

ATMOSPHERES IN ARCHITECTURE AND MOVING IMAGES: ISAAC JULIEN'S *LINA BO BARDI* - A MARVELLOUS ENTANGLEMENT

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ISAAC JULIEN

LINA BO BARDI

ARCHITECTURAL ATMOSPHERE

ENVIRONMENTAL MEDIA

MUSEUM AND MOVING IMAGES

EXHIBITION DESIGN

This essay examines Isaac Julien's multiscreen installation *Lina Bo Bardi—A Marvellous Entanglement* (2019) as an atmospheric encounter between moving images, architecture, and the cultural imagination of public space.

Through Julien's cinematic traversal of Bo Bardi's buildings in São Paulo and Salvador, the article explores how montage, screen arrangement, choreography, and the use of elemental agents produce a relational environment. Particular attention is given to MASP's open museographic dispositif

and exhibition design, the SESC Pompéia's bridges and apertures, and Bo Bardi's ecological thinking of air, ventilation, and collective inhabitation.

The installation is read as a filmic architecture in which the material and social energies of Bo Bardi's work are reanimated through projection, rhythm, and spatial passage. By linking atmosphere, spectatorship, and environmental media, the essay argues that Julien's work constructs a moving, breathable form of architectural memory and public culture.

"Atmosphere is a metaphysical space in which everything depends on everything else, [...] a space in which each person's life is mixed with the life of others" (Coccia, 2019 pp. 48-49).

"Phenomena are the ontological inseparability/entanglement of intra-acting agencies" (Barad, 2007, p. 139)¹.

Isaac Julien's 2019 multiscreen installation *Lina Bo Bardi - A Marvellous Entanglement* is perfectly titled, for the work itself offers the feeling of a creative entanglement². Here, one breaths the air of relationality between an artist and an architect, both keen on creating ambiance and displaying atmospheres. The installation is not simply an homage to Lina Bo Bardi (1914–1992), the visionary Italian-born Brazilian architect, but profoundly entwined with her creative, multiform architectural environments³. Versatile and wide-ranging, Bo Bardi's modernist practice involved, along with architecture proper, the design of exhibition spaces, interiors, furniture, costumes, and jewelry. It also spanned across the realms of landscaping and urban planning, theater and film, and furthermore engaged writing and editorship. As Julien unfolds his vision on nine interrelated screens, he reveals the depth of this practice, its very atmosphere. Adopting an errant mode of filming, he traverses Bo Bardi's work intimately, in a journey that displays both aesthetic and political sympathies. A process of cultural and artistic bonding takes place as the artist's multiscreen construction becomes intertwined with the architect's building structures. A montage of their public forms is elegantly interlaced across the screens, rhythmically crafting a poetic, relational ambiance. Layers of elective affinities take shape in this aesthetic dance that is a choreography of encounters.

The intensity of the intellectual and artistic relationship that Julien established with Bo Bardi's practice took proper time to be developed. The poetic journey of entanglements spanned several years of research devoted to absorbing

the cultural atmosphere of the architect's creations⁴. The installation makes one feel this active journey of exploration. In *A Marvellous Entanglement*, the present time is knotted together nonlinearly with several past memories of the architect's cultural itinerary, gathered through archival research of documents and films. These include findings in the archive of the French-born anthropologist and photographer Pierre Verger. Long interested in West African diasporas, Verger collaborated with Bo Bardi on projects such as the Casa do Benin, which Julien visited and filmed for the installation. His presence is evoked among that of others who were part of a marvelous entanglement of artistic friendships and intellectual collaborations in her life. These include the theater director, playwright, and actor José Celso Martinez Corrêa (known as Zé Celso), who co-founded Teatro Oficina, an experiment in theatrical display, and who makes an appearance at the end of the film.

Extensive visits to the various buildings designed by Bo Bardi led Julien to single out the locations to feature in the

Fig. 1 SESC Pompéia bridges in Isaac Julien, Lina Bo Bardi: *A Marvellous Entanglement*, 2019. *Nine screen installation*. Installation view, Victoria Miro Gallery, London, 2019. Courtesy of the artist and Victoria Miro



installation, and to link them together in an animated journey of architectural atmospheres. *A Marvellous Entanglement* traverses in interconnected, nonlinear ways three of Bo Bardi's São Paulo buildings: the São Paulo Museum of Art (MASP), the SESC Pompéia Leisure Center, and Teatro Oficina, all considered landmark examples of Brazilian Modernism. Further north, in Salvador, Julien filmed, in addition to Casa do Bonin, the Museum of Modern Art of Bahia, the Gregório de Matos Theater, and the Coatí restaurant, built as part of the Ladeira da Misericórdia Housing and Commercial Complex and now abandoned.

CHOREOGRAPHING MUSEUM SPACE AND EXHIBITION DESIGN

A meditative, choreographed way of filming takes us on a figurative dance through Bo Bardi's spaces, sometimes engaging actual dancers who interact with the architecture, while always employing a kind of motion that forms not simply an architectural but an atmospheric entanglement around sites of passage. With this strategy, Julien exposes the architect's airy vocabulary of openness and links it to her register of sociality and collectivity⁵.

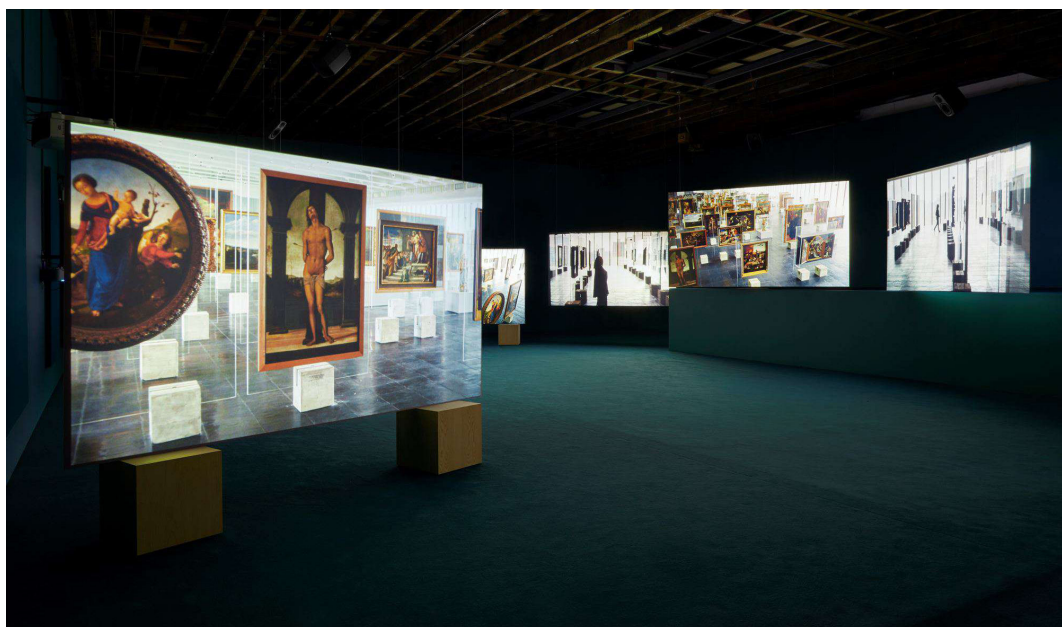
Filming MASP, Julien engages the conceptual design of Bo Bardi's Modernist museum to reveal its vision of art exhibition. He showcases her innovative art collection display, exploring how it encourages creative readings of art history. All nine screens are used to their full potential to show the museum's spatial flow and affirm that the architectural fluidity creates a more open design of both museography and spectatorial space. Such fluidity emerges via filmic intercutting between the two aerially suspended and intersecting red staircases of the museum as well as in shots that traverse the grand exhibition hall that is the museum's central core. In this journey, Julien's installation treats visitors to a historic moment: the striking visual

experience that affected those who first viewed the layout of the museum's principal gallery in 1969⁶.

This was no ordinary white cube. There were no walls, no dividers, not even movable partitions. In Bo Bardi's original exhibition design, artworks were not hung on any kind of wall surface. Paintings were instead placed across the open space of the luminous glass-enclosed room, laid out in asymmetrical rows and irregular grid patterns, hovering as if floating in space. Each painting, with its frame, was mounted on a stand of the architect's design, which she appropriately called 'crystal easel'. This was a vertical glass panel that was fixed to a concrete base. The canvases appeared to be perched on the huge panes of glass as well as suspended in space as if they were being aerially lifted and thrust across the space by a wind while supported by the cubic concrete base, simultaneously grounded into the earth.

Bo Bardi's exhibition room design revolutionized museum space, and Julien wanted his luminous screen panels to show, precisely, this. To do so, he reproduced

Fig. 2 MASP's crystal easels and exhibition design in Isaac Julien, Lina Bo Bardi: A Marvellous Entanglement, 2019. *Nine screen installation*. Installation view, Victoria Miro Gallery, London, 2019. Courtesy of the artist and Victoria Miro.



features of the architect's design, including the stands. The installation screens, modeled on her crystal easels, filmically reinvent their form. Like the display of her canvases, they project translucency, and they, too, are fastened to a concrete base. A structural bond between architectural and moving image display is created here in a projection of luminous waves. It is further activated with a ritual rhythm, as the excursion through the MASP progresses in a choreography of spectatorial movements, with a resounding sense of thresholds.

To enhance the atmosphere of architectural motion in public space, Julien filmed extensively with traveling shots that track paths of reception. He retraced Bo Bardi's assemblage of artworks to further highlight how visitors experience art historical links while traversing a translucent art gallery whose associative, sequential mode of display is itself cinematic. Exuding from the breath of the MASP as well as other spaces designed by the architect to be lived in such collective, social, or ritual form, is an undulant motion, which becomes the defining oscillation of the installation.

The filmic editing, both within and across screens, is itself an energetic architectural choreography. Devised by Julien in collaboration with his longtime editor, Adam Finch, the montage joins the nine screens together by moving across their planes rhythmically, like the motion and sound of waves. This movement is nonlinearly fashioned in a way that resonates with Bo Bardi's own sense that non-Western temporality moves in folds, in a processual and relational mode. As she put it, "Linear time is a Western invention; time is not linear, it is a marvellous entanglement". Julien's own dynamic is fluctuating, intent on actively conjoining artistic and architectural materials in a dance of moving relationality. It is as if his screens respond to one another in an associative mode of motion that is both performative and atmospheric. The movement and sounds fluidly ricochet in this ambient way across the screens that display the atmosphere of MASP, and, in this way, connect the

museum to other public sites. Ultimately, these passages create vaporous filmic architectures of public culture. They also produce a formal bond with Bo Bardi's nimble capacity for bridging spaces and for building with light and air. Such process of entanglement finally results in an aesthetic that turns her buildings' ecosystems into resounding, airy environments of moving images.

AIRY AMBIANCES: ARCHITECTURES OF WEATHER

"Air is the most essential element to terrestrial life, and it is also the element that has the greatest power to ensure a mediation between the different states of matter, within us and outside of us" (Irigaray, 2016, p. 27).

Projected from the translucent exhibition space of the MASP, the moving sense of aperture flows into the other spaces of the installation. In filming the SESC Pompéia Leisure Center, Julien continues to enhance this atmosphere of openness. The camera focuses on openings and especially on the suspended bridges across the Center's buildings, which function to connect them. As the aerial bridges appear in the film and are made to cross over all nine screens, their connective structures become even more linked architecturally. With this gesture of architectural joining on screens, Julien bridges sites and distances. Even the space that separates the screens in the gallery site appears diminished, as he effectively makes their planes closely intersect as the bridges do. This crossover montage of bridges floating on air throughout the installation space produces a structural, open reflection on how film and architecture create environments of passage, and especially on how they might construct a connective social space.

In this intra-active process, Julien's atmospheric, airy cinematic views become totally entangled with how Bo Bardi's creation of such openings and crossings affect

the ambiance of museums and public sites. To make the importance of atmosphere clearer, the film recounts how, in 1976, Bo Bardi entered the abandoned steel barrel factory in the Pompéia neighborhood of São Paulo for the first time. She returned over the weekend and noticed that “the atmosphere was different.” As Fernanda Montenegro, one of the two actresses who impersonates Bo Bardi in the film narrates, “The elegant and innovative concrete structure” no longer “felt solitary” but inhabited, for “there was a happy crowd of infants, mothers, fathers, older people passing from one pavilion to another” (Bo Bardi, 1986a)⁷.

The airy renovation, which spanned from 1977 to 1986, was guided by the atmosphere of social openness that the architect had witnessed. Aiming to continue to provide the neighborhood with the sense of a community plaza, Bo Bardi created an open library configuration that invited people to study and read but also to experience as communal social space. The entrance to the former factory was likewise transformed into an attractively breezy, translucent space, covered by a glass-tiled roof that allowed natural light into the open large volume. The architect removed doors from the original spaces to make more transits possible and enable air flow. Bo Bardi’s furniture, designed specifically for the space, further mobilized it. Its modular design turned it into an adaptable environment, capable of hosting the variability of what was “in the air” in the community. The theater chairs, for example, were designed in a particular relational fashion to create the kind of reserved intimacy that produces closeness. As the architect put it, she aimed “to give back to the theater its capacity to distance and embrace” (Bo Bardi, 1986a)

Drawn to the openness of the SESC Pompéia space, Julien explored the airy features of Bo Bardi’s architecture, extending his atmospheric way of filming from the suspended bridges to the design of her windows. Returning from a trip to Japan, the architect had been inspired to change the geometry and rectangular shape traditionally assigned to fenestration in Western culture. Instead of conventional

Fig. 3 Isaac Julien, *Tecnologia pré-histórica / Prehistoric Technology* (Lina Bo Bardi – A Marvellous Entanglement), 2019. Endura Ultra photograph facemounted. Courtesy of the artist and Victoria Miro.



Fig. 4 Isaac Julien, *Um maravilhoso emaranhado / A Marvellous Entanglement* (Lina Bo Bardi – A Marvellous Entanglement), 2019. Endura Ultra photograph facemounted. Courtesy of the artist and Victoria Miro.



windows, she designed irregular openings for the largest tower of the complex. Matching the kind of outlines and contours that can be created with a die-cutting instrument, these windows resemble large undular holes punched into the building to let the air in. As Julien captured the shape of these glassless apertures, he recreated in film the fluid form of the passage of pneuma. As in her architecture of weather, in this film installation a stream of movements also overcomes the boundary between interior and exterior, bridging and joining the two together.

Bo Bardi's windows evoke such relational forms not only

spatially, with their moving shapes, but also temporally, because the nonlinear forms appear even to bridge times of human inhabitation. Looking from inside the irregular holes cut into the Modern concrete building, as one does in Julien's installation, the space feels cavernous. Indeed, the hollow apertures give the impression of actually being inside a cave. In a sort of time warp, while inhabiting Modern architecture one can imagine dwelling in an ancient grotto, looking out into the open. Bo Bardi's future-leaning experimental construction was intentionally primordial. An architect who declared herself to be "horrificed by air conditioning," as well as carpeting, thought of a more ecological way to aerate and cool a building with windows that "suggested the prehistoric holes of caves with no glazing, nothing." Reprising this statement in Julien's film, the actress, speaking Bo Bardi's views, emphasizes that in the caves, the first "glassless" holes achieved "permanent cross ventilation," producing natural air technology (Bo Bardi, 1986b)⁸.

Building this entangled relation between different experiences of time and spaces of inhabitation, the construction ecologically engineered air and atmosphere while being grounded in the earth. The conjoined filmic-architectural journey through this Modern cave featuring environmental apertures thus enhances the connections between architecture, atmospheric formations, and geological processes.

Julien filmed the ecological windows in a way that releases the atmospheric sensation of Bo Bardi's architecture of weather, for he framed the cavernous holes in a way that allows them to open up to a breath of air. With a fluid framing as well as liquid motion that flows across the screens, environmental agents make their presence felt, entering both the architectural and filmic space. One senses the warm tropical air virtually flowing in and out of the space of the installation, rhythmically passing across the screens. The environmental apertures are reframed even more atmospherically when the actress impersonating Bo

Bardi opens the screens on the windows, herself breathing in the air, as if to absorb a metaphoric, cultural form of cross ventilation.

The flow of air passing through Bo Bardi's windows thus floods into the installation, becoming in time a palpable gesture of elemental philosophy and ambient relationality⁹. As if reprising the architect's conception of cross ventilation, the moving architecture of *A Marvellous Entanglement* itself becomes environmental in nature. As in Julien's other fluid multiscreen installations, natural elements physically come to life here. An environment of atmospheric fluidity is architected in filmic form. With camera movement and editing that join nine screens together in waves of motion, all elements can, indeed, float. The more the flow of air moves across these screens, the more it joins the flux of water. As Julien technologically harnesses the force of these environmental agents on screens, his moving-image installation communicates an ambient vitality. The energy one feels here is released by an atmosphere of projection in which waves of light and air are not simply elements but active 'elemental media'¹⁰. In this cinematic space, air perceived as the undulation of sea waves spirals across the gallery as if it were the whirling of wind.

Historically, air has functioned as an interface through which social bodies can be linked with one another as well as to landscape and atmosphere. But this force of air became somewhat obscured in later Western thinking, which has been largely characterized, as the feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray points out, by "the forgetting of air" as a form of dwelling (Irigaray, 1999).

It is therefore highly significant that the fluid materiality of air, and its circulation, is revisited in *Lina Bo Bardi—A Marvellous Entanglement*. Julien underscores that, by transferring primordial ventilation to a modern dwelling, Bo Bardi communicated the transitive capacities of air as a moving and connective social tissue and cultural substance. Bo Bardi and Julien's interventions, thus ethereally entangled, are a

needed breath of fresh air.

NOTES

- 1** This sentence is italicized in the text.
- 2** For further development of the topic of this essay, see Bruno (2025).
- 3** For an introduction to the work of Lina Bo Bardi see, among others, de A. Lima (2013); Esparza Chong Cuy et al. (2020); including writings by Bo Bardi edited by Ponce de Leon (2022). See also, Cobas (2021); Veikos (2014) which reproduces Bo Bardi's *Propaedeutic Contribution to the Teaching of Architecture Theory* (1957); Carvalho Ferraz (1993), and *Lina Bo Bardi 1914–1992*, the special issue, *AV Monographs* 180 (2015). Bo Bardi's work is contextualized in Bergdoll et al. (2015). For further publication of her writing, see, among others, Lina Bo Bardi (2013).
- 4** Julien first became fascinated by Bo Bardi in 2012, when he was invited to show at SESC Pompéia. The process of making the installation over time was documented as part of *Lina Bo Bardi—A Marvellous Entanglement*, an exhibition of Julien's work at the MAXXI museum in Rome, September 23, 2020–February 26, 2021, where the work premiered in Italy.
- 5** On the importance of the social in Bo Bardi's practice, see Buerger (2011).
- 6** By the 1990s, Bo Bardi's original design was badly altered but it was restored in 2015.
- 7** There are different translations of this text in English. My citation, slightly different from the adaption of the text in the film, is from Bo Bardi (2014). Montenegro's daughter, Fernanda Torres, also impersonates Bo Bardi, and speaks her voice.
- 8** The translation in the film is slightly different from mine.
- 9** For an introduction to elemental theories, see Macauley (2010).
- 10** For further articulation of this 'atmospheric thinking', see Bruno (2022), which considers the interrelations of projection, atmosphere, and environment, both in history and in contemporary art.

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