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Source: *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context, and Enquiry*, Issue 26 (Spring 2011), pp. 51-57

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#) on behalf of [Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, University of the Arts London](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/659295>

Accessed: 15/05/2014 12:29

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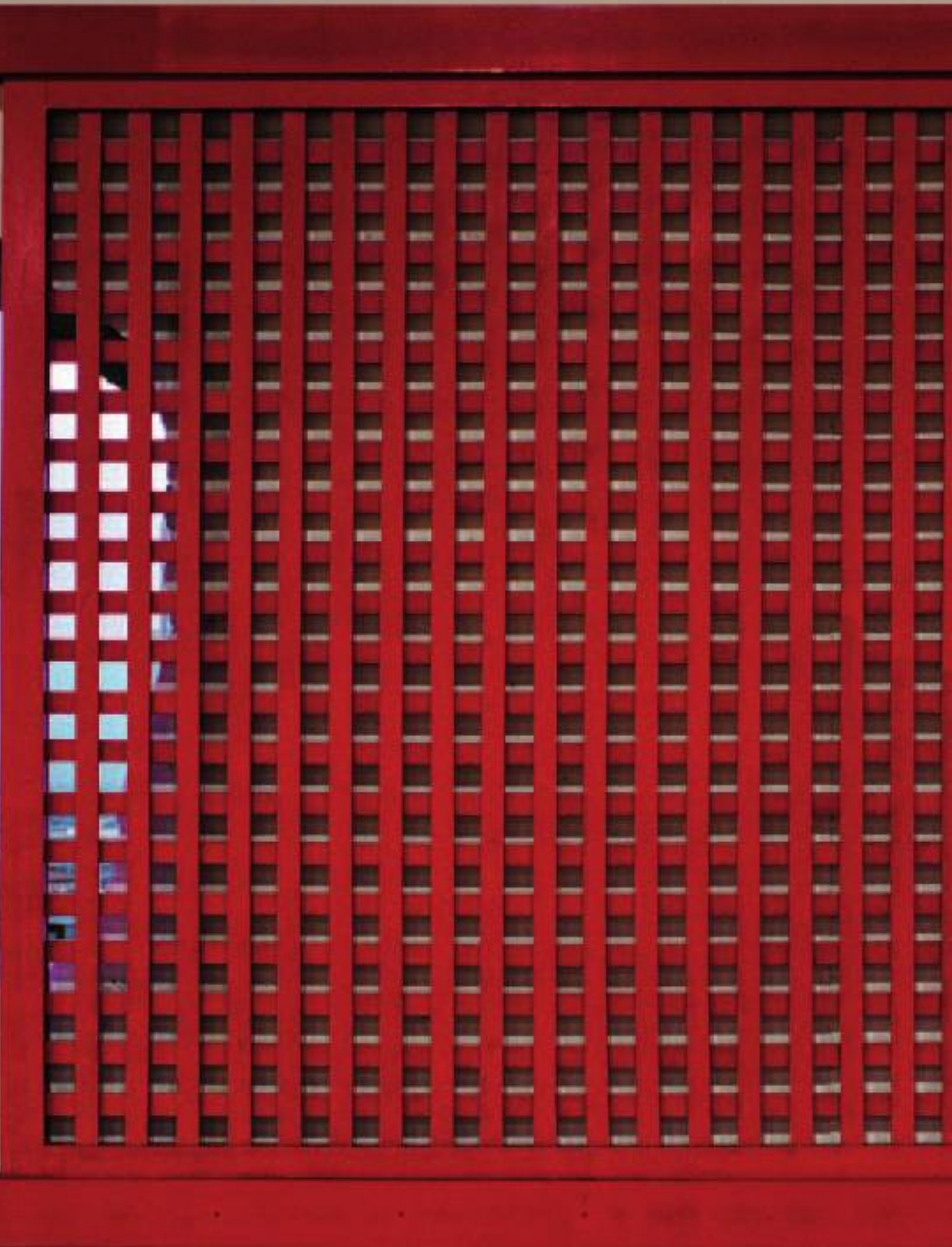
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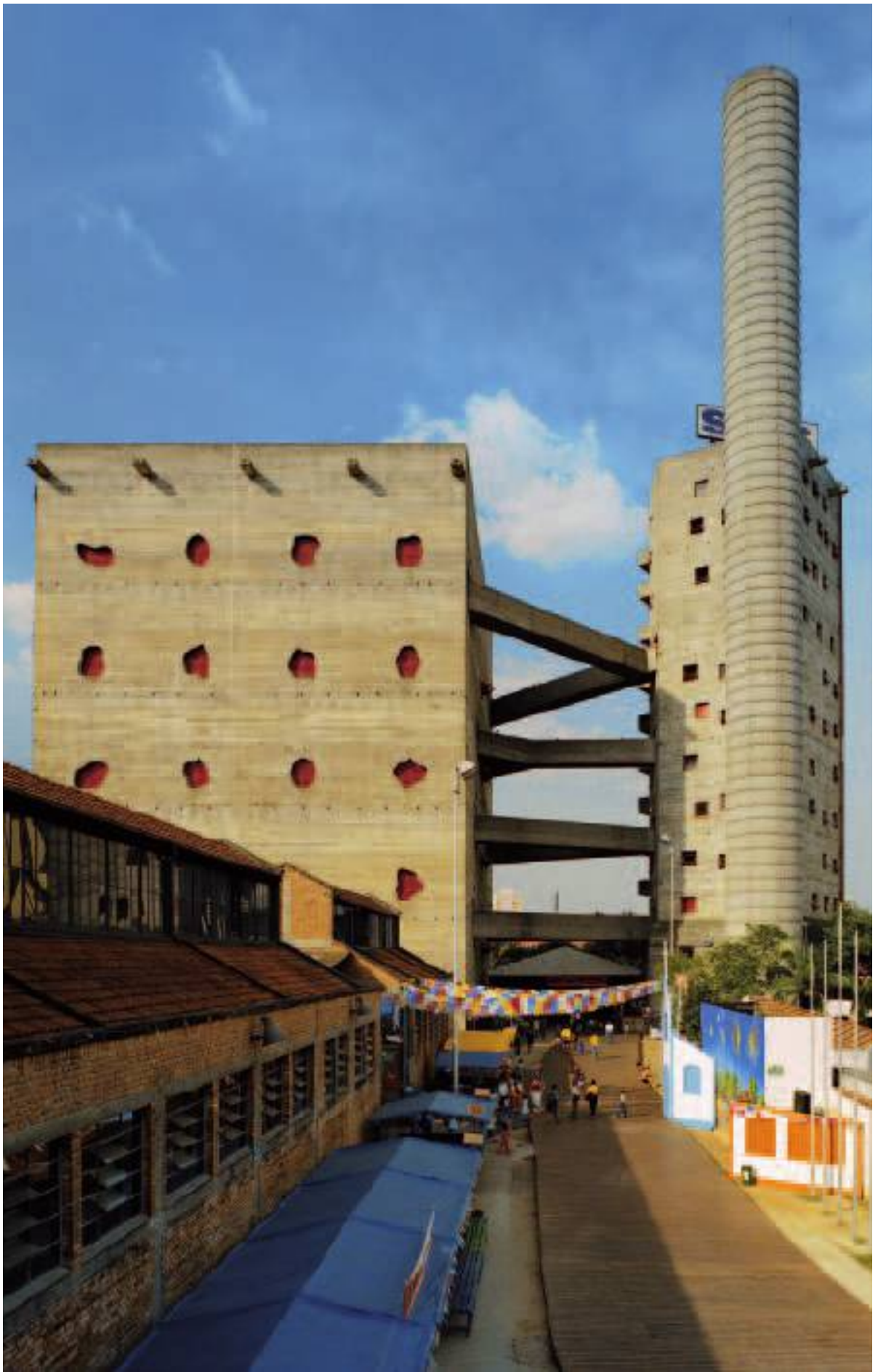


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Previous spread
and opposite:
SESC Fábrica da
Pompéia, São Paulo,
window detail.
Conversion by Lina
Bo Bardi, 1977–86.
Photograph: Nelson
Kon. Courtesy Nelson
Kon Fotografias

‘This Exhibition Is an Accusation’: The Grammar of Display According to Lina Bo Bardi¹

– Roger M. Buergel

Roger M. Buergel finds in Lina Bo Bardi’s exhibition designs mediations between audience and object that allow art’s social function to unfold.

There are two good reasons, at least, to lay claim to the architectural legacy of Lina Bo Bardi, her technologies of display and her sense of spatial texture. The first reason is artistic: the formal stagnation that haunts contemporary exhibition design. While curators are willing to talk endlessly about mediation (and are taught in so many curatorial courses to do just that) the realm of display gets shamelessly neglected. Art is made to look as if it were tied to nothing but artistic production, while context gets reduced to mere text. The second reason is political: Bo Bardi is exceptional in her formal understanding of that equally vast and mysterious entity called ‘the social’. Her poetics of sensual collaboration could be the antidote to the populist inclinations of Western art institutions (including their predilection for big exhibitions). Faced with the relative disappearance of their traditional constituency (the educated middle class) and simultaneously challenged by a curious mob of aesthetic illiterates, art institutions need to learn that cultural illiteracy will only be sustained by the business of mediation — at least as long as the latter is conceived to be primarily a service for unenlightened savages to which institutions eagerly ‘reach out’. Bo Bardi, in contrast, took clues from Paulo Freire’s ‘pedagogy of the oppressed’ — she based her work on the creative resources of the populace and advocated the democratisation of knowledge.²

Learning from Bo Bardi today entails conceiving of institutions in terms of their self-perforation, their own undoing. They have to learn how to dramatise their key dilemma — namely, what counts as teachable and why. Attempting to epitomise the gold-standard of legitimate knowledge in a world of crumbling canons is ridiculous. Attempting to epitomise contemporary sexiness is worse. A methodology is needed that addresses audiences as neither consumers nor infants, but as partners.

Bo Bardi’s most mature and extensive work hardly belongs to the sphere of art and culture proper. SESC Fábrica da Pompéia is a huge recreational complex on the outskirts of São Paulo, built on an old factory constructed in the early twentieth century in the style of François Hennebique, a pioneer of reinforced-concrete engineering.³ With an area of 16,500 square metres (and a floor area of 23,500 square metres), its size corresponds to that of a small industrial village. From 1977 till 1986, in a period of slow and painful transition from the rigidities of military rule to the ambiguities of an inexperienced

- 1 The quote stems from Bo Bardi’s ‘Account Sixteenth Years Later’, in Marcelo Carvalho Ferraz and Marcelo Suzuki (ed.), *L’Impasse del design. Lina Bo Bardi: L’esperienza nel Nordest del Brasile*, Milan and São Paulo: Edizioni Charta and Instituto Lina Bo e P.M. Bardi, 1995, p.5 (of the English insert). In 1980 Bo Bardi started editing material for this book, which was to become a testimony of her Northeastern period, which will be discussed further on in this text. In 1981 Bo Bardi stopped the editing, convinced that the whole undertaking would be of ‘no use, all this is going to fall into a void’ (p.1). Fortunately, the Instituto Bo Bardi, which fights for the preservation of Bo Bardi’s legacy, continued and eventually finished the editing. From the account the book provides, it becomes clear that the research done from the late 1950s until 1964 was part of a larger collective effort that, like Glauber Rocha with his ‘aesthetics of hunger’, pursued an artistic agenda with the aim of aligning the practical, mostly raw aspects of this culture with a politics that sought to address the actual living conditions of its people. An excellent source that covers the wider history of this period in Bahia is Roger Sansi’s *Fetishes and Monuments: Afro-Brazilian Art and Culture in the 20th Century* (New York and Oxford: Bergahn Books, 2007). See in particular chapter 6, ‘Modern Art and Afro-Brazilian Culture in Bahia’.
- 2 Paulo Freire, born in 1921 in Recife, was a highly influential educational thinker whose programmes to teach and emancipate the illiterate poor became officially implemented in Brazil in the early 1960. In his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968), a treatise about an education that was both modern and anti-colonial, he states that ‘[n]o pedagogy which is truly liberating can remain distant from the oppressed by treating them as unfortunates and by presenting for their emulation models from among the oppressors. The oppressed must be their own example in the struggle for their redemption’. P. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (trans. Myra Bergman Ramos), New York: Continuum, 1970, p.54.
- 3 SESC, or Social Service for Commerce, is a private non-profit organisation that promotes cultural and educational facilities all over Brazil.

democracy, Bo Bardi worked on this site in many different capacities — first as a planner, architect and designer, and later as its administrator, programme manager and exhibition organiser. She shaped the site in almost every regard while allowing herself, in turn, to be shaped and informed by this evolving sprawl of planned and spontaneous activities:

The second time I went there, a Saturday, the atmosphere was different — no longer the elegant and solitary Hennebiquen structure, but happy people, children, mothers, parents and OAPs [old age persons] went from one shed to another. Kids ran, youngsters played football in rain falling through broken roofs, laughing as they kicked the ball through the water. Mothers barbecued and made sandwiches at the entrance of Rua Clécia; there was a puppet theatre near it, full of children. I thought, it has to continue like this, with so much happiness. I returned many times, Saturday and Sundays, until I really got it...⁴

Until she really got what? By looking through the ‘structure’, the reinforced concrete of the derelict factory space, Bo Bardi was able to access the site’s psychic resonances. And while the particular value of these resonances emanated from a typical weekend feel of pleasure and boredom — as well as from a sense of place in a community of mostly migrant workers from the Brazilian Northeast and Europe — the actual material condition of the space seemed to matter, too. The social energy perceived and celebrated by Bo Bardi was a result of the precarious condition of the once solid structure. Dysfunctionality kicked off happiness.

Given Bo Bardi’s biography, her embrace of the little festival of affects is easily comprehensible, and so is her aim to sustain its energy. After more than a decade of military rule in which her public engagement, like that of most Brazilian cultural figures, was severely restricted, she might have felt ready for a new beginning. Her sense of beginning must, however, have been tinged by another beginning a few decades earlier. In 1946 Bo Bardi migrated to Brazil, leaving post-War Italy physically behind while preserving the memory of the ‘civiltà mussoliniana’. Educated in Milan, where she became a co-editor of the magazine *domus* in 1943, she must have been equally sensitive about modern architecture’s stance when it came to vitalism, planning, progress and the New Man.⁵ Also on her sceptical mind in 1977, most likely, were the heated architectural debates that shaped the Brazil of the 1950s and early 60s — debates that were fuelled by the utopian dream of a new country with a planner’s fantasy called Brasilia as its capital, which were laid to rest with the establishment of the US-backed military dictatorship in March 1964.

The Pompéia Factory was conceived with a capacity of up to 15,000 visitors per day. Bo Bardi decided to keep the old complex of brick buildings, preserving the industrial memory, but took out the partition walls to create a fluid interior space. This open space comprises a temporary exhibition area; a more solid, almost sculptural unit with a library and a videotheque; and, next to it, a multi-use space around a longish, elegantly-shaped lake — an allusion to the São Francisco River, the artery of the Brazilian Northeast. The spatial layout not only corresponds to but actually favours the arbitrary ways in which people circulate if they are not governed by definite destinations, aims or intents, while a multiplicity of architectural details, like the shells in the cement floor or the line of textiles suspended above the restaurant, disrupt the perception of a unified totality. The second part of the factory complex houses a grand foyer leading onto a theatre for 1,200 people, and a workshop area for making ceramics and other crafts. This workshop area follows a different spatial grammar. Lush openness is scaled down in favour of a labyrinthine wall-system built from raw bricks that slightly protects the respective working areas. However, these differences in structuring divisions of consciousness seem insubstantial.

4 The quote comes from Olivia de Oliveira, *Subtle Substances: The Architecture of Lina Bo Bardi*, Barcelona and São Paulo: Editorial Gustavo Gili and Romano Guerra Editora, 2006, p.205. The book, which is based on Oliveira’s doctoral thesis, offers a particularly rich and careful account of Bo Bardi’s architectural principles.

5 Italy’s finest architects, it is well known, supported the Fascist cause more or less openly. *Razionalismo*, Italy’s most radical branch of modern architecture, was unambiguous about its Fascist leanings. And it was Pietro Maria Bardi, later Lina Bo’s husband, who organised in 1931 in his gallery in Rome the second exhibition of ‘Architettura Razionale’, a show accompanied by a manifesto in open praise of the ‘civiltà mussoliniana’. The point here is not to denounce the Italian architectural milieu of the 1930s and 40s, years in which Lina Bo finished her studies and started to work in association with Gio Ponti in Milan. It suffices to say that Lina Bo was in a privileged position to contemplate the sinister affair between advanced architecture and planning on the one side and an utterly perverted *res publica* on the other.

They are subordinated to a general rhythm — a rhythm that is less a matter of architectural composition (which is, by its very nature, static) but that originates from the imponderable ways in which space is practised. The rhythm therefore varies according to the intensity of lived experience.

On the remaining plot of land, Bo Bardi erected a Brutalist, deliberately ugly complex of two high towers and a tall fake chimney, all built in raw concrete.⁶ In contrast to the old factory space, this complex enters into open competition with the urban environment. Quite literally, its own towers face the city, with its high-rises, eye to eye. While the compact tower houses a swimming pool in the basement and four gyms stacked upon one another, the smaller tower, arranged in a pattern that is a foil to the pattern on the larger tower, contains the staircase and the facilities. The towers are connected on each floor by Y- or V-shaped bridges or gangways, the spatial design of which is reminiscent of the expressive constructivism of Liubov Popova. And although Bo Bardi toyed with the idea of painting the cement in bright colours she finally abstained from it, reserving colour for the door and window frames, or for the ventilating tubes — for elements, that is, which help to punctuate the grey, bunkerish mass. To get to the gym or back to the showers and changing rooms, the athletes, mostly adolescents, have to cross the open, weather-exposed gangways, thus undergoing a kind of rite of passage that purifies them and readies them for the excitement and exuberance of play. The architecture's own playfulness becomes evident with the correlation of each of the gym's floors to the colour code and name of a season — a football team thus meets in 'winter' — and with the spectacular details of the gaping apertures in the walls, with their violently irregular but also somewhat organic shapes. Contrary to most gym spaces, the outside world is not closed off. It is confronted or challenged from within the arena. The violent thrill that accompanies every animated game, the momentous fantasy of annihilating one's adversary, is subtly diverted toward the megalopolis outside: São Paulo, or, in Bo Bardi's words, 'the world champion of self-destruction'.⁷

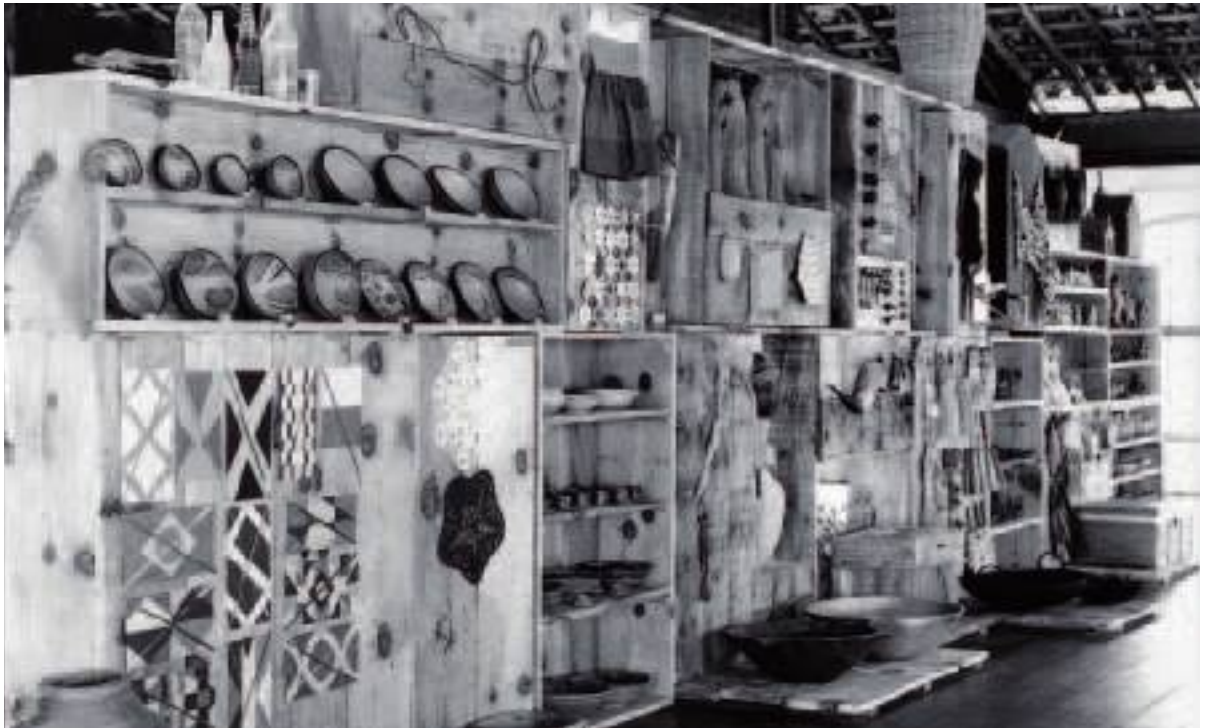
The festivities for the inauguration of the Pompéia Factory were planned by Bo Bardi down to minutiae like the colour of food. For the opening period she conceived of an exhibition for which people were supposed to bring 'all kinds of objects forgotten or rejected by "civilisation"',⁸ while the gym towers were celebrated with an exhibition about the history of football in Brazil — a colourful dream of documentary material, devotional objects, players' shirts and banners from all teams, 'even the most mediocre' ones.⁹ Later exhibitions by Bo Bardi at the Factory included 'Mil brinquedos para a criança brasileira' ('A Thousand Toys for Brazilian Kids', 1980) and 'Design no Brasil: História e realidade' ('Design in Brazil: History and Reality', 1982). There is a common tune to these proposals: an un concealed emphasis on radical inclusiveness ('all things'), on the material unconscious ('objects forgotten or rejected') and on what might be called the psychic texture of objects (ask any football fan about his or her team scarf or any child about his or her favourite toy). A similar tune can be already detected in Bo Bardi's early Brazilian exhibition activities, like the breathtaking installation of the 'Bahia no Ibirapuera' exhibition during the fifth Bienal de São Paulo in 1959, or the display she conceived for the exhibition 'Civilização do Nordeste' ('Civilisation of the Northeast') at the Museu de Arte Popular at the Solar do Unhão, in Salvador de Bahia in 1963. Historically, both exhibitions belong to the window of utopian dreaming that preceded the military dictatorship. The Bienal de São Paulo, from the moment of its inception in 1951, partook in this dream and, for better or worse, carried it along. It not only celebrated modern art in all its universalist splendour, but also fed the generation of Tropicália with a repertoire of forms that had to be devoured

6 The architectural language of progressive 'ugliness' with its bunkerish masses and unfinished surfaces is characteristic of the Paulista School (Paulo Mendes da Rocha, Joao Batista Vilanova Artigas and others). Its aesthetics were heavily inspired by Oscar Niemeyer's self-criticism in the late 1950s, when he condemned his own former striving for originality and surface appearance at the cost of architecture's social functioning. Bo Bardi explicitly stated: 'I want SESC to be even uglier than MASP.' Quoted in O. de Oliveira, *Subtle Substances*, *op. cit.*, p.203. It should also be mentioned that at the time SESC Pompéia was planned, the integration of the suburbs became part of the official line in urban politics. Self-management models based on neighbourhood groups or participatory building sites were especially encouraged.

7 Bo Bardi also called São Paulo a 'pile of bones'. Quoted in O. de Oliveira, *ibid.*, p.245. Her sensitivity for questions of cultural heritage and its preservation drew her back to Salvador de Bahia in 1986, where she was invited by the mayor to intervene in the historic district around the Pelourinho. See L. Bo Bardi, 'Obra construída/Built Work' (text by O. de Oliveira), in *2G International Architecture Review*, no.23/24, 2003, p.142.

8 See O. de Oliveira, *Subtle Substances*, *op. cit.*, p.246.

9 *Ibid.*, p.248.



and ‘vomited’ (as Glauber Rocha put it) before being prepared for the artistic aims of a decidedly local modernism.

The Bahia exhibition of 1959, conceived by Bo Bardi and Martim Gonçalves, looks retrospectively like a comment on, if not an answer to, the key question of how modern universalism could be reconciled with a local agenda. (And without questioning Hélio Oiticica’s genius, it needs to be said that Bo Bardi pioneered her environmental aesthetics years before Oiticica built his *Penetráveis*, the labyrinthine environments he began to make in the late 1960s.) The show, according to its own definition, took an anthropological rather than aesthetic view on popular artefacts created in the Brazilian Northeast — a region defined by poverty, a high rate of illiteracy and a mode of production Bo Bardi characterised as ‘pre-craftsmanship’¹⁰. In the Northeast, ‘objects of desperate survival’ were basically made out of garbage. One section of the exhibition was devoted to documentary photographs of the Afro-Brazilian religions macumba and candomblé. The photographs (by Pierre Verger and others) were informally mounted on a fragile wooden scaffolding — the material sensibility of which was closer to the consistency of the life depicted on them than to the institutional self-assuredness of, say, ‘Family of Man’, the exhibition Edward Steichen organised at New York’s Museum of Modern Art in 1955. Among the artefacts were almost life-size statuettes of Orisha spirits; musical instruments; patchwork quilts made of reclaimed scraps of leftover cloth; *fiôs*, or oil lamps, built from empty medicine bottles and pieces of tin plates; *carrancas*, or figureheads, from river boats of the São Francisco; ceramics; mats; hammocks; earthenware pans; pots for drinking water; and so on. ‘I could say that this exhibition reveals above all the creative force of a people who do not give up under the severest conditions,’ summarises Jorge Amado in an account written at that time.¹¹

The open exhibition space in Ibirapuera Park, next to the biennial, was primarily structured by a system of freestanding walls, most of them elevated on pedestals in the shape of white cubes. The rather compact walls provided conspicuously solid support for the hand-crafted objects — which were, all in all, either rude or tiny and brittle. While the elevated walls were coloured in different shades, one particular wall was covered with gold leaf as if to mirror the spiritual radiance of the religious sculpture displayed in front of it. The *ex-votos*, on the other hand, were directly fixed onto a whitewashed brick wall. By drawing on the analogy between the bareness of the wall and the wooden rawness

Lina Bo Bardi,
‘Civilização
do Nordeste’
(‘Civilisation of the
Northeast’), 1963.
Installation view,
Museu de Arte
Popular do Unhão.
Photograph: Armin
Guthmann. Courtesy
Instituto Lina Bo e
P.M. Bardi and
Armin Guthmann

¹⁰ See M. Carvalho Ferraz and M. Suzuki (ed.), *L’Impasse del design*, *op. cit.*, p.1.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, *op. cit.*, p.5.

of those sculptures, their stubborn dumpiness was transformed into an almost heroic expression: it embodied resistance against the disenchantment of the world. The white-cube pedestals were scattered all over the space, serving larger-size objects like the *carrancas* and Orishas as pedestals. A few artificial trees were planted here and there, one adorned with weather vanes, while the entire floor was covered with pitanga leaves. In the background, before the row of Orishas, the exhibition was sealed off by a huge, long curtain. This device, reminiscent of display strategies practised by Lily Reich in the 1920s and 30s, provided the space with an air of privacy while simultaneously underscoring its highly theatrical décor. In short, the language of display spoke many different tongues and thus appealed to a multiplicity of perceptual registers. It spoke less about objects than out of them. The exhibition's true subject was indeed neither artistic form nor anthropology; it was, as its title suggests, the spirit of a place and its possible transposition.

In her love for Bahia, Bo Bardi chose an even more emphatic term for this immaterial entity than the 'spirit of a place'. She called it the 'popular soul' and — this was the exhibition's wager — she tried to convey it less by the objects themselves than by their appearance.¹² Their appearance had to be revealed, not just their factual presence shown. In Bo Bardi's still acute memory, Italian Fascism had both vampirised and exorcised the popular soul. Under the Fascist regime, popular production or craft became 'irreversibly' transformed into folklore or kitsch, while genuine popular art was defined by its 'perfect reversibility'. While a kitsch object was thus defined as a psychic dead end that puts man's desire to rest, popular art kept the soul alert and ready to look for ever new and transformative ways to shape the world.¹³

The Bahia exhibition had to fight two enemies. One was folklore. The other was the naïveté of utopian design that had become dominant in Brazil in the 1950s and what this represented: the ludicrous fantasy that an underdeveloped country with feudal structures could be transformed overnight into an industrial society. Presenting the popular soul in action or revealing the reversibility of popular art called for a particular kind of display in which the object's essentially transitional character would be shown. This aim was achieved by a double operation. On the anthropological level the objects were linked to specific religious or labour practices. The photographs of Pierre Verger, for example, demonstrated their use in ritual. However, the objects were also paraded as being in excess of themselves, or, rather, as transcending any conceptual framework that would fix and guarantee their meaning. This was achieved by dislocating them into a deliberately artificial environment that highlighted their utter strangeness. This particular quality they had to borrow or even extract from modern art's claim to autonomy — a claim that was excessively stated, even propagated at the nearby biennial. The popular soul was, above all, volatile. Or, as Bo Bardi put it: 'To carefully search for the cultural bases of a country (whatever they may be: poor, miserable, popular) when they are *real*, does not mean to preserve the *forms* and *materials*, it means to evaluate the original creative possibilities.'¹⁴



Bo Bardi's activities in Bahia in the 1950s and early 60s opened her eyes to what she called 'the real Brazil, not the one of European immigrants'.¹⁵ The experience was profound; it made her into 'another person'.¹⁶ What 'the real Brazil' stands for is no mystery either: a sedimentation of layers of violently disruptive colonial rule. At Bahia Bo Bardi recognised how intricately linked the Western project of modernity was to colonialism — and in her subsequent projects it was clear that she was looking for an intelligent way to deal with this problem. Though she was asked in 1957 to build the Museu de Arte de São

12 What I have in mind here is an operation called 'cathexis' in Freudian discourse, by which an object assumes a particular value or embodies beauty primarily because it comes to symbolise a much-desired lost object. Kaja Silverman conceptualises the relation between appearance and visual affirmation in her book *World Spectators*. Any theory of display would have to start from this question: how can appearance be initiated from the side of the object rather than from that of the visitor? See K. Silverman, *World Spectators*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000.

13 For Bo Bardi's concept of 'reversibility', see M. Carvalho Ferraz and M. Suzuki (ed.), *L'Impasse del design*, *op. cit.*, p.4.

14 *Ibid.*, p.3.

15 O. de Oliveira, *Subtle Substances*, *op. cit.*, p.323.

16 *Ibid.*

Paulo (MASP), the process was temporarily suspended, and in the late 1950s she moved to Salvador, Brazil's third largest city (and until 1763 its capital, through which the slave trade was organised well into the nineteenth century), following an invitation to teach at the university and to build and direct a museum of modern art there.¹⁷ The building offered to her, the sixteenth-century Solar do Unhão complex at the waterfront, was in dire need of restoration and demanded an attitude towards the problematics of historical legacy. Neither trying to conceive of the building in its original form nor treating it as a neutral space, her 'project unmasked this pseudo-problem by considering the compound in all its different forms: mill, slave quarters, nobleman's residence, industrial complex, meeting place for political activists, snuff factory, cocoa factory, waterfront warehouse, warehouse for fuel, marine barracks, slum tenement, ruin, not forgetting the splendid location', as Olivia de Oliveira puts it in her extensive monograph on the architect.¹⁸

Bo Bardi's main intervention in the complex was the building of a huge wooden staircase, aptly called 'an event' by Aldo van Eyck, making the people 'who go up and down feel like nobility'.¹⁹ 'People' here is not a general term but points precisely at the poor and illiterate who were denied any social visibility by the racist bourgeoisie and its apparatus. While the massive steps of the monumental staircase seem to hover in the air as they rotate around a central column, with additional support provided by five outer beams, the wooden elements are connected by a traditional mortise and tenon system. Besides the Museu de Arte Moderna, the building complex also housed the Museu de Arte Popular, an institution that was inaugurated in 1963 with the exhibition 'Civilisation of the Northeast'. Consisting of about a thousand pieces from Bo Bardi's own collection, this display differed radically from the modernist atmosphere at Ibirapuera. The space was crammed like a Baroque church, and the institutional shell was almost entirely made of local building materials. The abundance of popular artefacts was displayed as if they all belonged to various families of forms, with each family representing a particular order. The ceramic bowls, for example, were framed and arranged according to their height on raw wooden shelves, while the oil lamps in the adjacent shelf contradicted this hierarchic principle and suggested a purely morphological pattern. Other objects, like a millstone, sat on the floor as if for sale on the local market. While Bo Bardi's ample display affirmed the basic function of ordering — of a system — as a way to render popular artefacts significant that were by and large considered insignificant, it also let the objects expose the arbitrary character of any such orderly arrangement. Basically, the objects were allowed to talk about themselves. But it would be wrong to consider this discourse merely in terms of object-presentation: what was actually displayed was the dynamic interlocking of the popular artefacts with visitors who were also invited to talk about themselves, this time by taking and enjoying pride of place.

The display at the Solar do Unhão was realised by Bo Bardi at about the same time as she conceived the building and revolutionary display for the collection of the Museu de Arte de São Paulo, which was finally completed in 1968 following her design. It seems evident that the lesson learnt from Bahia profoundly shaped the presentation of MASP's collection of predominantly Western art. The charmingly eclectic mix of sculptures and paintings, ranging from the baroque to modernism, was acquired from an impoverished post-War Europe by Assis Chateaubriand, a Brazilian entrepreneur, media mogul and art connoisseur who also had the idea to invite Pietro Bardi, Bo Bardi's husband, to become the museum's first director. (The popular highlight of the collection is Renoir's double portrait *Pink and Blue* (or *Alice et Elisabeth Cahen d'Anvers*, 1881), of which Blue, or Elisabeth, died on her way to Auschwitz in 1944.) The story of the 'fixed tropical greenhouse', as Bo Bardi called her extraordinary museum building at Avenida Paulista, is rather well known. Also known is the sad fact that her ingenious display was destroyed in the 1990s and replaced by a conventional wall system.²⁰ Photographs give at least an idea of the single,

17 The planning and building of MASP is a remarkable story in itself, with Bo Bardi acting in many different capacities. It was she who secured the site at Avenida Paulista in a backroom deal with the local governor, after which her husband, nominally the museum's director, characterised her bold plans as a 'beautiful female dream'. See O. de Oliveira's interview with Bo Bardi, in *2G, op. cit.*, p.244–46.

18 *Ibid.*, p.82.

19 *Ibid.*, p.81.

20 The controversy about the demolition of Bo Bardi's display within the museum and other narrow-minded architectural changes at MASP are summarised by de Oliveira in *2G, op. cit.*, pp.8–20. Unfortunately, this is no singular case and many of Bo Bardi's buildings and urban proposals were destroyed or carelessly altered in the decades following her death.



Lina Bo Bardi,
interior installation
display, 1957–68,
Museum of Art of São
Paulo. Photograph:
Paolo Gasparini.
Courtesy Instituto
Lina Bo e P.M. Bardi
and Paolo Gasparini

enormous exhibition space into which the visitor was drawn as if into a jungle of paintings. Each of the paintings, with their often quite prominent gilt frames, was mounted on huge vertical glass panes that were fixed on cubic concrete bases. While the artwork was thus radically singularised and exposed, the space, with its hundred or so transparent glass panes on which the paintings were suspended as if in the air, relativised the authority of the single piece. Each artwork was shown to be its own site, a display mode that attested both to the migratory destiny of the pieces, but also, and more importantly, to a lack of institutional framing. Art's ontological status was no longer treated as a given.²¹ While all the paintings' surfaces were facing one direction — towards the viewer who entered the space — each work contained a short, basic description on its back. Of course, presenting classical Western painting in such a spectacular display as a total image in and of itself — an image of artistic labour — put an end to all received wisdoms of systematicity (be they chronology, genre, style, -isms, national school). It laid any universal claim about the Western idea of art to rest. Education — self-education — would have to start from another angle, namely from the singular passage each individual viewer had to make, thus creating a rather personal set of affiliations between the artworks — something one might even want to talk about later and share. The artworks would appear primarily as instances of subjective memorising and not as containers of legitimate knowledge about art and its history. It needs to be emphasised, though, that subjective memories are not merely subjective but necessarily draw from a cultural repertoire of available forms. Consequently, the truly engaging work of art mediation, the poetics of sensual collaboration mentioned at the beginning of this essay, would have to address the gap between the given elements of this repertoire and each single individual's conscious or unconscious interpretation and transformation of them. Only here, in this interlocking of subjectivities and objecthoods, could art's social function truly come alive.

Bo Bardi's aim at MASP was again to restore art to its 'creative possibilities'. However, while the egalitarian space promises the individual free circulation, an open encounter between faces and surfaces, this promise is invested with a substantial threat — a threat visibly expressed by the unmediated competition between the artworks. Like a ward with newborns who cannot make it on their own, they all crave simultaneously for the viewer's attention. And this is the message conveyed by Bo Bardi's display (and a truth regularly suppressed by the art institution): art demands too much of our lives.

21 Theodor W. Adorno opens his posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory* with the famous remark that 'nothing can be taken for granted anymore when it comes to art [...] not even its right of existence'. T.W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1970, p.11. Translation the author's.