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**David Lamelas's *The Desert People:*
*An Odyssey for Authentic Representation***
Hammer Museum, January 30-June 5, 2016

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Exhibition Review

David Lamelas's *The Desert People* at UCLA's Hammer Museum, January 30-June 5, 2016.

About the Author

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**David Lamelas's
The Desert People: An Odyssey
for Authentic Representation**

Hammer Museum,
January 30-June 5, 2016

Zooming in a brilliantly white Gran Torino sedan along an interstate, dissecting the surrounding desert, five travelers reflect on their five-week visit to the Native American reservation of the Papago people (Tohono O'odham) in southeastern Arizona (fig. 1).¹ The testimonies of the travelers (an anthropologist, hippie, journalist, liberal, and Papago member) form the forty-four-minute narrative of David Lamelas's film, *The Desert People* (1974), screened at UCLA's Hammer Museum January 30-June 5, 2016.



Figure 1

David Lamelas, *The Desert People*, 1974. Still of title. 16 mm film transferred to DVD, color, sound, 44:09 min. Installation view. Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. Purchased through the Board of Overseers Acquisition Fund. Copyright David Lamelas, images courtesy of Maccarone, Sprüth Magers, and Jan Mot.

The accompanying soundtrack of funky beats and tangy electronics, shrieking tires, and roaring engines, paired with a camera that caresses the Gran Torino's glinting body as it

¹ While the term "Papago" is no longer popularly used and the nation prefers the term Tohono O'odham, I will be referring to the O'odham represented in *The Desert People* as "the Papago." My choice of term is to remain consistent with the film's use of "Papago." For more information about the Tohono O'odham Nation and how the O'odham self-identify, see: <http://www.tonation-nsn.gov>.

speeds across scorching asphalt, imbue the film with seventies-era "road movie" ambiance. However, Lamelas intercuts these features with documentary-style interview sequences, filmed uncomfortably up-close and from varying angles, making it impossible for the interviewees to escape the viewer's scrutiny. Shifting between flashy genre and seemingly candid study questions the veracity of the travelers' testimonies. The concept thus at play in the film is an examination of both distortions and accuracies of cultural representations, presented from an outsider perspective after an encounter of differences.

Screened at the Hammer in a black box room with six gray office chairs lined rigidly against the back wall, *The Desert People* was distanced from the single row of audience members by a long stretch of empty space. Hammer curator Aram Moshayedi and curatorial assistant MacKenzie Stevens designed this rather clinical observational setting to reinforce *The Desert People's* documentary aspect. This curatorial choice aligned with Lamelas's vision of the screening since Lamelas created his early films for museum settings. According to Maria José Herrera, Lamelas calls these films "movies made by a visual artist."² Thus, the Hammer underplayed the cinematic value of *The Desert People* while advancing its subject for critical analysis. This curatorial choice also limited the screening to six seated viewers, giving a sense of exclusivity rather than community. Accordingly, visitors might enter the exhibit with expectations to study the film as a documentary, which suggests that an interpretation of Papago life as it existed during the 1970s is still relevant. The curators stated in a wall text that Lamelas conceived the film in part as a fictional documentary, allowing audiences to wonder which parts are not fiction. This ambiguity is crucial to the viewing experience. I suggest that Lamelas, in fact, uses such ambiguity to focus analysis not on the state of the Papago people so much as on the viewers' awareness of the impact of Western temporal and historical constructs on cultural representation.

In Lamelas's forty-year career, he has taken up a wide spectrum of mediums, from object-based to light and space, and from film to installation. In these diverse works Lamelas consistently constructs his pieces to partially de-stabilize and partially reinforce fragmented truths. This is seen in *The Desert People*, as well as Lamelas's earlier non-filmic works, including *Office of Information about the Vietnam War at Three Levels* (1968) in which Lamelas featured a room packed with state-of-the-art office equipment, displaying the glamorization of war while exploring the dissemination of news. The luxury modern furniture indicates privilege, safety, and comfort at the receiving end of devastating news of war, thereby questioning the effect of environment on interpretations of current events. *Office of Information* dismantles the concept that truth can be disseminated objectively through media; its filtering through time, distance, and perspective alters the reception and further propagation of news.

Similarly, *The Desert People* critiques dissemination of information via documentary film by offering eyewitness testimonies, the authenticity of which swiftly dissolves under the glamorization of a road movie narrative and the heightened awareness of the cultural distance between the road-trippers and the Papago (fig. 2). In this way, Lamelas analyzes the manner in which histories are constructed through detached testimony. Here, as in many of Lamelas's works, he suggests that viewers consider the accuracy of perceptions.

² Maria José Herrera, "Introduction," in *David Lamelas: Buenos Aires* (Sáenz Peña: Universidad Nacional de Tres de Febrero, 2011), 23.



Figure 2

David Lamelas, *The Desert People*, 1974. Still of the travelers. 16mm film transferred to DVD, color, sound, 44:09 min. Installation view. Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. Purchased through the Board of Overseers Acquisition Fund. Copyright David Lamelas, images courtesy of Maccarone, Sprüth Magers, and Jan Mot.

This investigation into perception is also present in Lamelas's earliest film works. In film, Lamelas immediately embraced the recording of time to demonstrate that time cannot, in fact, be captured. In *Time as Activity (Düsseldorf)* (1969), Lamelas filmed city life in three different locations in Düsseldorf from a fixed camera angle with no sound or narrative. Regarding this work, Lamelas has stated, "I was consciously working with time in this piece. The concept was the structure, or deconstruction, of time in Düsseldorf, where the film was made and shown."³ He designed the film's screening in Düsseldorf with the projector present in the room, functioning, according to Lamelas, "as a time projector, projecting another time than the real time."⁴ Hence viewers witness the progress of time spreading across screen, as they consciously *spend* time, an awareness intensified by the sound and heat of a spinning projector. In this way, time fuses, implying that the past may never be fully regained because the present necessarily impedes our perception of the past. If time is not as simply linear as broadly conceived in Western tradition, might the structures of history be unsupportable? Further, this melding of past and present fosters consideration of time's relationship to our own reality and experiences, a consideration revisited five years later with *The Desert People*.

³ Amy Cappellazzo, "David Lamelas: Time as Activity (Düsseldorf), 1969," in *Making Time: Considering Time as a Material in Contemporary Video and Film*, ed. by Amy Cappellazzo (Lake Worth: Palm Beach Institute of Contemporary Art, 2000), 62-63.

⁴ Ibid, 63.

Here, Lamelas addresses elusive pasts through overlapping and partially fictionalized accounts, perhaps to provoke viewers to contemplate historical narratives and their impact on concepts of time and culture. In this way, Lamelas moves from an analysis of the broad construction of Western time in *Time as Activity*, to a consideration of time's relationship to culture and representation in *The Desert People*. At the same time, he moves from non-narrative film to fictional documentary.

Assuming the role of preservationist, the first interviewee in *The Desert People* is a white male anthropologist who shares his studied observations of the Papago people (fig. 3). He believes that, beyond himself, the Papago have no champion to secure their history. Thus, the film begins with testimony from a non-indigenous person who claims guardianship of the Papago's history. However, as the film progresses with each new interview, interspersed amongst interludes of moving cars, the testimonies falter in their consistencies and intent since they speak more of themselves than of the Papago.



Figure 3

David Lamelas, *The Desert People*, 1974. Still of the anthropologist's testimony. 16 mm film transferred to DVD, color, sound, 44:09 min. Installation view. Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. Purchased through the Board of Overseers Acquisition Fund. Copyright David Lamelas, images courtesy of Maccarone, Sprüth Magers, and Jan Mot.

For example, the white female New York journalist is keen to discuss the reservation women whose community contributions humble the journalist, newly aware of her lesser impact on her own society. Meanwhile, the white male Californian liberal laments this same tightknit indigenous community, deeming it divisive against outsiders, thus thwarting his hopes to romance Papago females. Contrasting with these perspectives is the last interviewee, a Papago man named Manny, who perceives indigenous life as unraveling due to loss of language, tradition, and unity—himself displaced and living off-reservation (fig. 4). For Manny, this is a desperate time, as he attests that “much of our culture has died and is dying now.”



Figure 4

David Lamelas, *The Desert People*, 1974. Still of Manny's monologue. 16 mm film transferred to DVD, color, sound, 44:09 min. Installation view. Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. Purchased through the Board of Overseers Acquisition Fund. Copyright David Lamelas, images courtesy of Maccarone, Sprüth Magers, and Jan Mot.

While saved for last as the Papago's "true" voice, Manny ironically loses authenticity. His testimony is undermined by the film's heightened dramatics, staged against the desert landscape and brimming with his poetic musings. This contrasts with the three other travelers' faster-paced testimonies that express less organized ideas, filmed seemingly spontaneously inside a diner or along a busy street. Manny is also the only subject to turn his back on the camera in a choreographed melancholic walk toward an empty horizon, rather than the frontal positioning to which the camera exposed the others. Finally, with theatrical purpose his speaking is methodically precise, delivered from a carefully crafted script. Hence, for audiences, the seemingly most authoritative voice is surprisingly the least convincing, albeit the most poignant.

However, Manny does not seem concerned with convincing anyone of truths. He is not attempting to inform; rather, his implied purpose is to raise awareness and maintain cultural survival. To achieve this, he considers the methods of his fellow travelers whose efforts he credits: "I suppose it is up to the people themselves to keep the culture—to pull it up. And the only way to pull it up is to listen to and talk to the old people that are left, the ones that really have some storage of what it was like. That's what *these* people have done. And I feel it is up to those people, who want to preserve it, to do it." In Manny's monologue, "truth" is secondary to "representation." Reality is less important than maintaining a story, even a fragmented and partially fictionalized one.

Manny continues, "[t]his is one way of doing it, I think—performing. Perhaps I'm wrong, but my heart is in performing and that is where it's going to stay." In this moment, any illusion that *The Desert People* is a documentary film dissipates. Manny is a professional actor performing a story that might be related to his heritage—but even that is in question. Is he really of the Papago people?

Does it matter?

If Manny's goal is to keep alive through performance that which he, as a character in the film, views as a dying culture, then his authenticity as a Papago person is not relevant. After all, viewers may now be wondering what, exactly, is the state of the Papago. Is the culture dying, as suggested by Manny, the scripted voice of the Papago? Or, is the portrayal of the culture obscured by Manny's possible outsider assumptions? Viewers may also notice that, besides the character of Manny, the film includes no Papago people and no footage of the reservation. The film is thus not necessarily about the Papago, and it does not advance "vanishing race" rhetoric. Rather, Manny's monologue about his dying culture invites criticism of such rhetoric by exposing a flawed and fictional narrative of cultural representation.

Accordingly, I propose that the film's purpose is to undermine the documentary format's authority to capture a specific reality. Concurrently, the film stimulates the viewer's curiosity and agency to more acutely process their observations, thus freeing them from traditional structures of historical and cultural narratives. Such observations may spark future explorations into the Papago or similarly underrepresented communities whose portrayals within Western culture are also too faulty to believe, yet nonetheless inspire attempts of recovery.

It is therefore fitting that Lamelas borrows the road movie genre in its countercultural celebration of unbound, open-road freedom, exemplified in the films *Zabriskie Point* (1970) by Michelangelo Antonioni, and *Two-Lane Blacktop* (1971) by Monte Hellman. *The Desert People* was Lamelas's first professionally produced film in Los Angeles, and marks a union between his art and the culture industry.⁵ On the wall label of the exhibit, the Hammer quotes Lamelas, who defines this work as "a study on American film production"; thereby Lamelas packages his art within a glossy road movie genre that embraces codes of mass culture, an attempt to use popular format to bridge concept with audience. By appropriating the aesthetic of this genre, Lamelas underscores the theme of propulsion into new territories and new ways of living and thinking, mental explorations that are consistent with his four decades of work in which audience agency inhibits stagnancy and fosters mindfulness of the present.

Lamelas has expressed hope that his artworks live on, that they "leave me behind. It's not about me. It's about itself . . . It's not my piece. It's *itself*. It evolves in time."⁶ Art has a life of its own, driven forward by audience interaction. If in *The Desert People* culture becomes partially fictionalized, then culture as a broad concept becomes artistic performance. In Lamelas's vision, this is not an entirely negative fate, but rather a fragmented alternative to authoritative histories. Truth is incomplete; authenticity is suspect, but perhaps a thread of the past survives when visual culture cultivates human relations and agency to explore. This, I believe, is the message of *The Desert People*.

⁵ Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Structure, Sign, and Reference in the Work of David Lamelas," in *David Lamelas: extranjero, foreigner, étranger, Ausländer* (Mexico, DF: Fundacion Olga y Rufino Tamayo, 2006), 139-142.

⁶ David Lamelas, interview by Catha Paquette, Long Beach, March 10, 2016, recording by Yukiko Hole. This interview was arranged, in part, as a preparation for the September 2017 to January 2018 exhibition of Lamelas's art at the California State University, Long Beach University Art Museum, sponsored by the J. Paul Getty Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA initiative.

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