

THE ARCHITECTURE OF TIME WORKSHOP

ARCHITECTURAL HUMANITIES RESEARCH ASSOCIATION

November 14 and 15, 2024

Furness Building / Fisher Fine Arts Library

University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia

THE PREY WE WANT TO CAPTURE*Warburg Meets Bo Bardi: Historical Bases for a Beyond-the-human Time Regime*

MARTÍN COBAS

KEY WORDS

time regime, chronotology, museography, art-historical time, cinematic time, ontological anthropology, predatory field

How do we capture time *in* architecture? What if we imagine the museum as a predatory field — the territory of the predator, a performative space, unfolded *in* time, in which cognition is not regulated by the symbolic machinations of language but rather by an intense visual semiosis? This non-linguistic communication, possibly a form of “creaturely rhetorics,”¹ would delineate an affective field populated by all forms of sensible life to therefore establish a new ecology of relations and, altogether, an anthropology “beyond the human.”²

How do we relate to and identify with time in view of recent developments in ontological anthropology, animal and vegetal studies, and the discourses of the post human and beyond the human? How are space and time correlated (if at all) in the context of our discipline? To what extent can material/ist scholarship tender time as an object or subject of inquiry?

The notion of time has been the subject of much debate and speculation in both the humanities and the sciences: in philosophy, history, the arts, thermodynamics, relativity, quantum physics, and evolutionary biology, to name just a few. Re-baptized as deep time, geological time, chronological time, experienced time, or *durée*, time is as ubiquitous as it is elusive. In spite of — or perhaps because of — its reluctance to be fully conceptualized, time is an elastic concept, capable of taking on myriad forms. Always melancholic, often tragic, morbid, or eschatological, time is also the yet-to-be, the arrow that

¹ See Diane Davis, “Creaturely Rhetorics,” in *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (2011), 88-94.

² I am paraphrasing Eduardo Kohn. See Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2013).

points to the future. And yet, with a few exceptions,³ little has been said about time in architecture and its critical import, with the “thingness” of objects always taking precedence in our all-too-disciplinarily driven discourse. Nevertheless, the topic of time seems especially timely — and, in more than one sense, urgent. It is always flitting time that confronts the endurance of space — especially in an era of rapid, unstoppable change. Hence, the theoretical urgency of expanding our understanding of time beyond the constraints and epistemological comfort of chronological time and, more importantly, beyond the ontological comfort of our own modern Western metaphysics.

This paper examines a felicitous encounter between art history, cinema, museography, architecture, and anthropology in Lina Bo Bardi’s *Museu de Arte de São Paulo* (São Paulo Museum of Art, 1958-68) and makes the case for a novel conceptualization and production of time at the intersection of images (as paintings), bodies, and architecture.

The *ur-objects* of this narrative are the *cavaletes de vidro* (glass easels), an idiosyncratic, quasi-anthropomorphic museographic dispositif devised by Bo Bardi for the main exhibition hall of the museum. These consist of a concrete base and a glass plane on which the paintings are supported. Crucially for this argument, the paintings and their metadata cannot be viewed simultaneously; the viewer is, in fact, forced to decouple visual and textual cognition in space and time. Detached from both physical walls and art-historical location (the title cards removed to the back), paintings perform in a free-floating space and time; adrift, as it were.⁴ Relying on complex spatial effects and visual traits — some of them studied by the empirical sciences of the nineteenth-century (e.g., retinal afterimages, peripheral vision, binocular vision, trompe l’oeil and mise-en-abyme) — the museography manufactures a spatiotemporal dislocation that exacerbates the temporality of perception and its codification. The political undertones of this operation have been well documented (the desacralization of the artwork, the removing of its “aura” in the Benjaminian sense, its “decolonizing” effect, the demystification of elite art to make it more widely accessible), as well as their immediate sources and precedents, considered by art and architecture historians alike. These include Bo Bardi’s Milanese sojourn and her engagement with Italian *disegno* — for example, Franco Albini’s designs for Scipione & Black and for the White Exhibition at the Pinacoteca di Brera in 1941.⁵

The question of time, through various designations (all concerned with an alternative to the rigid teleological periodization) has been a matter of central preoccupation in the history of art, from Aby Warburg’s “*Nachleben der Antike*” and “*Pathosformel*” to Henri Focillon’s “*vie des formes*,” George Kubler’s “shape of time,” or, more recently, Keith Moxey’s “visual time,” Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood’s “chronotopology,” and Georges Didi-Huberman’s perusals into Warburg’s *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*. In *The Surviving Image*, for instance, Didi-Huberman notes that “the ensemble

³ Among these exceptions, I would primarily identify two lines of enquiry: one phenomenologically oriented and the other scientifically oriented. See David Leatherbarrow, *On Weathering: The Life of Buildings in Time and Building Time: Architecture, Event, and Experience*. See, also, Sanford Kwinter, *Architectures of Time: Toward a Theory of the Event in Modernist Culture*.

⁴ Although the comparisons are illustrative in any case, Bo Bardi’s museography differs significantly from other “anti-museum” proposals, notably, Le Corbusier’s *musée à croissance illimitée* (museum of unlimited growth, 1931) or André Malraux’s *musée imaginaire* (museum without walls), the former an expansive meditation on the *promenade architecturale*, a defining spatial trope of modern linear time.

⁵ See, for instance, Renato Anelli, “Origens e atualidade da transparência no MASP (The Origins and Topicality of the MASP’s Transparency),” in Adriano Pedrosa and Luiza Proença, ed., *Concreto e cristal: o acervo do MASP nos cavaletes de Lina Bo Bardi* (Concrete and Crystal: MASP’s Collection on Lina Bo Bardi’s Easels) (Rio de Janeiro: Cobogó, 2015), 44-55.

of definite coordinates — author, date, technique, iconography, etc. — is obviously insufficient for [fixing an image]. An image, every image, is the result of movements that are provisionally sedimented or crystalized in it, a dynamic moment.”⁶ Here, the relations between objects (whether images, pictures, paintings or otherwise) are more important than objects themselves. This is most evident in Warburg’s *Bilderatlas*, in which each of the 63 panels and 971 items — an elaborated photographic montage — establish multiple connections, invisible threads, and an infinitely proliferating iconography unequivocally distanced from the Wölfflinian stylistic dialectics against which it stands. Warburg’s project was certainly anthropological in scope, and images were read as anthropological markers and carriers; Didi-Huberman suggests that “anthropology, therefore, displaces and defamiliarizes — one might almost say, disquiets — art history.”⁷ Anthropology, I shall demonstrate, also disquiets architecture. And its medium is the image; images disquiet architecture too.

Indeed, the question posed by the museography of Bo Bardi’s MASP is, to a certain extent, analogous to Warburg’s critique of the discipline of art history, a model that operated “like a fetishist on his shoes,” as amusingly stated by Didi-Huberman.⁸ Indeed, since the opening of the MASP building, its museographic apparatus has sparked much interest and debate. How is it possible to photograph a painting standing up, in nearly anthropomorphic fashion? To this end, I focus the discussion on Bo Bardi’s subversive museographic invention, glass easels,⁹ exploring their historical sources and variations (from preternatural rocks to concrete blocks) well beyond conventional historiographic lineages (e.g., Italian *disegno*) and through previously unexplored archival evidence (ethno-anthropological, art-historical, and institutional) reinterpreted alongside recent developments in ontological anthropology. My work thus aims to provide a robust archival, historical, and critical foundation for defining a beyond the human time regime.

The underlying hypothesis — the articulation of a “beyond the human” time regime — considers time not as an abstract, absolute value (mechanical or chronographic), but rather as “lived experience,” constitutive of our biological and subjective existence. In the philosophical tradition of Henri Bergson and Gilles Deleuze, Bo Bardi herself provides a compelling cue:

Linear time is a western invention. Time is not linear, it is a marvelous entanglement, where at any moment, points can be chosen and solutions invented, without beginning or end.¹⁰

Bo Bardi’s notion of time suggests the possibility of inscribing duration, as elaborated by Bergson,¹¹ and actualized in cinematic time.¹² Duration is embedded in space (e.g., in displacement, in parallax), and coincides with the placing of vision “in the empirical immediacy of the observer’s body.”¹³ It is this

⁶ Georges Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image: Phantoms of Time and Time of Phantoms: Aby Warburg’s History of Art*, Harvey Mendelsohn, trans. (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017), 19.

⁷ Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image*, 19.

⁸ Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image*, 23.

⁹ In its initial configuration, 119 paintings were exhibited in the glass easels. For an in-depth study of the MASP see, for instance, Adriano Pedrosa, Luiza Proença, Lucas Pessôa, Isabel Diegues, ed., *Concrete and Crystal: MASP’s Collection on Lina Bo Bardi’s Easels* (Rio de Janeiro: Cobogó, 2015).

¹⁰ Lina Bo Bardi, *Correspondence*. Instituto Bardi, Casa de Vidro, São Paulo.

¹¹ See Henri Bergson, “Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience.” (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, PUF, 2003). And Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. N. M. Paul and W. S. Palmer (New York: Zone Books, 1991).

¹² As Mary Ann Doane argues, “the achievement of modernity’s temporality, as exemplified by the development of cinema, has been to fuse rationality and contingency, determination and chance... Cinema’s decisive difference from photography was its ability to inscribe duration, temporal process.” Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 208-209.

¹³ Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1992), 24.

vivifying museographic experience that underlies the type of time regime I seek to define: anachronic and heterochronic, and due to its distinctive chronotopological conditions, a conduit for difference *in continuity* in the form of ontological otherness. Nevertheless, it relies on the primacy of the body as the locus of “subjective vision,” and on the combined coupling of bodies and paintings to the extent of their cognitive interchangeability; pictorial space and living space converge within the architectural milieu. Beyond perspectival symbolism, bodies and paintings constellate on a *communal stage of the gaze*.

Within the archival evidence that I reclaim as fundamental for fully understanding the conceptual implications of the glass easels, I focus on two episodes: the *Exibições Didáticas* (Didactic Exhibitions) held at the old building of the museum on Rua 7 de Abril between 1947 and 1951, and the experimental work of the *Seminário de Cinema* (Cinema Seminar/Workshop) taught at the museum as part of its educational program since 1949.

In short, the Didactic Exhibitions consisted of a series of panels, each a masonite square with sides measuring 1.32 meters, containing photographic reproductions of artworks and brief accompanying texts meant to introduce the general public to the world of art history in a synthetic and direct way. The first of these exhibitions comprised 76 “thematic” panels, ranging from cave painting to sculpture, architecture, and contemporary art. Although initially conceived in a nearly film-strip fashion — presenting the artworks in chronological succession as photograms — they evolved into more complex visual syntaxes. In fact, their goal was to overcome a teleological narrative, favoring instead a non-evolutionary and non-linear approach. The conceptual and visual resemblance with Warburg’s *Bilderatlas* is remarkable, as is the case with the MASP’s museography. (Think, for instance, of a transposition from a *mise-en-page* to a *mise-en-scene*.) Pietro Maria Bardi, then Director of the museum and working closely with Bo Bardi, opened a report to the International Congress of Museums (ICOM) in which he discussed the experience of the Didactic Exhibitions, noting the continuous nature of historical time:

There is no interruption of continuity; there is no bound in the history of human development. Every event, every fact or gesture has its reason, by which it is bound to the past in a kind of *living resonance* [emphasis mine].¹⁴

The second “scene” takes us to the most radical film produced in the *Seminário de Cinema*: *Os tiranos*, a tabletop documentary with a duration of 7 minutes, directed by Plínio García Sánchez and written by Marcos Marguliês (both professors of the *Seminário*) in 1952.¹⁵ *Os tiranos* was filmed in 35mm and consists of a series of “photographic planes,” as Marguliês explains, of Antoine Caron’s painting *The Massacre Under the Triumvirate* (1566). Marguliês analyzes *Os tiranos* in a short and explanatory text published in the fifth issue of the journal *Habitat*. The text opens with a reproduction of Caron’s painting in black and white. However, the painting is “marked” by a series of superimposed frames of different sizes (some of them numbered) and a series of intersecting diagonal lines (some of them dashed, perspectival lines) that link (in an order provided by occasional arrows) pairs of rectangles or establish a relation with a “master frame” that takes up the entire painting. Upon closer inspection, one notes that

¹⁴ Pietro M. Bardi, “Didactic Exhibitions: Report by P. M. Bardi, Director, to the International Congress of Museums (ICOM) held at Mexico City, in November 1947.” MASP Archives. 1.

¹⁵ Ten people took part in the shooting of *Os tiranos*: the director, cameramen, composer and seven students. The only existing copy of the short film is held at *Cinemateca Brasileira*. It has not been digitized.

the rectangles-frames, though of different sizes, are proportioned according to the aspect ratio of the 35 mm frame (3:2). According to Marguliês, the incorporation of dynamism into the static painting allowed for new emotions to emerge in front of nearly imperceptible details. Some of the photographic planes in which Caron's painting is broken down are illustrated in *Habitat* and accompanied by a brief caption. Bo Bardi's engagement with cinema is well-documented.¹⁶ There, Bo Bardi's ethnoanthropological project intersected with cinema, and the museum was finally set in motion.

Art history and cinematic explorations bring us back to the notion of the image and its politics. In the museum, paintings approximate the act of picture-making (recall Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas*) and non-human forms of sentient life. Sentient life is fundamentally composed of all sort of images. Despite their unique ontological status, images reside within sentient life — in our human bodies and beyond. As Emanuele Coccia argues, "there is a bond between life and images."¹⁷ Visual semiosis unfolds in time: it brings to us (and into us) that which is no longer available. It reveals connections and delineates continuities between things and beings that once seemed utterly irreconcilable. Recall Warburg: in the museographic display of the MASP, architecture's temporality is engulfed by a confabulation of images — anachronic and heterochronic planes superimposed, opening up the territory of the other and, crucially, to non-linguistic communication.

Subjected to the inconsistencies of visual time and the eerie animate agency with which paintings are endowed — in the subject's radical impossibility of objectifying "a" gaze — the "modern-body" is destabilized. The "colonialized" body is thus re-imagined alongside multiple bodies (an assemblage of animal and human-animal others). The result is enthralling: a body-multiple, hospitable, intensely constellated, and the beholder of a *communal stage of the gaze*. In the paradoxical gesture of standing upright — culturally anchored, the body-human is made into an explorer and, more provocatively, a predator. Unveiling its "animal reserve," the body in the predatory field rehearses some of the fundamental tropes of Brazilian "modernization" (e.g., anthropophagy) and the *metaphysiques cannibales* proposed by anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro.¹⁸

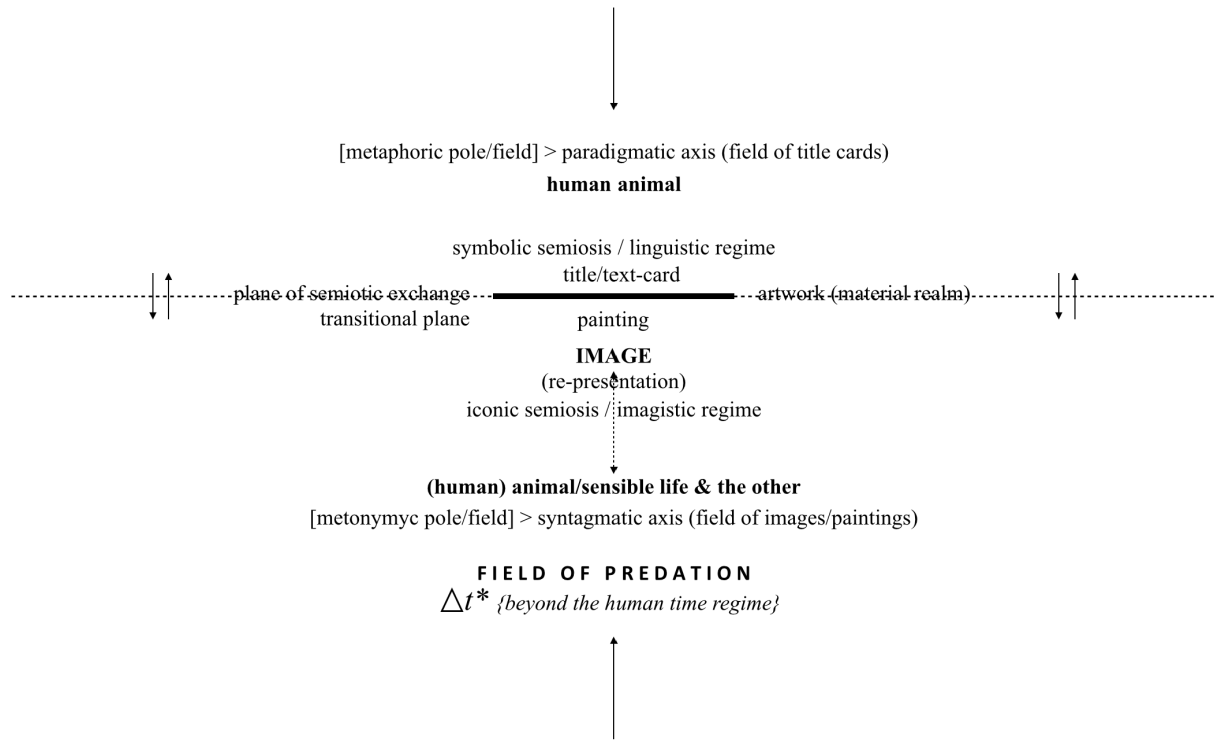
What can we learn from the museum without a text, the museum made of harrowing connections in lieu of evolutionary schemata? The ubiquitous presence of images has significantly altered the world of the real and challenged one of the dominant dichotomies of Western metaphysics, that of the real and the representational. Time, the prey we want to capture, is elusive, deceitful, evasive; yet it is this very elusiveness that makes it such an attractive prey. There are no vantage points, no towers of observation. Just time.

¹⁶ Indeed, Caron's painting belongs to the Bardi collection in the *Casa de Vidro*, further attesting to the close liaisons between the couple and the work of the *Seminário*. Consider, also, Bo Bardi's engagement with Cinema Novo (New Cinema), especially through the work of Glauber Rocha.

¹⁷ Emanuele Coccia, *Sensible Life: A Micro-ontology of the Image*, trans. Scott Alan Stuart (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016).

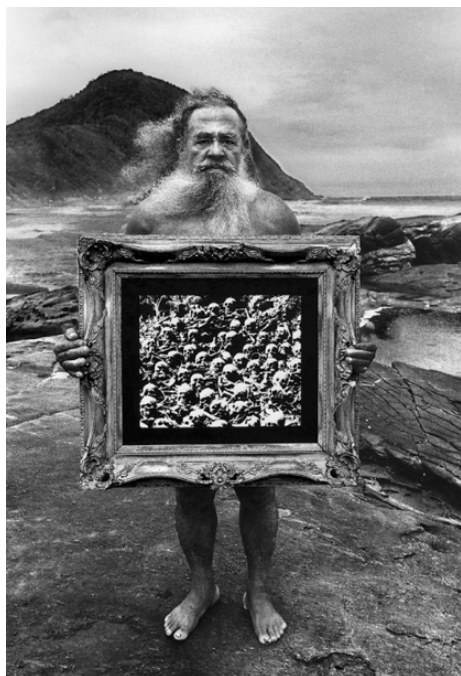
¹⁸ Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics: For a Post-structural Anthropology*, trans. Peter Skafish (Minneapolis: Univocal Publishing, 2014).

The following diagram (in-progress) is an attempt to conceptualize the spatial doubleness resulting from the museography of the MASP and the time regime it entails. The “paradoxical” nature of time is expressed by the “chiasm” introduced by the “plane of exchange/transformation.”



VISUAL APPENDIX

This paper will be primarily illustrated with archival materials and primary sources collected by the author during his doctoral and postdoctoral research in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro (2017-2022).



Manoel Alcântara, Photograph by Araquém Alcântara, 1981.

Source: *Araquém Alcântara*, Fernando Ullmann, ed. (São Paulo: IPSIS Gráfica e Editora, 2012).

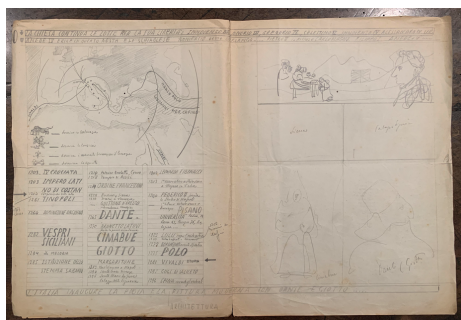
The Lady and Modigliani's Renée, c. 1970. Anonymous photograph.

Source: *Museu de Arte de São Paulo* (MASP) Archives. Reprinted in Anna Carboncini and Luis Sadaki Hossaka (ed.) *Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand* (São Paulo: MASP, 1978).



Lina Bo Bardi, *Museu de Arte de São Paulo*. Main gallery. Photo: Paolo Gasparini, c. 1969.
Source: *Museu de Arte de São Paulo* (MASP) Archives.

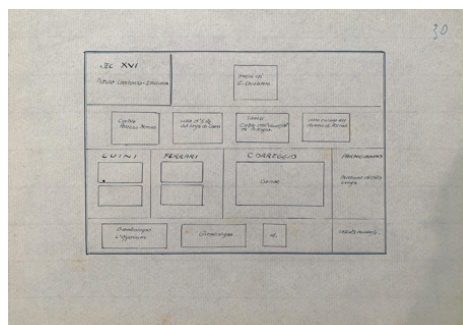
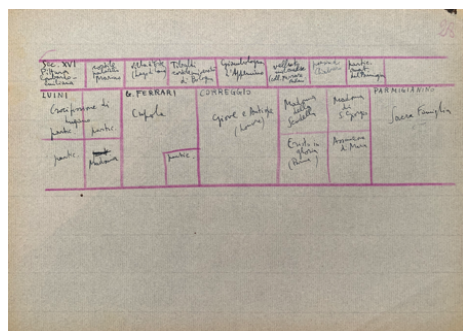
Aby Warburg, *Atlas Mnemosyne* (1924-29), fragment. Source: Georges Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image: Phantoms of Time and Time of Phantoms: Aby Warburg's History of Art*, Harvey Mendelsohn, trans. (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017)



Pietro M. Bardi, Lina Bo Bardi, Gregory Warchavchik and wife looking at preliminary versions of the panels for the Exposição Didática. In the back, Flávio Motta and Lasar Segall. MASP, 1947.
Source: MASP Archives.

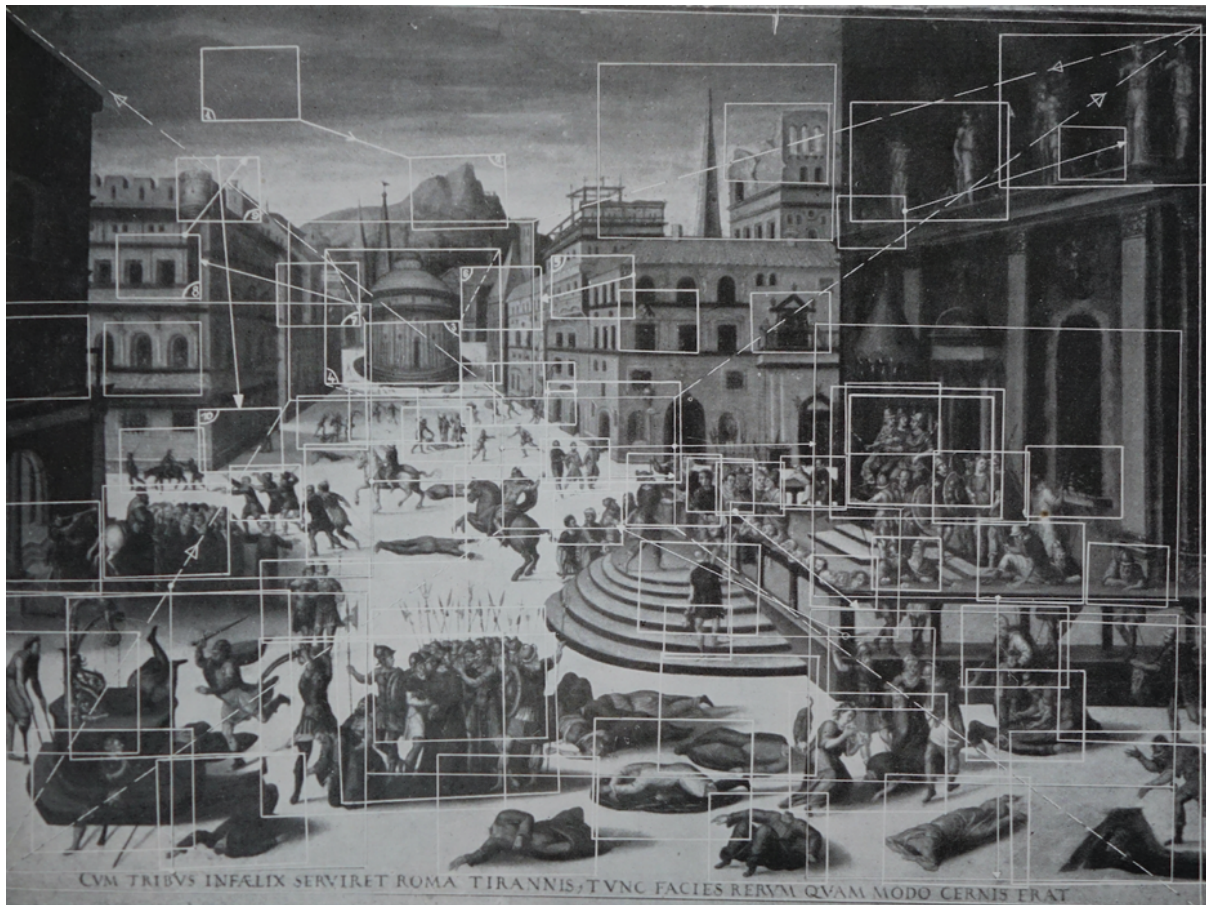
Pietro M. Bardi and member of his team discussing the organization of the panels, MASP, c. 1947.
Source: MASP Archives.

Preliminary historical study for the Didactic Exhibitions, c. 1947. MASP Archives. The spread shows a map of Europe and a tripartite list containing an artistic and politic chronology of the XIII century, focusing on the events that took place in Italy. To the right a series of sketches suggest a potential misse-en-page with reproductions of Cimabue and Giotto. At the bottom of the page an inscription in capital letters reads: '*L'Italia inaugura la poesia e la [architettura] pittura moderna con Dante e Giotto*' (Italy inaugurates modern poetry, architecture and painting with Dante and Giotto).'
Source: MASP Archives.



A comparison between the second and third stages of the studies for the Didactic Exhibition. A “section” of the strip shows panel no. 28 (later no. 30); the second drawing presents panel no. 30 as an individual board. Note that the basic arrangement (Luini-Ferrari-Correggio-Parmigianino) is maintained in both versions.
Source: MASP Archives.

Visitors at the Didactic Exhibition, MASP, 1947. Photographer unknown.
Source: MASP Archives.



Antoine Caron, *The Massacre Under the Triumvirate*, ca. 1566. Superimposed frames for *Os tiranos*. Marcos Marguliês and Plínio García Sánchez, *Os tiranos* (35mm, 7min, 1954).

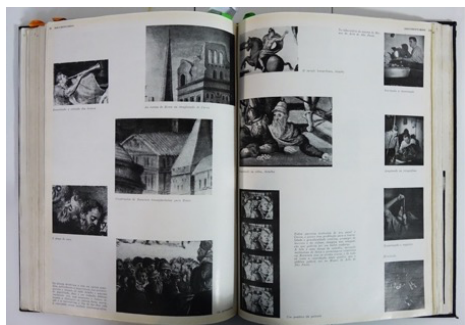
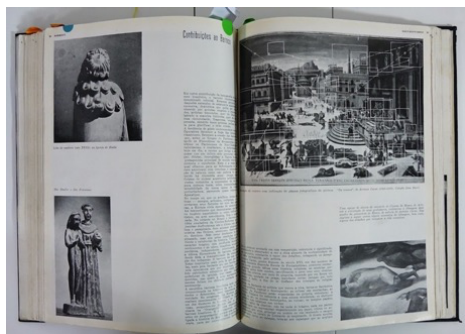
Source: Marcos Marguliês, "Os tiranos," in *Habitat 5* (São Paulo, 1951).

Antoine Caron (1521-1599), *The Massacre Under the Triumvirate*, c. 1566. *Casa de Vidro*, São Paulo. Photograph by the author. Note that the frame has been removed.



“Art lessons for more than 20.000 people!” Flavio Motta conducts the weekly program ‘Video de Arte,’ produced for TV Tupi, São Paulo, 1952.

Source: *Cinemateca Brasileira* Archives, São Paulo.



Marcos Margulies, “Os tiranos.” *Habitat*, No. 5 (1951), São Paulo.

MASP, Lina Bo Bardi. A series of visual traits in the museology of the MASP: parallax, anamorphosis and “*dompte regard*.” Photograph by the author, 2018.

Appendix 1: A diagram

Appendix 2: Time Toolbox (a dictionary)

Appendix 3: Propositions for a beyond-the-human time regime

ARCHIVAL SOURCES

Museu de Arte de São Paulo (MASP) Archives, São Paulo

Instituto Bardi, Casa de Vidro, São Paulo

Cinemateca Brasileira, São Paulo

Martín Cobas, Arch., MDesS, MA, Ph.D.

Professor of Architectural History and Design

Chair, Department of the History of Architecture

Research Advisor, Department of Architecture and Urban Design

FADU-UdelaR

Montevideo, Uruguay

martincobas@gmail.com