

Theater and Museography in Lina Bo Bardi. Between Italy and Salvador.

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A glass box and a cave. These were the words Caetano Veloso used to describe the two buildings that comprised the installations of the MAM-BA, directed by Lina Bo Bardi from 1960 to 1964:

The Museum of Modern Art of Bahia functioned on the foyer in marble and glass of the huge Castro Alves Theater, practically gutted by fire only a day after its inauguration, just a few years before the creation of the museum. The foyer had remained undamaged, but the theater itself had been reduced to a huge charred cave, from which Lina chose the part where the stage had been to create a small semi-circular theater, where, in collaboration with the director of the Drama School, Eros Martim Gonçalves, she staged Brecht's Threepenny Opera (...), followed by Camus' Caligula¹.

It was in the shell of the grand theater that the architect, recently arrived from São Paulo, set up the MAM-BA, which she had been invited to direct by the then-governor of the state, Juracy Magalhães. The choice speaks volumes about the program developed at MAM-BA and the way Lina Bo Bardi approached the museography, as we shall see.²

Besides being housed inside a theater, from the very beginning the Museum established a close working relationship with the UFBA, especially the Drama School, directed by Eros Martim Gonçalves. In this context, when it came to the museum's traditional activities as a conservator of works of art, the theater was adopted as an integral part of MAM-BA, and as something of a counterweight. Writing on the fledgling museum's activities at the time, Lina said:

Our institution is not a Museum, the term is not appropriate: a museum conserves, and we don't have a collection as yet. Ours is more a Center, a Movement, a School and future collection, one well-programmed in accordance with sound and lasting didactic criteria. As such, it should be called a Permanent Exhibition. That's the sense we mean when we use the term Museum³.

1 VELOSO, Caetano. *Verdade Tropical*. São Paulo, 1997, p. 95.

2 MAM-BA was based at the Castro Alves Theater until November 1963, when restoration work began on the theater and the museum moved to the Solar do Unhão, where it remains to this day.

3 FERRAZ, Marcelo Carvalho (org). *Lina Bo Bardi*. São Paulo, 2008, p.139.

Lending a certain continuity to activities already begun at MASP, the MAM-BA project strove to set up a museum as a dynamic organism bound up with the life of the city. While this direction came to fruition in exhibition content that stressed the relationship between art and the life of the common man, it was also brought to bear in a series of activities open to the city's students and residents⁴.

On this program, the theater auditorium was adopted as the museum's spill-over, housing a series of activities connected with theater, music and the arts, as well as film screenings and film shoots. In practice, this use, provided for in the agreement signed by the State Government, the MAM-BA and the UFBA⁵, plugged the Museum into the effervescent political-cultural scene developing in Salvador, turning it into a point of reference in the process.

The close relationship that developed between the MAM-BA and the UFBA's Drama School between 1960 and 1964 also reveals certain possible readings of, and avenues for deeper reflection upon, MAM-BA's museographical project (and, later, that of the MAP), particularly in terms of the way works were exhibited with the express aim of creating an appropriate atmosphere, one capable of priming the visitor's perception in direct interaction with the artwork.

An experiment already begun at MASP⁶, emulating the strikingly scenographic character of the Italian exhibitions of the 1930s and 40s (while still in Italy, Lina Bo Bardi worked with Gio Ponti, the man behind the VII Triennale di Milano of 1940⁷), museography not only developed at MAM-BA, but saw its perspectives broaden through the relationship with the language of theater.

After lengthy analysis of documents from the period 1958-64 in the MAM-BA archives, Pereira underlines just how pivotal this collaboration was in ripening the museographical project at the MAM-BA, committed as it was to emphasizing the fundamental relationship between the artwork and the human element, that is, to reinforcing its historical meaning. A text Lina Bo Bardi published in the *Diário de Notícias* newspaper to promote an exhibition of French posters the Drama School put on in 1958 makes this clear:

On the initiative of its director, Martim Gonçalves, the University of Bahia's Drama School is presenting a small didactic exhibition of French posters, fliers, and Brazilian pamphlets. The inauguration of the exhibition coincides with the opening night of the Chekov play "Three Sisters" (...) What is the meaning of this exhibi-

4 We refer here to the concern with establishing the museum as a dynamic organism, integrated with modern life through its schools, which, in the case of MASP, led most notably to the creation of the IAC.

5 An agreement signed by the Bahia State Government, the MAM-BA and the UFBA, available in the MAM-BA archives, reads: "item VI - the Castro Alves Theater shall serve as a venue for exhibitions, congresses, conferences, research centers, theater performances, film culture studies and courses, and film shoots, while the foyer is to serve as a gallery for the Bahia Museum of Modern Art". Item VII reads: "The University of Bahia shall use the premises and facilities of the Castro Alves Theater for rehearsals and performances by the schools of Drama, Dance and Music" apud PEREIRA, p.153.

6 On the São Paulo Museum of Art, Lina wrote: "(...) The Museum's goal is to create an atmosphere, a frame of mind that enables the visitor to understand the work of art, and in this sense no distinction is made between an ancient and a modern work. Likewise, the work of art is not displayed according to any chronological criteria, but rather is presented, almost intentionally, to cause shock and trigger reactions of curiosity and investigation". BARDI, 2007, s/p.

7 On the Italian exhibitions of the 1930s and 40s, see: CAT. EXP. *Gli anni trenta* 1983, pp.311-324; CELANT, 1977.

tion? Well, it is not just an exhibition of Graphic Art or of some funny collection. In fact, we might call it an Exhibition of Manners, by which we mean the 'historical moment' of a certain people, a certain juncture of civilization. So it should come as no surprise that here we can see a poster by Picasso flanked by one for the Medrano Circus and some ads for Spanish bull-runs.

Art's results are open to critical judgment, but to understand and judge it properly, it is important to study its sources and deepest roots; and who better than a drama school to document these 'moments', which are the moments of life, the same life that theater purports to present and express in its most legitimate meaning?⁸

Likewise, in their presentation text for the *Exposição Bahia no Ibirapuera*, Lina and Martim justified the joint organization of the event by a museum and a drama school in the following terms:

(...) It is in this sense, tied in with experience, that we present this exhibition. It is a way of being that extends to the way of looking at things, of moving, of setting one's foot on the ground; it's not an 'aestheticizing' way, but one closer to nature, to the 'truly' human. So it is no mere coincidence that this exhibition is presented by a Drama School, because theater covers all the needs of aesthetic man. And here we quote words that might seem messianic, that might coax a smile from the art critics, the 'experts', but which temper a generous human impulse with a warning, a cry of caution concerning the directions of a new culture; in the words of Appia: 'soyons artistes, nous le pouvons'.

We present Bahia. We could have chosen Central America, Spain, Southern Italy, or any other place where what we call 'culture' has yet to arrive⁹.

For the *Exposição Bahia no Ibirapuera*, which coincided with the V Bienal Internacional de Artes Plásticas and the II Bienal de Artes Plásticas do Teatro, held by MAM between September and December 1959, simple, use-worn objects, tools and items of popular and religious dress were displayed within a museum context, or, more precisely, at a sort of "stall" erected outside the official Bienal pavilion.

The scenography was designed to evoke an atmosphere redolent of the culture of Bahia, full of its music and aromas, conjuring a space in which the objects selected by Lina and Martim could be "elevated" to the status of art.

The presentation text, co-authored by both organizers, opened with a reference to Lautréamont. It reads: "poetry must be made by all and not by one". Criticizing the heavy-handed categorization of "Art" into "popular art", "folk art", "primitive art", and "spontaneous art", it posited, albeit tacitly, of art as abstract activity divorced from human needs is something individual, something "privileged". They wrote:

⁸ BARDI, 1958 apud PEREIRA, Juliano Aparecido. *Lina Bo Bardi: Bahia, 1958-1964*. Dissertação de mestrado. Uberlândia, 2008, pp.155-156.

⁹ FERRAZ, op. cit., p. 134.

Where does art begin and end? Where are its boundaries? This 'no-man's land', which limits man in the expression of his total humanity, depriving him of one of his most necessary and deepest manifestations, such as the aesthetic, this distinction between Art and art is what suggested this Exhibition¹⁰.

Aligning the exhibits with the most recent international developments in modern art, most notably the so-called “poly-materialism”, Lina and Martim drew attention to just how current those popular manifestations were, which, uninhibited by “cultural schemes and concepts”, could finally present themselves as “man’s right to aesthetic expression”.

This reference to and valorization of the primitive element therefore figured as the negation of a cultural tradition, seeking out ways to reconnect the idea of art with the possibilities of aesthetic expression for the common man. It distanced art from categorizations that tend to define it as an abstract activity, the preserve of a cultural field, and, in that sense, it accrued importance to the activities MAM-BA developed between 1960 and 1964.

There is a clear affinity here with the thought of Antonin Artaud, the French dramatist often cited by Lina, and in whose writings the primitive is given central importance as a possible vector for a return to the origins and therefore also to the meaning of art, that is, art as human activity, free of categories or restrictions. Seen through the lens of Artaud, the formulations related to the Exposição Bahia no Ibirapuera gain amplitude, establishing clearer nexuses with theatrical production.¹¹

For Lina and Martim, in terms of reclaiming art’s human values (and questioning the development of western culture), recent developments in modern art seemed to legitimize those popular objects as examples of aesthetic expression and, by association, the very meaning of their inclusion within an art exhibition (in fact, an exhibition parallel to the Bienal Internacional de Artes Plásticas, an internationally-recognized bestower of artistic renown).¹²

In a piece entitled *Brennand cerâmica*, published in the MAM-BA Catalogue of April 1961, Lina recognized the existence of a “*cultural battle*” and, espousing her analysis of the historical moment in which Brazil found itself, clarified the aims behind the activities undertaken at MAM-BA (and, later, at the MAP, with its research center and documental archive, which envisioned a shift from primitive arts and crafts to modern industry):

Brazil is embroiled in a battle of culture. Within the next five, perhaps ten years,

¹⁰ Idem, pp.134.

¹¹ In Artaud, a reference to the primitive and to the attempt to restore theater as ritual, a characteristic of primitive cultures, puts itself, as a possible reintegration of art into life, a dissolution of the frontiers raised between areas of human knowledge and experience. On this, see: QUILICI, Cassiano Sydow. *Antonin Artaud: teatro e ritual*. São Paulo, 2004.

¹² The “migration” of primitive objects from natural history museums into art museums was particularly notable in the first decades of the 20th Century, largely in connection with the efforts of anthropologists (like Lévi-Strauss) and surrealists, with special mention for the exhibition of indigenous painting which Max Ernst organized in New York in 1946. On this and other references, see: RUBINO, Silvana. *Rotas da Modernidade: trajetória, campo e história na atuação de Lina Bo Bardi*. Tese de doutoramento. Campinas, 2002, pp.111-112. Jean Dubuffet and the above-cited Art Brut exhibition held in 1947 are other important references. On this, see: DORFLES, Gillo. *Tendências da arte hoje*. Lisboa, 1964, pp.177-180.

*the country will have drafted its cultural blueprint and plotted a course toward becoming either an autonomous culture, built upon its own foundations, or an inauthentic nation with a pseudo-culture based on imported and inefficient schemas; an ersatz culture cobbled together from snatches of other countries. It will have become either a country worthy of a place in the universal concert of cultures, or one that pines for other milieus, worlds and climes. Brazil today is split down the middle: there are those who want to be up to speed, constantly looking abroad for all the latest trends, to be given a national spin and hurriedly launched on the culture market; and then there are those who look inside, tirelessly rummaging through the sparse heritage of a new, but passionately beloved land for the roots of an as yet formless culture, to be constructed in unsmiling earnest. This painstaking search is conducted in the jumble of legacies haughtily dismissed by ramshackle critics as regionalism and folklore. (...)*¹³

Brazil's traits as a young country, a place where, in Lina's words, the contradictions of the "great western error" are present contemporaneously and in living color, proved essential to the reading and recognition of her chosen interventions, especially in the activities she developed during her first stay in the Brazilian Northeast, between 1958 and 1964.

If, as early as 1947, and particularly in the first years of the 1950s in Brazil, Lina and Pietro Bardi were aware that MASP, the IAC and *Habitat* magazine were mediums capable of contributing to the construction of a modern culture, Lina's activities between 1958 and 64, in connection with the UFBA and at the helm of the MAM-BA and the MAP, involved her directly with popular Northeastern culture and enabled her to identify elements she felt could underpin a genuine national modern culture (national, not nationalist, as the architect went to lengths to point out).

While still in Italy, the young Lina was part of an intellectual movement centered on issues related to culture, especially through her editorial duties at *A* magazine (later renamed *A cultura della vita*), published by Editore Domus between February and June 1946.¹⁴

In Italy as in the rest of a Europe devastated by war, the issue of reconstruction, cultural included, was very much in the foreground. In the wake of the ravages of war and the atomic bomb, the wear that was showing in Western culture, flagged since early in the century by the avant-gardes, with their reference to primitive cultures, now surged as a concrete reality experienced by all. Faced with the rubble, and accepting the bankruptcy of the old development model, time had come to take stock and seek new foundations on which to rebuild the continent's economy and culture.

Themes related to health and family planning featured alongside articles on the political state-of-affairs in Italy, the possibilities for urban planning, the

13 In written text, 2009, p.133.

14 In June 1946, after only nine issues of the magazine, Editore Domus discontinued publication, probably because the content was considered overly political. On the publication of *A cultura della vita* and related historical and political issues, see: LIMA, Zeuler Rocha Mello de Almeida. *Verso um'architettura semplice*. Roma, 2008, pp.9-15.

aesthetic of public housing and objects of everyday use.

Discussion on the aesthetic value of the objects that made up the domestic and urban environments gained space and emphasis in the magazine. Whether in cartoons, reports or ironic comparisons, attention was drawn to the meanings contained in everyday things in a bid to rethink, along broader lines, the social relations embedded within them. Note, for example, the ironic representation of the everyday scenes depicted in the series of strips that illustrated the magazine's covers, or even the column "Quale scegliereste?" (Which would you choose?), a light-hearted game in which the reader was to choose between objects of modern design and antique examples of styles of the past.

Years later, that same game would re-appear in the pages of the Sunday Supplement of the newspaper *Diário de Notícias de Salvador*, part of an editorial project Lina pursued in the city before receiving the invitation to direct the MAM-BA. An issue from October 1958 pitted a Greek sculpture against one by Mário Cravo—*Exu Molas-de-jipe*. Written upside down underneath the pictures came the conclusion:

It's a Greek statue. There's no point choosing it, it's in the Louvre. You might go for a plaster copy, such as that of the 'fine arts' model but you'd be starting down a bad road of sculptural culture. (...) If you chose the "plaster copy", you could stick it in a fountain or at the foot of a flight of steps of your house, which, in this case, would have to be in the 'mansion' style of the test we ran a fortnight ago.¹⁵

In a sense, this reflection on the aesthetic value of the object ties in with a conception already present at the original MASP, in the *Vitrine das Formas*, in which primitive objects, pieces of "art" and industrial wares were displayed side by side. Regardless of where they fell on the timeline, the objects were exhibited as conveyors of values that were essential and significant to a given culture. In this sense, the modern museum space is understood as a place reserved for experiencing and approaching objects in such a way as these become objects of art in the kernel of that experience¹⁶.

Triggering experiences connected with the aesthetic perception of the object and the meanings contained therein seems to be the key to Lina Bo Bardi's work, especially her museography and interventions in the field of theater.

What we find here is an approach that reveals broad perspectives for recognizing the expressive autonomy of the objects, something of great significance in the art world of the 1950s and 60s, in painting as in environmental interventions. This recognition of the expressive autonomy of the object (which, in the international context, belongs to that set of manifestations that questions the inspired and abstract character of the work of art) tends toward direct interventions in the urban space and toward the development of languages that appro-

¹⁵ BARDI, 1958.

¹⁶ On *Vitrine das Formas* see: POLITANO, Stela. *Exposição Didática e Vitrine das Formas: a didática do Museu de Arte de São Paulo*. Dissertação de mestrado. Campinas, 2010.

appropriate fragments of reality in order to construct a popular and contemporary form of communication. In this perspective, near what Pierre Restany described as operations of “*the artistic baptism of the object*”¹⁷, we find a series of works in which the artist, in a nod to Dadaism, appropriates fragments of the urban reality, to which he ascribes new meanings while proposing new relationships between the work and the public, no longer understood as a mere contemplator, but rather as a spectator/agent, in a shift that paves the way toward environmental art and the happening.

In this sense, within the context of the activities of the MAM-BA, it is worth remembering that the very building that housed the institution became, in the hands of Lina Bo Bardi and Eros Martim Gonçalves, raw material for cultural action. The shell of the fire-gutted theater was incorporated into the stage setting for Berthold Brecht’s *Threepenny Opera*, the play that practically inaugurated the space.

A controversial fact, the tragedy that befell the Castro Alves Theater left its mark on the history of Salvador, and, though the venue was open to public visitation, it was not inaugurated in 1958, as had been planned. Given the political significance and historical dimensions of the controversy surrounding the blaze, as well as the general cultural and political effervescence the city enjoyed in the 1950s and 60s (of which the activities of the UFBA and the MAM-BA were a significant part), one can sense the magnitude this staging of Brecht assumed, as, by incorporating elements of the urban reality into fiction, it succeeded in turning the theater toward the city space — or, better put, it managed to identify the city itself as the true space of political action.

If we take the staging of the play as a part of the cultural action undertaken by the MAM-BA in partnership with the Drama School of the UFBA, we can see that, by highlighting the theater on the urban landscape, *The Threepenny Opera*, as a play about beggars, turned its critical gaze upon the theater and upon the development of Bahian culture as a whole.

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17 “To appropriate this or that fragment of the real for poetic ends is to raise the issue of the object’s expressive autonomy, in other words, to return to the Dadaist reference, to Marcel Duchamp’s ready-made: the object of use baptized as sculpture is effectively a work of art to the extent that its artist-inventor takes moral responsibility for it”. RESTANY, Pierre. *Os novos realistas*. São Paulo, 1979, p.32.

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