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Three Essays on Design and the Folk Arts of Brazil

Author(s): Lina Bo Bardi, Introduction by Hilary Macartney and Translated by Zanna Gilbert

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Lina Bo Bardi: Three Essays on Design and the Folk Arts of Brazil

Introduction by Hilary Macartney

Translated by Zanna Gilbert

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Introduction

Although well known in Brazil and to a lesser extent in Europe, Lina Bo Bardi (1914–92) is only just emerging to North American scholars as a distinctive figure among architect-designers of the twentieth century. This obscurity is partly due to the preeminent position of Oscar Niemeyer (1907–2012), whose career has shaped much of the architectural landscape and critical agenda of modernism in Brazil. Bo Bardi knew Niemeyer, and it was partly due to him that in 1950 she became founding director of the design journal *Habitat*. However, her career and interests followed a very different trajectory from his.

Born in 1914 to a middle class Genoese family, Achillina Bo undertook her architectural training in Rome. Moving to Milan in 1940, she set up in practice with Carlo Pagani and began writing for *Lo Stile*, a design magazine edited by Gio Ponti. In 1943 she became deputy editor of *domus* but her practice as an architect-designer and as editor were disrupted by the end of the war in Italy. During these years, Bo had become involved in left-wing resistance activities, and in the immediate aftermath of the war she was preoccupied with the reconstruction of the country. This phase of her life ended in 1946 when she married the art dealer and curator Pietro Maria Bardi, and set off for Brazil with her husband. P. M. Bardi, who had been a prominent figure in the visual arts during Mussolini's regime, was a supporter of "L'Architettura Razionale" (Rational Architecture). In 1933 he founded the journal *Quadrante*, the same year that he attended the fourth CIAM congress where he met Le Corbusier and other leading designers of the Modern Movement.

Soon after their arrival in Brazil, Bardi was offered the directorship of the Museum of Art of São Paulo (MASP). Lina, who took the combined name "Bo Bardi," set up her own design practice (*Palma: studio de Arte e Arquitetura*), launched the design journal *Habitat*, and began designing their new home in Morumbi, a district of virgin forest in the south of São Paulo. Designed as a simple box frame on a sloping site supported by thin columns and glazed on three sides, it became known as the *Casa de Vidro* (Glass House). Although modernist architecture in Brazil was beginning to attract some criticism,¹ the 1950s were a high point of innovation and optimism in architecture and design circles. In 1951 the city of São Paulo celebrated its 400th anniversary, the international Art Biennial was launched, and a range of important construction projects, such as the Juscelino Kubitschek Building in Belo Horizonte, were begun. Five



Master Vitalino, a potter, working with a group of children in 1948. These ceramic figurines were bought mostly by the local people in rural districts such as Caruaru and Pernambuco in the Northeast of Brazil. © Instituto Lina Bo e P. M. Bardi, São Paulo, Brazil.

years later, in 1956, plans for the new capital, Brasilia, were drawn up. During this time, Bo Bardi was working across a wide range of interests. She designed buildings, furniture, jewelry, and textiles, launched a fashion show, and began teaching architecture and urbanism in São Paulo University.² In 1957 she began the designs for the future Museu de Arte de São Paulo (MASP), one of her most ambitious and powerful buildings.

At this moment of relatively straightforward development, Bo Bardi's career began to mutate. In 1959 she collaborated with Martim Gonçalves on theater productions in Bahia; from this point onward theater design (scenography, costumes, buildings, and the interior spaces of theaters) would be a significant part of her work. She also became entranced by Bahia, the northeastern region of Brazil noted for its isolation, its rich traditional culture, and its vibrant music scene. In 1959 Bo Bardi was appointed director of the Museum of Modern Art of Bahia (MAM BA) in Salvador and, over the next decade, she mounted a series of landmark exhibitions. Perhaps the most famous of these was *Nordeste*

(Northeast), the 1963 exhibition that launched the Museum of Popular Arts at Unhão. This period of discovery and innovation was cut short in 1964 by the coup that ushered in the military dictatorship in Brazil for the next twenty years.

Returning to São Paulo, Bo Bardi oversaw the design and construction of the Museu de Arte de São Paulo (MASP, opened in 1968), embarked on a series of theater and film projects, and continued to curate exhibitions on contemporary and traditional design and crafts. One of her earliest exhibitions at MASP was *A mão do povo Brasileiro* (The Hand of the Brazilian People, 1969). She was also an active participant in Tropicália, the cultural movement that emanated from Bahia. Although now perceived as primarily a music phenomenon, led by Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil, Tropicália had a broader political and social agenda that resulted in many of the leading figures being dispersed through imprisonment and exile. Bo Bardi continued to work as an architect and designer in São Paulo despite the limitations placed upon her diverse cultural activities.

It was in the 1970s that Bo Bardi first took an interest in the abandoned factory buildings in the Pompéia district of São Paulo, which had begun to be colonized by a series of informal and local initiatives. In 1977 she and her collaborators, André Vainer and Marcelo Ferraz, began adapting the spaces of the factory for a combined leisure and cultural center under the auspices of SESC (Serviço Social do Comércio), an employees' welfare organization. As well as planning the conversion of this large postindustrial site, Bo Bardi curated a series of exhibitions there that explored the complex postcolonial history of Brazilian material culture, including *Design no Brasil: História e realidade* (Design in Brazil: History and Reality), *O "belo" e o direito ao feio* (The "Beautiful" and the Right to Be Ugly), and *Mil brinquedos para a criança brasileira* (A Thousand Toys for Brazilian Children, 1982).

As the movement for democracy gained ground in Brazil in the 1980s and the political environment eased, Bo Bardi was able to participate in more public projects. The first phase of SESC Pompéia was completed in 1982, and work began immediately on the more ambitious second phase, incorporating a sports center and swimming pool. When seen across the built-up skyline of São Paulo, it is the three concrete structures of the second phase that capture the spectator's attention. Built in an uncompromising brutalist concrete, these three towers—a cubic sports block, a linked amenities block, and a cylindrical water tower—make a powerful statement about the role of community action and

resources in a city fast becoming dominated by generic apartment buildings and corporate office blocks. Opened in 1986, SESC Pompéia has become a design icon of São Paulo, and a pilgrimage site for architects concerned with the balance between modern design and the demands of community services.

In the aftermath of SESC, Bo Bardi received many other commissions for public buildings, museums, private houses, theaters, even urban design projects, but few were realized. She died on March 20, 1992, at the Casa de Vidro.

Writings on Design and Folk Culture

Although interested in the indigenous culture from the moment of her arrival in Brazil, Bo Bardi was acutely sensitive to the tensions and divisions created by the country's modernization. In her writings she often juxtaposed modern design with historical styles, and explored the appeals of internationalism alongside the diversity of vernacular cultures throughout the various regions of the huge country. These were not presented in terms of simple alternatives. As a committed modernist who had trained in Europe during the 1930s, she never turned her back on the strong internationalist current in Brazilian architecture and design. This was tempered, however, by a rising sympathy for the indigenous cultures of Brazil, as revealed in the folk arts, music, and vernacular design of the Bahia region. In the catalogue for an exhibition in Bahia in 1961, she wrote:

Today Brazil is conducting a cultural battle. Over the next ten or maybe even five years, the country will have sketched out its cultural program, establishing whether it is to be a country with its own autonomous culture built upon its own roots, or an inauthentic country with a pseudo-culture of imported, inappropriate schemes—an *ersatz* of other countries' cultures. A country able to take an active part in the universal concert of culture, or a country nostalgic for other means, another world, and other climates. Brazil today is divided in two: those that want to be aware, constantly looking outward, trying to capture the latest novelties in order to throw them, overlaid with a hasty national coating, into the culture market, and those that look within and around themselves, wearily searching among the scanty heritage of a new and passionately beloved land for the roots of a culture as yet unformed.³

As demonstrated by her activities in theater, music, and exhibitions, Bo Bardi had a protean interest in all types of design work. When designing houses she

was preoccupied with the interior furnishings as much as the structure and exterior appearance. Her interest in the folk arts and vernacular cultures of Brazil was also a great stimulus to her design process, allowing her to explore basic questions of comfort, utility, and symbolism in familiar objects such as chairs or toys. It also produced some unusual results. The *Cadeira de beira de estrada* (Roadside Chair) of 1967 has many of the hallmarks of postmodern design, but it springs directly from observation of Brazilian peasant women and an awareness of what can be learned from those overlooked in the modernization of Brazil.

This attention to the poorest in society sprang directly from her left-wing political views. However, the intellectual climate in which she began researching and collecting vernacular artifacts encouraged a close association between the intense nationalistic pride in a specific Brazilian form of modernity and both the popular arts and the most progressive international tendencies in architecture and design. This tendency was not unusual in the 1950s and 1960s, but the postcolonial history of Latin America and the sense that Brazil was, or could be, its cultural leader fueled a project that sought to carry both the modern and the traditional, the regional and the international, the exotic and the mainstream within it. Bo Bardi's exhibitions of ex votos, of handmade toys, of devotional objects and popular carvings were assembled in ways that emphasized their accessibility and immediacy to the modern spectator; she often suggested that such displays should be closer to a market stall than a museum.⁴ Lifted out of their original context, they spoke to their audience as neither artworks nor ethnographic specimens, but as vital messages from a pre-industrial culture that were meaningful and exciting to the urban Brazilian audience because they were both fragments from the past and the raw material of a new modern aesthetic.

—Hilary Macartney

Notes

1 See Max Bill, "Report on Brazil," *Architectural Review* 116, no. 694 (1954): 234–40, in which he attacked the sculptural tendencies in recent Brazilian architecture.

2 From these courses she developed her doctoral dissertation, "Propaedeutic Contribution to the Teaching of Architecture Theory," first published in *Habitat* in 1957. It was subsequently published in Olívia de Oliveira, ed., *Lina Bo Bardi: Obra construída* (Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, 2002). An English translation is in preparation.

3 From the exhibition catalogue, *Brennand cerâmica* (Museu de Arte Moderna de Bahia, 1961).

4 Marcelo C. Ferraz, ed., *Lina Bo Bardi* (São Paulo: Instituto Lina Bo e P. M. Bardi, 2008), 160.

*The Residence in Morumbi*¹

Lina Bo Bardi

In this house, neither decorative nor compositional effects were sought, as the objective is its extreme proximity to nature in all the ways—the simplest ones—that would interfere the least with nature. The challenge was to create a “physically” sheltered environment, that is, where one could live protected from the rain and wind while at the same time taking part in what exists of poetics and ethics, even in a storm.

The aim, therefore, was to situate the house within the natural environment, participating in all the dangers without being concerned with the usual protections; the house, in fact, does not have railings or parapets. The structure, composed of Mannesmann steel tubes, supports a very light platform of reinforced concrete of the “lost-form” sort, in which the wood has been adhered directly to the concrete; a fully glazed wall encloses the house on three sides; the roof—a very thin layer of concrete covered with Eternit and insulated with fiberglass—has the necessary inclination [slope] for the runoff of rainwater away from the Mannesmann elements. The roof water is brought to two lateral spouts where it falls directly from roof height. The glass wall is continued on the two lateral sides by double iron sheets insulated with fiberglass. These iron sheets and the rainspouts are painted red. One enters the house by a staircase made of iron and natural granite. An open internal area, a sort of suspended patio, allows for cross ventilation during hot weather. The back of the house, which rests on the ground, has a common stone-and-concrete construction; a long garden closed on one side separates the utility area from the front part; the two parts are connected by the kitchen. On the roof of the kitchen—made watertight by aluminum sheets—there is a garden with tropical plants, which grow spontaneously without much attention. The south-southeast exposure allows for the elimination of shutters and sun-blinds: the latter are not advisable during the rainy season, since only the sun can prevent mildew. Defense against the morning sun is obtained by way of white Plavinil Vinilite curtains.

This residence represents an attempt at communion with nature and the natural order of things by offering the least number of defenses against the elements; it seeks to respect this natural order with clarity—not like



Casa de Vidro (The Glass House) in Morumbi, São Paulo, soon after it was built in 1951. © Instituto Lina Bo e P. M. Bardi, São Paulo, Brazil.

an enclosed house that flees from the storm and the rain. These elements are feared by most people, who, when approaching nature, do so in the majority of cases from within a decorative or compositional—and therefore “exterior”—perspective.

1. *Originally published in Habitat magazine (Sao Paulo), no. 10 (Jan.– Mar. 1953): 31–40.*

Bahia in Ibirapuera

**Introduction to the catalogue of an exhibition held in 1959,
for the Fifth Biennial in São Paulo**

Lina Bo Bardi and Martim Gonçalves

La poésie doit être faite par tous, non par un. —Lautreamont
[Poetry must be created by all, not by one alone.]

Employing general definitions like “popular art,” “folklore,” “primitive art,” or “spontaneous art” implies, albeit tacitly, a classification of art that excludes Man and considers art itself as something separate, an abstract activity, a privilege. Where does art begin and where does it end? What are its boundaries? This “no man’s land” that sets out to limit mankind in the expression of his total humanity, depriving him of aesthetics, one of his most essential and profound manifestations, this limit between Art and art, is what prompted this exhibition.

What place does this so called popular, spontaneous, or primitive art occupy in the hierarchy of the Arts? (Explicit, implicit, or “condescending”?)

What is its meaning? Why does popular art exist, and not the art of civil servants, engineers, or bank clerks? That sector of society that is generally called “the people” is the only class that is not inhibited by cultural norms and concepts, possibly the only one that preserves the habit of natural explanations regarding aesthetic man.

The term “folklore”—as seen and classified by cultured men—defines the necessity and capacity for aesthetic manifestations by culturally isolated men (whenever the term “culture” is used in the traditional sense). But true art today seems to claim its human values by abandoning established norms, seeking to go beyond art itself for the fullness of its expression. From its rehabilitation, from the desire for self-annihilation, an era begins in which the totality of human values, in their material expression, is connected to a critical lucidity and to an autonomy which can no longer permit divisions into categories or sealed compartments; a time when man can no longer be denied, in the name of any creed or myth, the right to live his abundance.



View of *Exposição Bahia* (Bahia Exhibition) organized by Lina Bo Bardi and Martim Gonçalves in the foyer of the Castro Alves Theater, for the Fifth Biennial of São Paulo, 1959. At the inauguration of the exhibition, the floor was strewn with eucalyptus leaves. © Instituto Lina Bo e P. M. Bardi, São Paulo, Brazil. Photo: Miroslav Javurek.

Judging by the work, the creed of today's artist is to renounce any claims on immortality. The fragility of the materials—from collage to paper cutouts, from detritus to scraps—and that sense of contingency, which is peculiar to modern art, gives up the unwanted eternity of the work of art and instead re-absorbs it into the historical moment, not wanting to resist the passing of time.

The multimedia compositions—paper cutouts, sculptures from refuse, temporary constructions made out of anti-eternal materials, such as plastic or pressed metal—seek only to be a conscious renunciation of immortality, of the privilege of art; it is the recognition of ourselves as human and therefore limited, the awareness that the only “truth” created by man is at his own measure, beyond which is the absolute, metaphysical, and indifferent. This polymaterialism is different from that of other times when the gilded

backgrounds or incrustations with precious stones and sundry materials represented a quest for riches, a sense of delight far from the sense of dispossession that characterizes our own times.

Genius may create fixed relationships, the great masterpiece, the great work of art, the exception. But man, left alone, uncertain in what are considered to be his contingent artistic manifestations, today claims the right to poetry. Beyond these categories, there shall no longer be misgivings in recognizing the aesthetic value of a paper flower or an object made out of a kerosene can. Great Art shall, as it were, surrender its place to a nonprivileged aesthetic expression; the folkloric, popular, and primitive production will lose its attributes (more or less explicit today) of conscious manifestation or of transition to other forms, and will signify the right of men to aesthetic expression. This right, thus repressed over centuries among the educated, survived as a live seed, ready to germinate among those blocked from enlightening themselves by such inhibitory methods.

When organizing this exhibition we tried to bear in mind everything, no matter how small, that expresses poetry in everyday life. In this context, we have chosen to present a whole series of common objects that have been lovingly cared for: an important example for modern industrial design that, in the West, is normally created by a specialized elite, while in the East, where aesthetic man has over the centuries had preponderance over scientific man, this is a normal fact of life. This love for everyday objects should not be confused with decadent aestheticism; it is a vital necessity to be found in the origins of human life. It is in the sense of being entirely connected to life that we present this exhibition. It is a way of being that extends to the way of looking at things, of moving, of placing one's feet, a way that is not "aesthetic" but is close to nature, to the "true" human being. It is not by coincidence that this exhibition is presented by a theater school, because it is the theater that combines all the requirements of aesthetic man. And we repeat here words that may seem messianic, that may make today's experts, the critics, smile, but which contain, in addition to a generous human impulse, a warning—a call to arms for the pathways of a new culture; in the words of Appia, "soyons artistes, nous le pouvons." [Let us be artists, we can do it.]

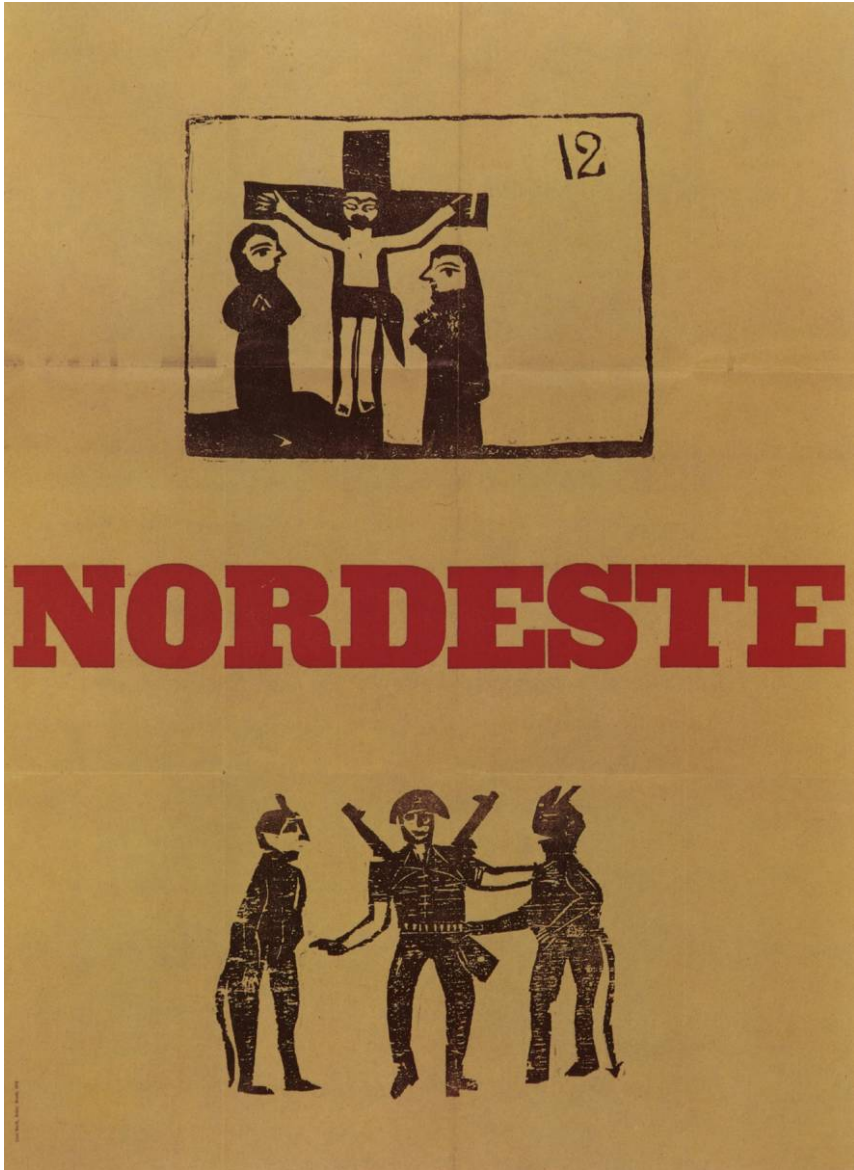
We present Bahia. We could have chosen Central America, Spain, Southern Italy, or any other place where what is known as "culture" has not yet arrived.

Nordeste / Northeast Solar do Unhão, Salvador, Bahia, 1963

This exhibition, inaugurating the Popular Art Museum of Unhão, should have been called *Civilization of the Northeast*. “Civilization.” I am searching for a sense of the word devoid of courtly rhetoric. Civilization is the practical aspect of culture; it is Man’s everyday life. This exhibition tries to present a civilization thought out in all its details, studied technically (even if the word “technical” here defines primitive work), from lighting to kitchen spoons, to bedspreads, clothing, toys, furniture, and weapons.



Display of textiles, ceramics, and other artifacts in the exhibition *Nordeste* (Northeast), Solar do Unhão, Salvador, Bahia, 1963. © Instituto Lina Bo e P. M. Bardi, São Paulo, Brazil. Photo: A. Guthmann.



Poster for the exhibition *Nordeste* (Northeast), woodcut and letterpress, Solar do Unhão, Salvador, Bahia, 1963. © Instituto Lina Bo e P. M. Bardi, São Paulo, Brazil

It is the urgent and vehemently productive search by men who do not want to be defeated, demanding their right to life. A continuous struggle to avoid sinking into despair; an affirmation of beauty with the rigor that can only be achieved through the constant presence of reality.

The raw materials: rubbish.

Burnt-out light bulbs, scraps of fabric, oil cans, old boxes, and newspapers.

Each object traces the outer limits of the "void" of poverty. This limit, together with the continuous, insistent presence of that which is "useful" and necessary," constitutes the value of this production, its poetics of human things hard won, not created by mere fantasy. It is in this sense of modern reality that we critically present this exhibition. As an example of the direct simplification of forms full of vital electricity. The forms of craftsmanship and industrial design. We insist upon the identification of the artisanal object and the industrial model based on a technical production that is linked to reality and not to a folkloric-choreographic formalist abstraction. We call this a Popular Art Museum rather than a Folklore Museum, because folklore is a static and regressive term, which is sustained by those responsible for culture; whereas popular art (and we use the word "art" not just in the sense of the fine arts, but also in the sense of making something technically) defines the progressive attitude of popular culture connected with real problems.

This exhibition is an invitation for young people to consider the problem of simplification (not poverty) in today's world; a necessary path to encounter a poetics within technical humanism.

This exhibition is an accusation.

The accusation is from a world that, despite forgetfulness and indifference, is unwilling to renounce the human condition. The accusation is not humble; with a last-ditch attempt at culture, it confronts the degrading conditions imposed by man.

Hilary Macartney

Hilary Macartney is Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Glasgow and director of the Stirling Maxwell Research Project. Her doctoral thesis for the Courtauld Institute of Art examined the historiography of Spanish art. She has published widely on aspects of Iberian culture, including *Spanish Art in Britain and Ireland, 1750–1920: Studies in Reception in Memory of Enriqueta Harris Frankfort* (Tamesis, 2010), which she co-edited with Nigel Glendinning, and English translations of articles on art in Spain and Latin America for *Art in Translation*.

Zanna Gilbert

Zanna Gilbert is Andrew W. Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. She was formerly an AHRC Collaborative Doctoral Award Holder with the University of Essex and Tate Research in the UK. She recently curated the exhibitions *Intimate Bureaucracies: Art and the Mail*, *Contested Games: Mexico 68's Design Revolution*, and a retrospective of the artist Daniel Santiago in Recife, Brazil.