, we bring the trojan horse into MoMA". Do you remember that, Sabine? So finally, the work arrived in MoMA, and it was a very interesting passage, because then it finally became art. Anything in MoMA becomes art. I find very interesting this transition between a non-art piece becoming an art piece. So, I would like leaving you, Sabine, the word on that. Are you speaking in German or in English?

Sabine Breitwieser: Whatever language you want, just not Italian.

DL: The three of us, we are ourselves means of communication, so we have to decide which language we communicate with. And it's very important how to translate communication, because how you communicate the information changes the information itself, which in French means one thing, in Italian another. Some of the meaning changes...

SB: But not everyone is as multilingual as David Lamelas. You're a phenomenon, in many ways.

DL: Do you think so, Sabine? Anyway, the work that we are talking about is in four languages, so it is indeed not a detail which kind of language we are speaking. As this is an Italian-German speaking region, Andrea should talk in Italian and Sabine in German. I am already talking in English. And we should make a phenomenal translation of this conversation, at the end!

SB: In German?² Hello! Many thanks to the Antonio Dalle Nogare Foundation for the invitation and especially to David Lamelas and Andrea Vilianni. Indeed, David Lamelas is a phenomenon that many art scholars and art historians have grappled with. A question arises above all others, and I would like to address it upfront: how was it possible for this man, in this time, to create works that were so innovative, posing new and

fundamental questions about art and society? At the opening of *Part I* in April this year, we had a small discussion about the work *Office of Information about the Vietnam War at Three Levels: the Visual Image, Text, and Audio* (1968), which I acquired for the MoMA. It was part of a very comprehensive acquisition, in the context of which this work was gifted by the artist and Jan Mot. At that time, we purchased five works from this period, thanks to an extremely committed acquisition committee, the so-called Latin American Committee. I no longer work at the MoMA, but I still want to thank those individuals who, even after I left, continued to raise funds for this acquisition. Back then, I asked them the following question: There are purchase options A, B, C; Group C is the most extensive proposal, what do you think we can purchase? And they replied: "Absolutely everything." That was extraordinary, and for me as a European, it was a new experience to see such enthusiasm for art and people advocating for the acquisition of truly essential and certainly quite challenging, not necessarily mass-appealing works of art. Today, I will present some of them to you. As already mentioned, at the last exhibition opening here last April a discussion arose, after which, Andrea and David suggested that it should be conducted publicly. David asked me what I thought about the presentation of the *Office*, and without having the title of the exhibition in mind, I said: "*I have to think about it*". So, what we are doing here now is thinking about this work.

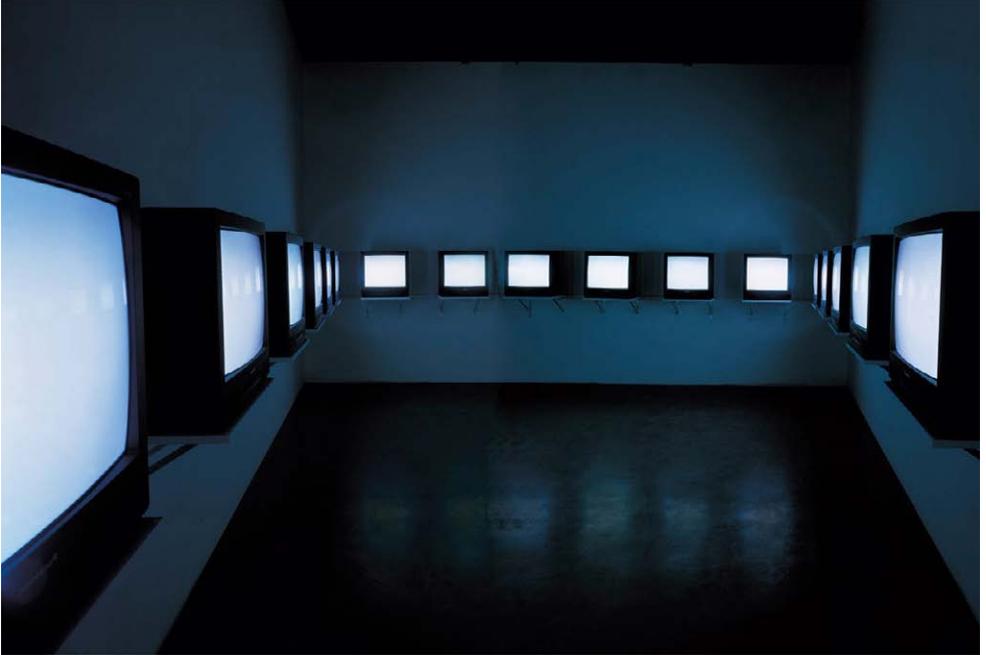
The background to my extensive acquisition of Latin American art for the MoMA - I am, generally speaking, a specialist in the art of the 1960s-1970s - is a kind of archaeology and years of research that I, especially, I must say, conducted on female artists. In this sense, David Lamelas is an exception. In the year 2000, I curated an exhibition titled *vivências* at the Generali Foundation in Vienna, an exhibition that would no longer be possible today, namely with the now internationally highly sought-after artists Lygia Clark, Helio Oiticica, Marta Minujin, Lea Lublin, Luis Camnitzer, David Lamelas, and many more, of whom we reconstructed, for the most part, 'immersive environments', as one would say today.

Now, we're already - I switch to English -, in the middle of the subject, questions of contextualization, re-contextualization and eventually re-construction of works that are loaded with social and political context, and often also featuring the very specific means of a certain time, the 1960s. David already mentioned what was going on in the world at that time. But before talking about *Office*, I would like to talk about another work by David that has been re-constructed as well as *Office*: the work *Situación de tiempo*. I think it is a very important piece because David created it in Argentina just before he moved to London...

DL: In 1967, or one year before... It was the last big piece I made in Argentina, right before Venice.

SB: Exactly. And now I'm going to quote you. I found in my catalogue a statement which I thought is very interesting, in particular re-

garding *Office*. Here, you say: “My interest in the object-environment relation led me to consider the importance of the technological object, its capacity to modify this environment, its influence; in a space its presence becomes dominant”. Doesn’t this remind us so much of what we’re facing today? All your work and what you were doing, David, I think we need to highlight that, are so relevant, and that’s really striking. The re-construction of *Situación de tiempo* in Vienna, at the Generali Foundation



David Lamelas, *Situación de Tiempo*, 1967
Installation with 17 TV sets, reconstruction for the exhibition *vivências*
Installation view, Generali Foundation, Vienna, 2000, Ph. Werner Kaligofsky

implied challenges that were, in a way, similar with the ones related to the re-construction of *Office*. But before we go there, could you David talk about how and why you created this piece, with its 1970s TV set for a specific institution, the Torcuato Di Tella art space?

DL: The story is this. It was during the Second World War in Europe, this young couple from Milan moved to Argentina and he became Mr. Di Tella, the founder of the biggest industry in Argentina, a sort of General Electric... cars, television sets, refrigerators, and so on... He was also a major contributor, maybe the number one contributor living outside Italy in terms of money, against the fascist government. And, at the same time, he was an art collector, who also opened an art space under his name, Torcuato Di Tella. I was invited there when I was nineteen years old. And I worked on that occasion with the Di Tella industry. Then, one

of the major things they produced were TV sets; every house in Argentina had a Di Tella TV, because they made it accessible, paying monthly rates, so every house in Argentina had a Di Tella refrigerator, a Di Tella television set, a Di Tella whatever. So, I asked the Di Tella industry if I could borrow for the exhibition a set of seventeen TVs. In a way, I was exhibiting the Di Tella industries at the Di Tella art institution, exposing why we could afford their products, making a connection between the industry and us.

SB: This piece, *Situación de tiempo*, certainly came out of a specific context, but you also created it out of a technological phenomenon of the time - what we call today “white snow” and displayed it under specific conditions.

DL: In those days it was the whitest snow. The idea was to show the object of information, but without information.

SB: Exactly, so the challenge was the issue of re-constructing historical artworks with contemporary conditions, that we were facing in 2000 in Vienna. In 1967, you simply tuned TV sets to a non-existing channel, right?

DL: I used to call it “degree zero of information”, like Malevich did with the white painting...

SB: *White on White* from 1918... a work at MoMA, by the way.

DL: I actually did my own Malevič with *Situación de tiempo*.

SB: Indeed. However, what you did then, is simply not possible anymore, because if you switch your TV set it will turn blue and quickly after blue, in a few seconds, it will just turn black. In fact, you can't create “white snow” anymore, there's no serial information: Or you could say that media technology was then prepared for this, that there was always information that could be manipulated and controlled, as a matter of fact.

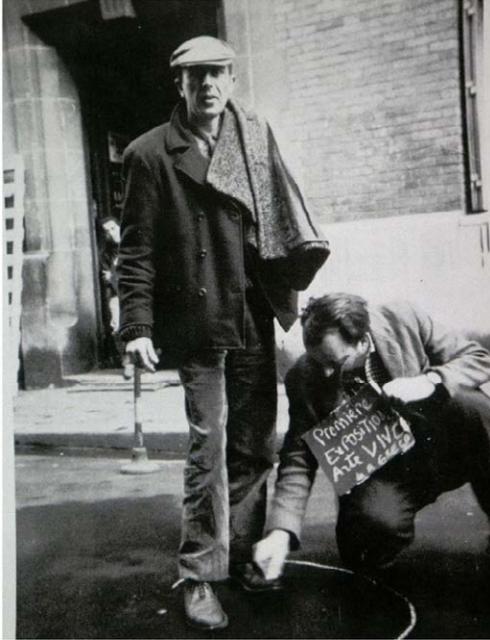
DL: Yes, you cannot escape information. Those days the light on the television set was outer space light, did you know that?

It came, it was transmitted through the information system into your house, so the idea actually was to fill up that room with outer space light.

SB: Exactly. But today the only solution we have is shortcutting the TV sets to achieve a situation comparable to the original installation, which is the one we were actually trying to re-construct in Vienna. As a matter of fact, this is a big issue I often had to solve in my career, in particular at MoMA, where I was in charge of media art and performance art: in the case of historical media art works do you hunt for historical technical equipment, do you create something like a technical archaeology and actually recreate something like a technical museum? Or do you work with the means of today facing the challenges of creating something based on history but that is something new, and you confront the audience with the challenges of how media conditions have changed today? Let me show another piece that David spontaneously performed at the

Generali Foundation during the opening of the exhibition *vivências* in 2000 coinciding with a happening by Marta Minujin who is a kind of hero for David. Now, another important hero for David is Alberto Greco, originally Italian, who actually performed from 1962 onwards what he called *Vivo Dito*, in fact he marked people on the streets by drawing a chalk circle around them and signing it. I think this is very interesting because David called his happening “after” Alberto Greco *Vivo Dito*, clearly showing what art is about: it’s about information, it’s about marking and signing and ...

DL: It’s about life.



Alberto Greco, *Vivo-Dito*

Lt: Madrid, year, Ph. X

Rt: Paris, 1962, Ph. René Bertholo



David Lamelas, *After Alberto Greco Vivo-Dito*, 2000
Performance by David Lamelas at the opening of the exhibition *vivências*
Generali Foundation, Vienna, 2000, Ph. Pez Hejduk

SB: Absolutely. And that's what the title of the exhibition I am talking about, is about, *vivências*, an imperfect translation would be "life experiences".

DL: Well Greco was, I think, heavily influenced by the work of Marcel Duchamp, when and where he did life as art. I did it too, and then Gilbert & George, for example. I think there is a strong connection between Greco, Gilbert & George, and Duchamp obviously.

SB: But the interesting thing is, I think, what Greco was using, and you picked up on: it is a sort of an archaic version of mass media, a piece of crayon.

DL: Yes.

SB: David already spoke about the social and political context of the Venice Biennale, and *Office* is a piece that was interesting to us already in 2000 during the research for the *vivências* exhibition. We eventually decided not to re-construct it then: we had a discussion about it, and at the end we thought that we could not do it, it was too complicated. So, we showed *Situación de tiempo* instead. *Office* was a subsequent big undertaking, for which I have to thank my former team at the MoMA, and in

particular Martin Hartmann, assistant curator, and Francesca Valentini, an intern at the department at that time.

DL: Can we switch here into German?

SB: I think they want me to keep going in English, David. Francesca is Italian, so she was able to undertake amazing research. At the end we acquired the piece, but we weren't sure if we would be able to ever recreate it, if it could actually be re-constructed and if we could accept the gift from Jan Mot. I think it was a very innovative project, a kind of Trojan horse!

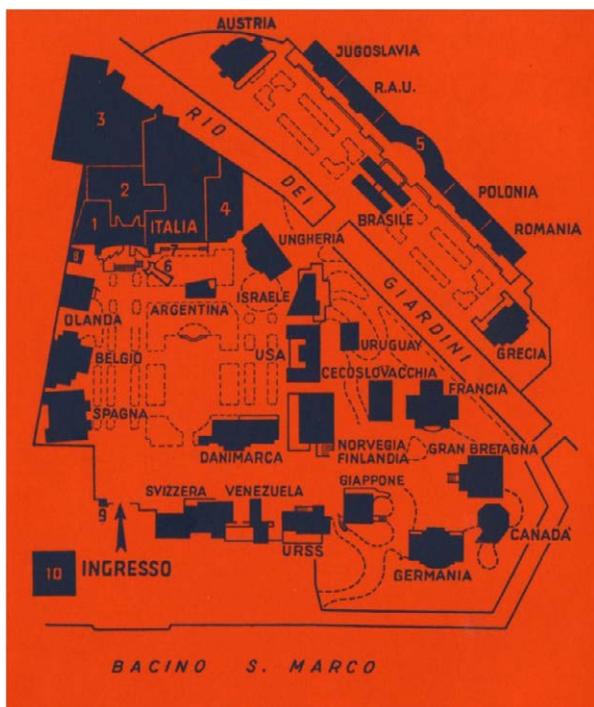
DL: That's true, how can you possibly recreate a moment in life?

SB: Exactly. Nothing was left from the original work after the Venice Biennale: the furniture went back to Olivetti, and to get the news I've sent several letters and emails to ANSA, who at that time didn't respond.

DL: Well Sabine, the main constant is war.

SB: Yes, that's right. The first thing we thought, while researching the possibility of re-constructing *Office*, was: "Where was this glass pavilion at all?". We found out that it was not where the Argentinian pavilion is located today, in the Carlo Scarpa building, which I think was built later. Here you have the map, and in the centre you find the word "Argentina", actually with the Alvar Aalto pavilion in front of that word.

DL: It was the Finnish pavilion.



SB: Yes, the one designed by Alvar Aalto. A few years ago, I was on the jury of the Venice Biennale representing Finland and since then I am very familiar with the history of this pavilion. But at that time, I was not. However, originally the pavilion was meant to travel around the Giardini and it was built to be dismantled, but this never happened.

DL: I was very lucky because it was beautifully designed. I think it still exists, they took it back. It was small. At the end of it there was a very small room. The curator wanted to hide my work, because the attention was given to a painter, very fashionable at that time. So he put me back and he even put a wall in front, so very few people saw it.



Alvar Aalto pavilion at the Biennale di Venezia, Venice.
Used for the presentation of Argentina in 1968 and 1970

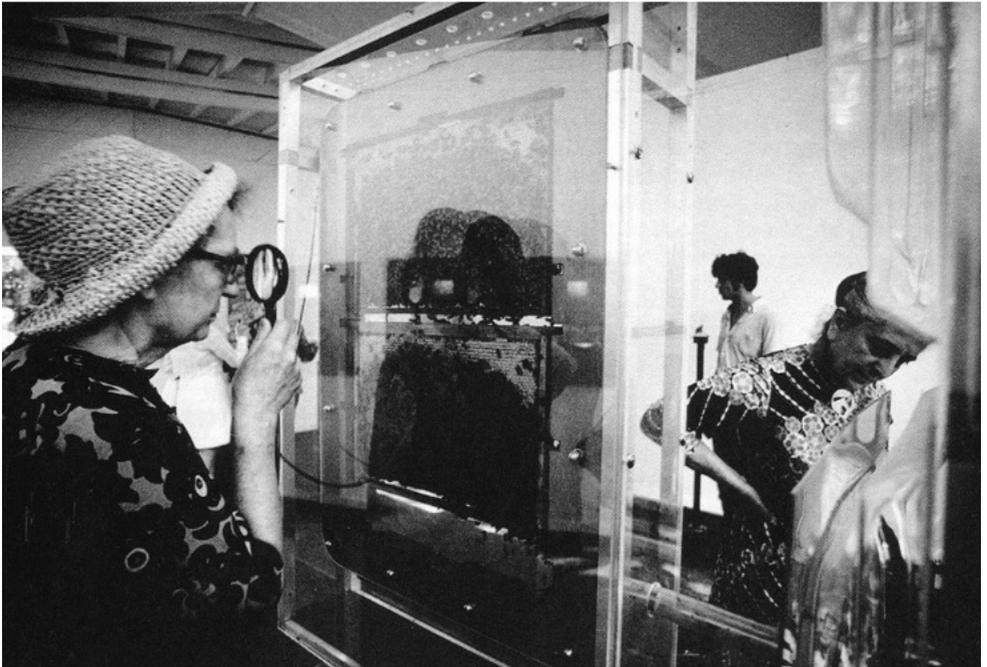
SB: Sometimes the most important projects become known later. Here you can see two images, which prove that this was the location of your piece. David, you could not remember it at that time.

DL: I cannot see now, what is that?

SB: These wooden elements? That's the Alvar Aalto construction and you can clearly see your office on the top.

DL: Ooooooh! Where do you find that picture?

SB: That's the result of our research. Later, we also received some parts the "original" news from ANSA and luckily, the re-constructed piece was shown at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.



Photograph of the Argentinian pavilion, XXXVII Biennale di Venezia, Venice, 1970, Ph. Ugo Mulas © Ugo Mulas Heirs, all rights reserved



David Lamelas, *Office of Information about the Vietnam War at Three Levels: The Visual Image, Text and Audio*, 1968
Office furniture, telex machine, tape recorder, microphone, telephone receivers, text, Plexiglas partition, and performance.
The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Gift of the artist and Jan Mot, Brussels, 2012 © 2024 David Lamelas
Installation view, *Transmissions: Art in Eastern Europe and Latin America, 1960-1980*, The Museum of Modern Art,
New York (September 5, 2015 - January 3, 2016)
Digital image © 2024 The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Ph. Thomas Griesel



David Lamelas, *Office of Information about the Vietnam War at Three Levels: The Visual Image, Text and Audio*, 1968

Office furniture, telex machine, tape recorder, microphone, telephone receivers, text, Plexiglas partition, and performance.
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Gift of the artist and Jan Mot, Brussels, 2012 © 2024 David Lamelas

Installation view, *Transmissions: Art in Eastern Europe and Latin America, 1960-1980*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York (September 5, 2015 - January 3, 2016). Performer: Patrisa Tomassini Digital image © 2024 The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Ph. Thomas Griesel

This presentation was organized by my successor Stuart Comer for a show titled *Transmissions*, where he kindly included a number of works that I had acquired for the MoMA collection, yours were among these. I was already busy running another museum in Salzburg where I had moved. You already described, David, how the piece worked. The ANSA news came in from a telex machine and a woman picked up, read aloud, someone translated, and people could hear live or listen later from a recording. So, it's not about real life, it's about real time. Again, none of the components have been preserved. What we basically were doing was kind of hunting for Olivetti furniture, hunting for ANSA news, hunting for technical equipment and information on the original location and display. David, I don't know if you remember, but you kept sending me things, furniture and technical equipment, to New York, to the MoMA, objects that you picked up somewhere...

DL: I picked them up on American eBay, where I was finding old furniture from 1960s for \$50, things like that.

SB: In fact, we never showed these things you sent us, they were not so good...

DL: Were they not good?

SB: No.

DL: But it was useful for the re-construction, at the end.

SB: It was good for starting a discussion about it.

DL: As they said, the beginning of something.

SB: We re-constructed the work from a single photo we started with at that time... and not a very good memory of the artist, comprehensible of course.

DL: Say it again!

SB: Not a very good memory of the artist at that time. I think you refreshed your memory after.

DL: Yeah, yeah of course.

SB: It comes back.

DL: You know, after twelve years in California, I was brainwashed somehow. It is really interesting how that moment seemed faded, and then I re-constructed this history over the years...

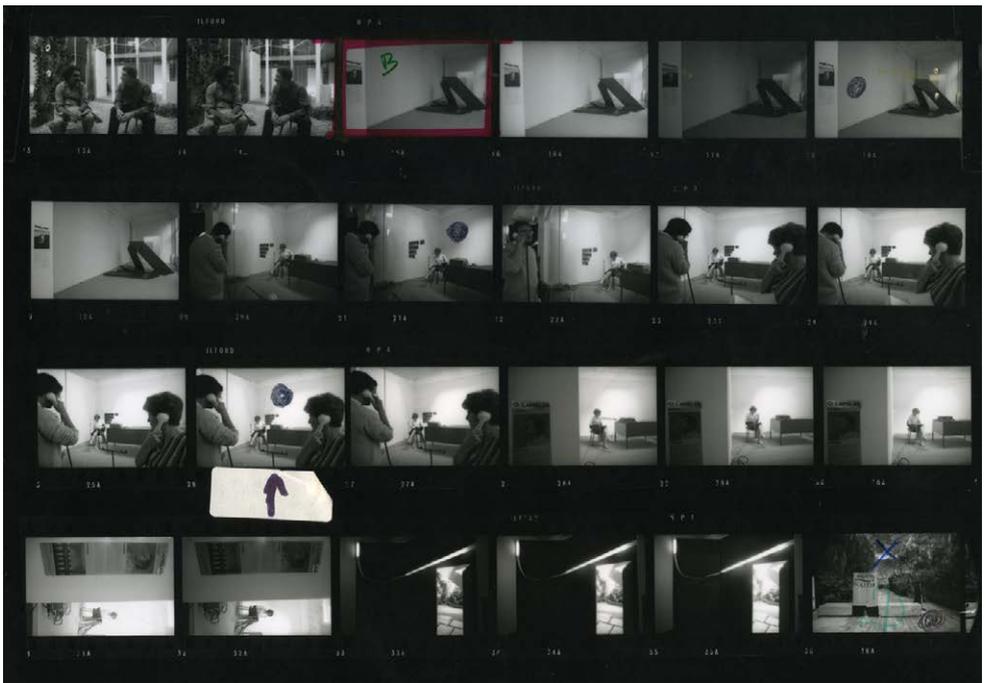
SB: Because it was legendary. The team of Jan Mot also provided important help, and we all consulted the archives of the Venice Biennale. So, the re-construction of the piece kept going and I think, putting the ball back into Andrea's court, the issue was basically: "What is this? What has the Museum of Modern Art acquired and presented in the end?" And what is on show here at the Fondazione now given that the original piece no longer exists, and this is not the version re-constructed at the MoMA?

AV: Thank you, Sabine. I'm going to speak in German, now...

DL: Really good.

AV: No, not really, David, it was a joke, of course. I think that Sabine introduced in a very clear way the many possible pathways and

alternative routes, and so the different decisions, even the contradicting aporias, the eventual metaverses that, as artists and curators, we face every time a work that comes from a past exhibition needs to be re-presented, or re-enacted, in the present of another exhibition. I'm like a Sabine follower since quite a few years now, of her curatorial practice and her impeccable curatorial commitment to the artist, to the history of art that specific artists contributed to shaping (even if he does not remember the details anymore) and, ultimately, to the present agency of this history. As David himself said, this work starts as a concept - what is information? - and not as an art piece. In 1968, photographer Ugo Mulas documented this piece



Ph: Ugo Mulas © Ugo Mulas Heirs, all rights reserved

while he was documenting the artworks of this contested and inevitably performative Biennale; and how this context impacted the way that the works had been installed by artists and experienced by the audience. Mulas's photographs were very useful not just for re-constructing David's piece, but to understand why so many pieces like this one have been destroyed immediately after the Biennale, why they did not survive its contextual moment. The relevance of the documentation in front of such an artwork and such a destiny is an essential part of the decisions David and I made for re-presenting the work here at the Fondazione. As in my first exhibition here, and actually as quite frequently in the exhibitions that I curate, the main issue was: "How do you re-enact the past? Do you work philologically, re-constructing what happened, or imaginatively, articulating what could have happened / linking what happened then to what is happening right now? Do you go for the archival fever or for the archival amnesia? Is there an in-between that could be a more productive space-time, in terms of the experience of the re-enacted work and the new knowledge that it could still produce?"

The previous exhibition I curated here at the Fondazione was titled *Re-Materialization of Language*, and it was a re-enactment of another exhibition that also played a part in the history of the Venice Biennale, just one decade after David's *Office*, in 1978. Its original title was *Materializzazione del linguaggio*, ("materialization of language").

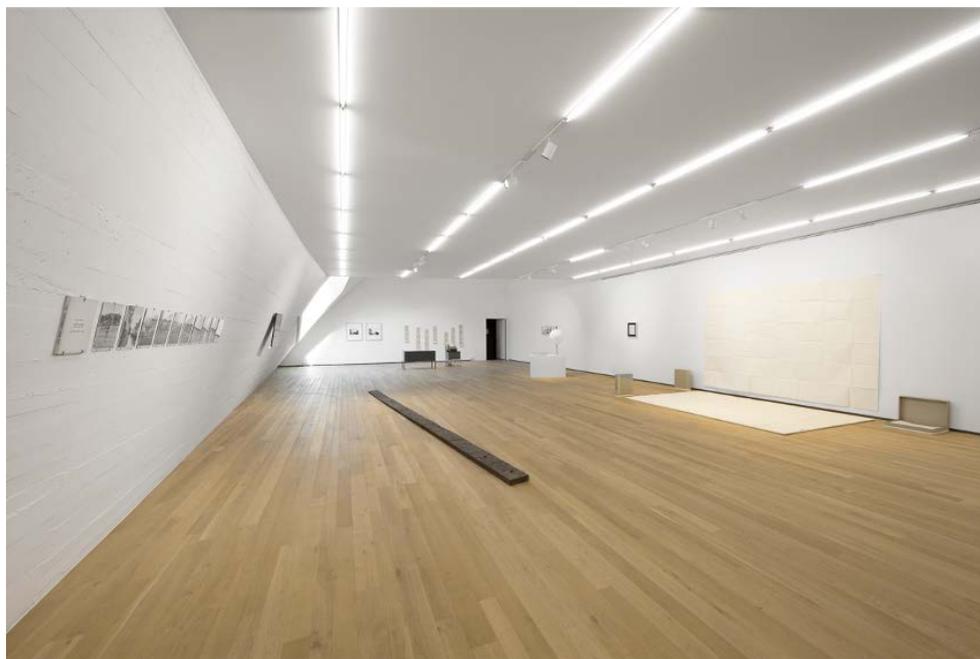
These photographs are not by Mulas, but they are filed at the ASAC, the archive of the Venice Biennale that also Sabine and her team used for re-constructing *Office*. When I studied the documentation of the original exhibition with co-curator Cristiana Perrella, we read the papers of Mirrella Bentivoglio, the original curator and participating artist. Bentivoglio realized that she didn't have enough time to prepare the show, or a proper exhibition space, nor did she have an adequate budget because the Biennale realized quite late that in the 1978 edition there were almost no women artists, and invited Bentivoglio to create her feminist exhibition almost last minute. So, *Materializzazione del linguaggio* opened a few months after the Biennale, and ran for a few weeks only, using the Biennale's residual money. We thought: "Does it make sense to re-enact an exhibition that valued so poorly by the Biennale itself? Do you re-enact an exhibition by keeping its self-destructive premises, the conditions for its subsequent oblivion?" We decided to venture to the other side, conceiving a research-based but alternative version, which was much more expensive, thanks to the Fondazione, than the original one. We decided to put not only more money, but more space and more time, and I suppose more respect, into action, also considering works and positions that Bentivoglio wasn't able to show because there was almost no budget for insurance, shipping and travels. This was an institutional decision, not just a curatorial decision: to re-enact this past exhibition with sensible variations. So, we decided to do an "as if" re-enactment, based on a com-

mitted research but giving to the exhibition the possibility to be more similar to the hypothetical exhibition that the curator and her artists had possibly intended to do. Of course, this is by all means fiction about an exhibition that historically never happened.



Venice Biennale Historical Archive - ASAC, Ph. Ferruzzi

In a few minutes we are going to open the second part of David's exhibition, where *Office of Information about the Vietnam War*



Installation views at Fondazione Antonio Dalle Nogare, Bolzano, 2023, Ph. Hannes Ochsenreiter

is presented in a totally different set-up than the one at Venice Biennale in 1968, as well as in a totally different form from the re-construction that Sabine oversaw, allowing this lost piece to become part of the MoMA collection. First of all, this further version is, of course, not the original work, because it has been dismantled after the Venice Biennale. Today artists and their galleries - the art system and the related art market - would never allow a piece to be dismantled or lost after the Venice Biennale. But in 1968, under its particular conditions, the work by David was dismantled. So only the documentation material - including the photographs by Mulas and the other ones searched and found in archives like the ASAC, or the eventual memories of the surviving witnesses, including in this case the artist himself or an institution like the MoMA, thanks to the research work conducted by Sabine and her team - could not only make it possible for the piece to be re-constructed, but its original framework too. Also, more recently David realized another version of this piece, which is totally different from the original one and which, in this case, was not about the Vietnam war but about the then current war in Iraq. So, the artist already experimented the possibility of doing an alternative ver-

sion, changing its reference to which information the piece mediated and reflected on. In our case, we decided to work in a further different way.



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Basically, we agreed with David to just evoke the work, re-presenting the most basic elements of it, the *raison d'être*, the reason of the original piece, which is the information and how information is mediated on the three levels of image, text and sound, embodying the (documentary) information on the work itself. In the process of finalizing this possibility, we realized that it was impossible to do this without actually mixing together the previous versions and how we have come to know them: which means the original version known only through both its documentation (in particular the many still unpublished photographs that we found in the Mulas Archive, of which we decided to show two on the wall behind) and the re-creation made at MoMA. What we achieved was an in-between version, so to say. After the photographic documentation, we focused on the transcription of the ANSA news from 1968 (a further document *per se*, which we received from the artist, who in turn received it from MoMA upon their recollection of the original documentary material needed for re-constructing the work). We could still have got it, as Sabine said, hunting for the telefax, even if we would most likely not have found the paper on which the news coming from this telefax were printed. When we were

in the middle of this process, our collaborator Silvia Di Giorgio found two identical versions of the Olivetti furniture (which we bought) as well as - here in South Tirol, at the Typewriters' Museum (Museo delle macchine da scrivere) in Parcines - both the same telefax used in 1968 and a roll of telefax-paper from the late 60s.

DL: This is a loan from this museum, actually.

AV: Yes. Lastly, concerning sound, we had two options: we could have done it as a live performative event, like in Venice in 1968 or at MoMA during the live presentation of their re-constructed work; or we could have asked MoMA, as we ended up doing, for the recording of their own re-enactments (again a further document). So, in the end, we decided to present a further version composed of the documentary material plus a selection of identical items plus some re-constructed materials (based on their documentary research) on loan from MoMA. The result is partially something only documented and partially something identical to the original but profoundly related to documentation. In its inner articulation, this is neither the original version nor a re-construction of the original version (like the version in the MoMA collection), but, so to say, an hyper-documentary version, suspended between work and document, museum and archive, fact and fiction. This could be the most impure or less acceptable version of this work, the most self-analytical and the less disposable among the various versions. It could just as well be a "beautiful phantasy" (una "*bella fantasia*", as Michelangelo Buonarroti defined, with obvious disdain, the mannerist experimentations by the younger generation of Florentine artists), which embodies both the concept of the original work as well as the nostalgia of its dispersion. A schizophrenic version, I reckon, that is self-aware and acknowledges to have become both its own documentation and/or its recreation. And which, as a memorial catalyzer, retains and shows again only certain elements that were important for the artist and that are still relevant to him now. David himself told us about the relevance of the Olivetti furniture, because it was specifically devoted to communicating information. So... What is this last version? How can we define it? What does it correspond to? How is it positioned in relation to other versions of the same work and in the artist's research path? Is it still the work of art it became at MoMA or has it gone back to being just the information it was at the Venice Biennale in 1968? Or neither of these options?

These are the questions that, retrospectively, I wanted to pose David (and myself) and Sabine. As these replies will be recorded, we are actually producing another document on the multiple and layered history of this work.

DL: I believe we have carried out anthropological work.

SB: I agree, it's a kind of anthropological work.

DL: I mean, the work that we made here, on the occasion of this further presentation, was that of an anthropologist. We, somehow, were

trying to discover the original paper, the original typewriter, the original furniture. Again. And it is very interesting because my work, very often, uses anthropology as a working reference.

SB: About that... David said he wants to be challenged, so I'll try...

DL: Please, Sabine, I like to be challenged.

SB: My question is: is this not just nostalgia, to hunt for original technical equipment and furniture? Wouldn't it be far more important to discuss the issue of the specific location of this piece, for example? Why didn't you and the curator decide to put it up in the city of Bolzano? And then, why did you not activate it accordingly in a new way?

DL: Within the city of Bolzano?

SB: Wherever. Maybe in a shop, behind its glass window. I mean, what I am questioning is the issue of the importance of the location, rather hunting for the historical and physical components, and in addition, how you deliver the piece, how people receive the piece. In the Venice pavilion, even if your work was hidden, it was right in front of the Italian pavilion, so everyone who walked through the Giardini probably encountered your piece. It was not safely shown in a museum. And you used the objects of that time. You were not making use of historical furniture. As mentioned, these are issues I'm often confronted with in my work as a curator. That's one thing and the other, if we're talking about re-constructing histories it is a re-construction of a history; if we're talking about activating history it is to bring history back in relation to today's issues. What's the role of artists and curators in such a project? Your archive was acquired by the Getty Center, you told me. Congratulations David, you're part of history. But a lot of artists don't have the same privilege and their work is completely diminished if someone like Andrea is not putting up a show like that and someone like Antonio is not supporting it.

AV: We could consider David as a pioneer in many senses, also considering the relational approach of the artwork to its audience. So, it is an effective possibility to present this *Office* not in art spaces but rather in a city shop, in a space that people can encounter, with a glass that they can decide to pass by or through. Eventually linking it to another war which is not the Vietnam war, but for example the current Russian-Ukrainian war. It would make much sense, also considering what David told us about how relevant the presence of the glass in the original presentation was, like one of his "*segnalamenti*", like the one in the show, the fragility and malleability of information itself. What I can add is that David and I did not want to actually leave the art space, with this further presentation, but challenge it, trying to understand what remains of a work like this once you do not re-construct it or update it. We acted to break its mechanism and logic to study it from the inside. This also considering what David just said, that *Office* allowed him to explore "things that I still don't understand today, like how ideology works". In a way, this is a work that already exists and is still to be fully experienced and understood by the



Installation view at Fondazione Antonio Dalle Nogare, Bolzano, 2023, Ph. Hannes Ochsenreiter

artist himself. This could be, more than an anthropological approach, an archaeological one, like dealing with fragments that amplify the need for a missing, original unity, for a still missing understanding of what the original work revealed about how ideology works. Could it be antidote to the fetishism of a philological re-construction (which, in a way, could also be an expression of nostalgia)? Or could it be just another way of updating a work that is not about war, but about the knowledge of it?

SB: It's always an artistic decision in the end, and we, as curators, can just raise questions.

DL: Well, I know it's a very difficult set of decisions. About 5 or 8 years ago, I did indeed in Essen an exhibition and I did a completely new version of this piece, as Andrea said, because today we get information through the laptop.

SB: Yes.

DL: In the exhibition I had a laptop open about the war in Iraq.

SB: Well, the question is how you activate the same piece.

DL: It was just a laptop with the newsroom, and it was about the current war.

SB: May I ask you something?

DL: Yes.

SB: You made a work titled *Time as Activity*, right?

DL: Yes.



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SB: That you were doing in different cities.

DL: Yes.

SB: So, you have an ongoing project where you sort of translate the concept of the same work to different cities.

DL: Yes.

SB: So that could be a sort of blueprint, maybe.

DL: What is your idea? How does it work?

SB: Think about the presentation at MoMA. As I said, I wasn't involved in the MoMA presentation, I would have probably chosen a different location inside the museum, like the Agnes Gund Lobby, which would be more frontal. You could just put the office down there, you know, before you go up the stairs to the Atrium at MoMA ...

DL: That is something we could propose!

SB: I'm not working there anymore, I can't decide. Let's talk to Stuart.

DL: Yes, we can still propose it.

SB: OK, but the question is still how you could re-activate, and so update, the work in different ways, without simply re-constructing it.

AV: Yes.

DL & SB: ...

AV: Please use the microphone, otherwise it's a silent movie.

DL: That was a very private conversation, anyway.

AV: The audience is ready to leave the room, as the opening is about to start. But we can also stay, the three of us, in front of the camera and keep talking, if you want.

DL: We don't want to be boring in the end.

AV: OK, so I will just switch to Italian to conclude³. What we have tackled is a dilemma, so to speak. We haven't presented a solution, but rather many. For example, that there is a place and a way, at the MoMA, where this work is exhibited in a relevant manner as a re-construction. That there are ways to re-activate the work engagingly for the public, as has happened in Essen, or as could have happened in Bolzano had the work been shown by the Foundation as an artistic institution in the context of the community it speaks to, but which ever so often ignores it as an artistic space-time proper. What we started discussing, but without reaching a conclusion, as if it were a question that will remain unanswered for now, is whether the version we presented at the Foundation - being neither the original work nor its re-construction - is a version that has the possibility to exist within the space and time of a retrospective exhibition that investigated precisely the space-time of our experience of art and the institution dedicated to it. In spite of all the debated solutions, it is clear that information is a delicate and potential material, as manipulable as it is liberating (as shown by the glass in the original version and its re-construction, which in the version we present at the Foundation is only documented, instead of being displayed); and that access to that information must therefore pose these or analogous questions. So, we can imagine the exhibition we are about to re-open as an ongoing decision-making process; and that the exhibition, even the retrospective one, is never the endpoint of a discourse, or its best version, but only a renewed opportunity for reflection.

In this sense too, I believe, David Lamelas wanted to title his retrospective *I Have to Think About It*. So let's keep thinking about it too, maybe by visiting the exhibition, which is going to open in the next few minutes. We can turn off the camera and stop recording. Thanks to our audience. And thank you, Sabine, thank you, David...

DL: So, is it finally time to go? ... Goodbye...

³ The speaker conducted this part of the conversation in Italian.



David Lamelas, Andrea Viliani, Sabine Breitwieser
Fondazione Antonio Dalle Nogare, Bolzano, 2023, Ph. Ivo Corrà



Opening of *David Lamelas. I Have to Think About It. Part II*
Fondazione Antonio Dalle Nogare, Bolzano, 2023, Ph. Ivo Corrà



Opening of *David Laibman. I Have to Think About It. Part II*
Fondazione Antonio Dalle Nogare, Bolzano, 2023, Ph. Ivo Corrà



Werner Kaligofsky, Sabine Breitwieser, David Lamelas
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David Lamelas
*Office of Information about the Vietnam War at Three
Levels: The Visual Image, Text and Audio, 1968*
A conversation between David Lamelas with
Sabine Breitweiser and Andrea Viliani held on
the occasion of the opening of *David Lamelas. I
Have to Think About It. Part II*
30.09.2023

David Lamelas
I Have to Think About It. Part II
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