

Gary Warner
Social Lamellaphone
18 June – 11 July 2026
Schmick Contemporary

Social Lamellaphone 2014

blackbutt tops and bridges, jelutong sound boxes, plywood stand, brass fixings, steel tines

Colournotes 2014

ink on cotton rag paper

Tongues & Tines
Mara Schwerdtfeger

Gary Warner's *Social Lamellaphone* assembles a site for 'cooperative creativity'. The circular form attracts participation and *requires* collaboration. Yet, Warner provides no prompt, instruction, or formal invitation. The instrument is aleatoric, dependent on chance encounters when audience becomes performer.

Approaching the instrument, thin vibrating prongs (lamela) poke out like mechanical tongues. Hands gather over the metallic keys as the instrument becomes an extension of our voices. Instead of attempting small talk, we begin the conversation with the tentative scatterings of plucked notes, meeting in the microtonal language of Warner's cultivated chance composition.

The tonality is inquisitive. The instrument soundtracks its own exploration, evoking a genre of 'thinking music'.

I find myself seeking ostinatos to focus on small groups
of notes, become familiar with their frequencies, and grasp patterns which soon
begin to morph as my confidence builds.

But a desire for melodic precision does not serve the charm of this instrument, just as approaching the instrument individually will not render harmony.

The instrument belongs to an extensive lineage of lamellaphones, commonly known as 'thumb pianos'. It functions in the same way as the mbira, sanza, likembe, and kalimba (the commercially popularised variant for the Western ear), but unlike these portable equivalents, the *Social Lamellaphone* requires multiple players. It builds on a lineage of musical techniques and innovations where cooperation surpasses the individual: Kotekan—a system essential to Balinese gamelan—involves interlocking parts (from two or more players) heard as a single melody; Studio Brynjar & Veronika's inventive circular flute blends the breath of four indispensable players in its 2.5 metre loop. This sort of synchronicity and extended technique can be negotiated with Warner's instrument too.

We begin to move in a continuous circle around the instrument, dragging light
fingertips across the tongues. An airy drone is produced with the harmony
reminiscent of a harp's time warping glissando.

Warner's work portrays the possibility of cultivating community through sonic engagement. Initiated players decipher a sense of agreement around the instrument, finding variation of expression within the microtonal tuning. Eventually, the sound of the *Social Lamellaphone* becomes a blanket of babbling phrases, as music and conversation blur.

Curated by Ashton Biddulph