Interview with Giuliana Bruno

Esther Império Hamburger[1]
Cecília Mello[2]

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[1] Editora da Revista Significação, Professora Titular do Departamento de Cinema, Radio e TV da ECA-USP. E-mail: ehamb@usp.br

[2] Editora da Revista Significação, Professora Associada do Departamento de Cinema, Radio e TV da ECA-USP.

Introduction

Giuliana Bruno is Emmet Blakeney Gleason Professor of Visual and Environmental Studies at Harvard University, situated in the Carpenter Center for Visual Arts. Born in Naples, Italy, she earned her PhD from New York University's pioneering Film Studies Program under Annette Michelson. For over three decades, her critical thinking has been characterized by sophistication, rigor and originality, placing her among the leading world academics exploring intersections between visual arts, art history, architecture, film, and visual culture studies.

Bruno's interdisciplinary approach has fostered connections between these fields, enriching our understanding of visual culture. Her work anticipated the field of "media archaeology", uncovering and analyzing historical layers and traces embedded in visual artifacts for deeper contextual insights. She has also contributed significantly to spatial theory, particularly in relation to the intersection of architecture, art, and film, exploring how spaces and places shape our experiences and perceptions.

Bruno has published seven award-winning books and over one hundred essays. These include *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map: Cultural Theory and the City Films of Elvira Notari* (Princeton, 1993), winner of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies' Katherine Singer Kovács Book Award and Italy's Premio Filmcritica-Umberto Barbaro; *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture and Film* (Verso, 2002), a seminal work that has provided new directions for visual studies, understanding the sensorial and material dimensions of cinema in its intersection with architecture, and which won the Kraszna-Krausz Moving Image Book Award, a prize awarded to 'the world's best book on the moving image'; *Public Intimacy: Architecture and the Visual Arts* (MIT, 2007); and *Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media* (Chicago, 2014), widely praised for its new materialist approach to contemporary art. Her latest book, *Atmospheres of Projection: Environmentality in Art and Screen Media* (Chicago, 2022), considers the interrelations between projection, atmosphere, and environment, binding art to the ecology of ambiance.

In anticipation of her visit to São Paulo in December 2023, *Significação: Revista de Cultura Audiovisual* conducted a two-hour online interview with Bruno, focusing on *Atmospheres of Projection* and her other groundbreaking contributions. Bruno is an invited speaker at the interdisciplinary workshop organized by FAPESP (São Paulo's Research Foundation) in December 2023. Before that, she will give a Masterclass at the University of São Paulo, an event promoted by LAICA and *Significação: Revista de Cultura Audiovisual*, with the support of FAPESP, IEA-USP

Hamburger

We would like to start by asking you about your new book, *Atmospheres of Projection: Environmentality in Art and Screen Media*. **In it, you put forward a notion that envisages not only the perception of ambiance, but also the possibility of transforming it. Can you tell us a bit about the transformative potential of projection?**

Bruno

The book is a cultural history about the realms of projection, atmosphere, and environment, and it connects these three fields together, both historically and in contemporary art. It began from my thinking about the screen as a projective membrane that connects the inside and the outside, transforming their boundaries. I developed the idea that the projective screen is an environmental medium, foregrounding how the stream of projection, by way of its environment — light passing through air — creates the possibility of enveloping spectators within a space while changing the space itself.

Projection emerged as a technological device to transform matter into light, as well as transforming light and air into an ambiance in which spectators are incorporated. It was invented as a *dispositif* around the time when psychoanalysis also developed the notion of projection as a way to define the boundaries of the self. Moreover, projection is a concept in architecture, where it refers to a mode of representation and transformation of space. So, I asked myself, is this a coincidence? Is there a relation between these three meanings of projection?

Of course, film projection had been long associated with psychoanalysis, but mostly in Lacanian terms, in the apparatus theory of the 1970s and 1980s. I wanted to shift the meaning of projection more towards its architectural, environmental side, because that is where the transformation of an ambiance by way of light and shadow occurs. Cinematic projection also carries this possibility, as well as that of transforming the relation between interior and exterior space.

In order for projection to be understood as such a transformative and relational technical medium, it had to be reshaped in a philosophical sense, even in psychoanalysis. When Freud discussed projection, it signified a "throwing forth": a psychic mechanism that allows a person to not only expel but also "project" a feeling from the interior onto the exterior. But, as Melanie Klein showed, projection is also related to introjection. This means that such a mechanism for the transmission of affects is relational: it affirms the possibility of projecting from the outwards inwards, from objects to subjects, from the environment to a mental space, and vice versa.

It is important to emphasize this relational and environmental side. Not only can we project ourselves into a physical environment or atmosphere of projection in technical media, but we can also absorb sensations from the space itself, sensing the vibrant materiality of nonhuman entities. Iridescent technical media themselves project such an atmosphere and can transmit it to us. This also means that projection should no longer be understood as only an optical or perspectival device, as it had been conceived in association with the gaze in Lacanian terms, but as fundamentally a haptic, relational, and environmental medium.

Mello

Environmentality **is another central concept in** *Atmospheres of Projection*. **I wonder if you could provide us with an overview of what environmentality means and how it manifests itself in art and screen media.**

Bruno

Let me start with the idea of transformation, since it is related to environmentality. In order to shift the notion of projection **from purely** optical **to** haptic, **and to connect** it to ambiance and environmentality, it was also important to dig into another meaning of projection, one much more related to material space.

Although the association of projection with psychoanalysis and even with architecture might be known, it was not at all well-known that the concept actually originated in sixteenth century alchemy. Here, the term *projection* meant the transfer of substances into other forms, the transformation of materials, minerals, and environmental matters. So, to me, rediscovering this alchemical function was essential because it is truly transformative. The alchemical concept of projection is clearly rooted in the transformation of matter and space. This really suggested

to me the environmentality of projection. An alchemy of transformation can also occur when one relates to the environment and becomes open to the kind of projective ambiance it creates.

My notion of environmentality is also invested in bringing back to light a pre-Socratic philosophy that understood the power of air, light, water, earth, and fire. I find that elemental philosophy also relates to the idea of projection in architecture, to the creation of an actual space. Both foreground "elements" of material space and the function of light in transforming it. In architecture, projection is not only optical; it's also volumetric. And it is environmental even in a virtual sense. This is because, as a representational technique, architectural projection makes possible the transformation of a three-dimensional space into a two-dimensional site, and vice versa. And that's exactly what happens in the projection of technical media. By way of light passing through air, cine-projection transforms a three-dimensional environment into a two-dimensional space.

And this environnmentality is even more evident today, when cinema has moved from the movie theatre to the art gallery, in which projection *is* and *creates* an environment. When moving-image installations are projected in a gallery, you encounter screens that architecturally and volumetrically create a space. You are physically enveloped in an aesthetic situation, in which you no longer just look at a screen but are able to actually move through the space of projection, not only physically but also virtually and mentally.

I call this *environ-mentality*. I like the idea that there is *mentality* in an environment. An environment is not simply a physical but also a mental space, a psychic architecture, a psychogeography. The creation of an atmosphere of projection also depends on this transfer that happens not only physically but also, emotionally, and socially between the material space of an environment and the subjects that are enveloped in it. This is an "environ-mentality" because a creative process can engage a shift in mentality — a transformation in knowledge and experience, both cultural and artistic, of aesthetic atmospheres.

Hamburger

When we think about projection, we think about light coming from behind to project something on a screen (or surface). In electronic or digital media, light comes from within the screen. Can we talk about projection in relation to video/digital devices?

Bruno

That is an important question I also asked myself. Historically, in projection, there's a stream of light from the projector that is not only perceivable, but also creates a physical ambiance of luminous particles and waves that become present in the space itself. And then most of the time, in video or digital media, projection happens from within the screen. Of course, there is a difference, but it is still a projection of electrical light, something that creates a kind of electricity in the air. And that's the reason why, despite the actual technical differences, I moved fluidly between one and the other.

For me, projection is related to the historical and cultural moment in which light was electrified and created an electrifying or, I should say, a *mesmerizing* environment. This was the time of mesmerism, a period of insistence on the attraction of elements, of research on electromagnetism, of the discovery of currents of energy: that is, of the revelation of energy transmission between entities, inanimate as well as animate. This includes technical objects, which in themselves are vibrant matters. Technical projection activates — actually animates — a space by the transmission of electrical currents. And these are transmitted in different ways, sometimes even from the screens themselves.

There is also something else that makes me move fluidly between one type of projection and another. In *Atmospheres of Projection*, I called attention to contemporary artists who are inspired by earlier forms of analog projection, but who also reinvent them in contemporary electronic or digital media. So, there isn't, in my mind, a necessary major split, because many interesting artists today are returning to the kind of environmental, panoramic sense of fluid projection that characterized older forms of projections in space. Others are using projection, very often LED projection, to actually expose the cables of electricity concealed in translucent screens, so that you understand that, despite the pretense of invisibility, there is still a kind of electrification involved. The cloud itself needs a lot of electricity. So, we should really continue to think about how these forms of electrical currents are still present and how they are sent out and transmitted today.

Philippe Parreno is a good example of a contemporary artist who uses projection from behind the screen but simultaneously makes you very much aware of the electromagnetic field it creates, from which filmic projection came from. Elementally speaking, film is just a projection of electrical light, and it could not even have existed without electromagnetism and electricity. Edison, after all, invented both electricity and the cinema. So, film is rooted in the environment's electrical

currents, which were discovered by Alessandro Volta. The electromagnetic force is truly environmental because it is one of the fundamental forces of nature. And from electromagnetism, we can move back to the psychic currents of Franz Mesmer, who believed that a mental and physical projection of currents between beings could actually transform people and psychic space. And we should not forget that this mesmeric thinking became the force behind hypnosis, and that hypnosis is what led to psychoanalysis. So, as I show in the book, there is this relation of cultural energies that leads to projective environments: a connection between alchemy, electromagnetism, mesmerism, and psychic transfers.
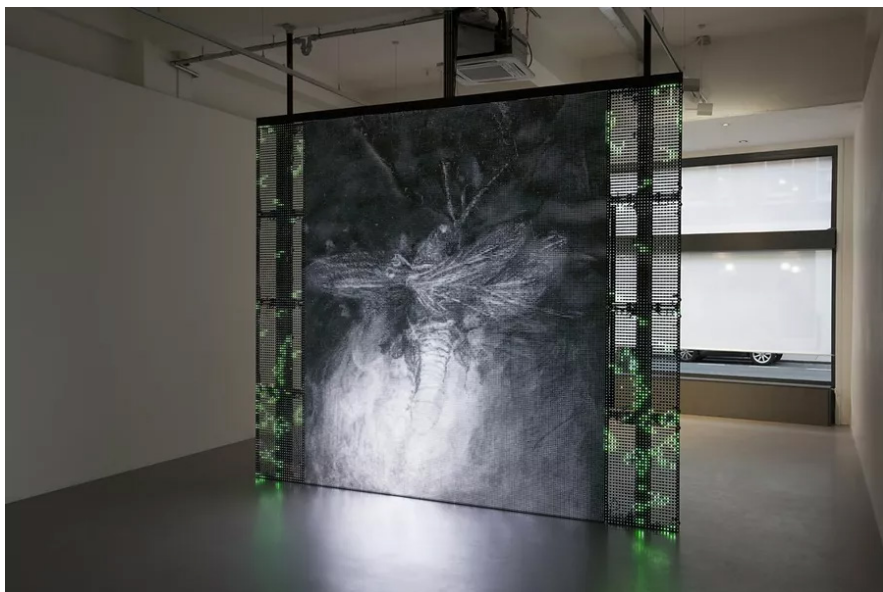
Philippe Parreno, *With a Rhythmic Instinction to be Able to Travel Beyond Existing Forces of Life, 2014*. Installation view, Pilar Corrias Gallery, 2014.

Hamburger

So, you think that both the electronic and the digital revolutions have electricity as their basis, with no great split in how projection is experienced?

Bruno

I think that it ultimately depends on how the atmosphere of projection is designed. I am interested in contemporary artists who use projection to understand, and even deconstruct, not only how the projector projects, but also what the light

coming from the screen itself does in terms of projecting outward. For example, Anthony McCall and Rosa Barba are contemporary artists who reimagine historical forms of projection by working on the stream of light coming from the projective device. And, instead of projecting it on a flat geometrical screen, they're making it volumetrically part of an environment.

Rosa Barba "exhibits" this stream of light and incorporates it into a new media technology that allows the projector to act on its own and produce light and sound that diffuse in an environment. In her installations, projectors become real kinetic sound sculptures. Sometimes, a sound frequency, coming from musical instruments being played, reaches the projective mechanism and electronically activates it. So, this is a mechanical projection and a digital one at the same time.

Anthony McCall also employs digital technology to refashion the atmosphere of projection. He creates phantasmagoric environments by projecting particles and waves of light that become sculptural entities. Light turns into volume. The ethereal becomes a three-dimensional environment to such an extent that spectators sometimes don't even cross the stream of light, as if it were a physical barrier as opposed to just waves or particles of light.

Rosa Barba, *Western Round Table*, 2007. Installation view, Eye Filmmuseum, Amsterdam, 2016. Two 16mm projectors with film loops, optical sound, 2 min. Photo: Studio Hans Wilschut.
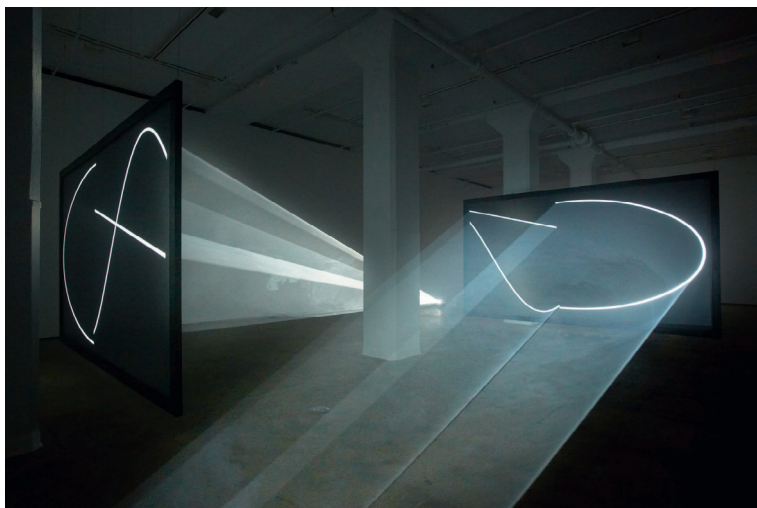
Anthony McCall, *Face to Face*, 2013. Installation view, Sean Kelly Gallery, New York, 2013. Photo: Jason Wyche.

Hamburger

We were also thinking of the role of sound in this. How is it incorporated into projection?

Bruno

      In *Atmospheres of Projection*, I approached the question of sound theoretically in relation to atmosphere. Sound is incorporated into this philosophical shift about ambiance — the sensation of energy pulsing in space — which is not a visual but a sentient haptic experience. I think that sound is very much a part of this sensory experience of atmospheres. In the book, aside from specific discussions of sound, I rethink the concept of atmosphere itself as a rhythm. In a sense, I speak of atmosphere as a soundscape. This is not just adding sound to the understanding of space, but rather recognizing the *resounding* effects of energy transfers in ambiance. It means being sensitive to the sensation of tempo, the cadence of rhythm, the vibrations and reverberation of an atmosphere. For instance, you walk into a space, and from the slightest noise, or lack thereof, you sense whether this is a joyful space or a depressing environment.

      So, observing these sensations, I asked myself, how can I describe this form of perception? How can I define the sound of an ambiance? I went back to *Stimmung*, a notion of atmosphere that circulated in German aesthetics from the mid-eighteenth

to the late nineteenth century. This term is often simply translated as "atmosphere," but, in fact, it's a term that originally referred to the musical tuning of instruments. From *Stimmung*, a concept developed that came to encompass ideas of resonance and reverberation. In this sense, I advocate for a kind of "tuning up" to the rhythms of an atmosphere in haptic, ambient ways, to ways of being in silence or noise.

And this idea of attunement is important because it's deeply connected to environmentality: you can indeed tune into a space and not just to a person. And you establish a relation through being observant, attentive, and receptive to that environment. This attunement to ambiance involves a particular sensitivity, a transitive form of spatial mediation. Such projections in atmospheres do not just make in-between spaces, but *intermediate* spaces, spaces of intermediality, sites of inter-relationality. These are spaces in which the borders between the environment and the self, or the self and others, can be trespassed, or *should* be trespassed. Openness and attunement to an environment engage a form of receptivity that I think is particularly important today, as we tend to make borders rather than cross boundaries. Borders are walls; boundaries are membranes. If we recognize projection and atmosphere as such, as environmental mediums of transmission between inside and outside — spaces of transfer between the environment, technical objects, and spectators — we can pursue forms of attunement and relationality that can, in turn, transform the environment in which we live.

So, in speaking of atmospheres as projective forms of relational interaction, I also intended to dispel the negative connotation that postmodernism associated with projection when everything was wrong with this concept, for it had been misunderstood to be the transference of anything unpleasant in ourselves onto another person. To avoid being subjected to such projection, one had little choice but to put up a defensive wall and keep apart from others and otherness. With this book, I have argued for and demonstrated the opposite. Projection is actually not just this kind of negative expulsion, but rather affirms the possibility of taking in, of observing, of being receptive and…

Hamburger

And creative!

Bruno

Yes, extraordinarily creative! To think of projection creatively and to use projection as a creative artistic medium also means approaching territories of otherness

not to appropriate them, but to instead attune yourself to an understanding of diversity, and engage it in dialogue. To me, that's the sense in which notions of projection, atmosphere, and interrelationality are important to affirm in today's culture.

Ultimately, then, if I insist on what I call "atmospheric thinking" and "projective imagination," it is because these relational modalities can create forms of interaction that are opposed to the enclosed nature of human individuality and self-sufficiency. To speak of environmental fluidity is instead to attend to a materially relational mode of living amongst clusters of beings, whether organic or inorganic. If atmosphere is at the center of my inquiry, then, it is because I embrace its inclusiveness and interstitial quality, its airy resistance to divisibility and lack of singularity.

To take this position was to make a politically important statement in *Atmospheres of Projection*. To say that thinking atmospherically is to think relationally is politically important because it can enable the ground to shift from under certain divisive earthly matters. An awareness of atmospheric mixture of beings can even work at dissipating the secure boundaries between the different bodies and nonhuman species that dwell in the atmosphere.

Mello

Actually, speaking of that, you mention briefly in your book the work of Karen Barad and their notion of "intra-action," which, unlike "interaction," recognizes the agency of both human and non-human beings. Yet you do not engage with the idea of diffraction, which Barad borrows from Haraway as a metaphor for agential intra-activity. Is this something you hope to explore further in the future?

Bruno

I've been following my own train of thought about interrelations ever since I started thinking about it with *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture and Film* over 20 years ago, and then I encountered Barad's "agential realism" more recently along the way. I found elective affinities with their ideas and also with Jane Bennett's idea of "vibrant matter." They are different yet related modes of thinking, and in some way close to the inquiry on the agency of relationality I've been engaged with for quite some time.

In *Atlas of Emotion*, developed some aspects of what is now called "affect theory," speaking about the relation of emotion to motion and defining the terms of an "e-motion." Emotion is a "moving out," and this moving out is also about migration, which involves an interaction with otherness that is transformative.

This is not about pre-established bodies that come together but about a dynamism involving forces of change. And I spoke of such transformative affects as transmitted by technical media or objects that have their own life. There was an engagement with vitalist philosophies that started in that book, which recognized entanglements of materialities. And then I encountered the work of Karen Barad as I was entering my long process of conceiving a cultural history keen on reinventing projection from alchemy and theorizing environmentality. This process has ended up further recognizing the existence of a vital, relational, and projective materiality, and, in conceiving atmospheres as the mutual constitution of different agencies, has, in its own way, emphasized an "intra-active" agency in non-humans.

This latter aspect has been very important to highlight in *Atmospheres of Projection* because, in psychic terms, projection has generally been related only to humans. But it is not just humans that project meaning and feelings. So, I actually insisted on environmentality to underscore that agency is not the property of humans or individuals but a dynamic force in material space as well as in technical objects. In this sense, I also shifted from notions of empathy, which are too often understood as merely a forms of interactions between humans or, rather, restricted to human notions of sympathy. In the philosophy of sympathy, there's a "syn" pathos, meaning a feeling "with," an attunement to feeling together with the animate world, rather than a projection going from the human to the object. Sympathy is also the force of attraction that animates things themselves and moves them to intermingle. And this, for me, is a transformative process of interrelationality.

We never think in isolation: there's a zeitgeist, something "in the air." There are constellations of thinking surrounding us that maybe come from different fields, or that take a different route or have a different outcome, but this is a space where you can find affinities and attunements with other thinkers. That's what happened for me with Barad and Bennett, for example, and I like these kinds of sympathetic encounters. Moreover, I don't think that encountering a theory means you need to apply it. Thinking theoretically is not about applying theory. And "thinking with" theories also push me to write in a way that's different from the demonstrative critical strand typical of Anglo-American academia. I practice a form of sympathetic thinking that is also an attunement to a poetics of writing.

Mello

In your previous book Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media, *you engage with the "material turn" in visual studies and do so with a focus on*

surfaces, material spaces, artifacts, objects, technologies, and bodies. More recently, you argued for the materiality of atmospheres and projections. Was that something you ever put into question, in the sense that projections are actually light waves, rather than material? How do you negotiate between this emphasis that you had on the material in Surface *and your argument for a materiality of atmospheres and projections in the new book?*

Bruno

Surface is a book that deeply engages with the argument that materiality is important in the so-called virtual world, where it assumes different "superficial" forms. The book makes a forceful argument to move from image to surface matters. It treats the texture of the skin and the tissues of clothing, the tones of the canvas and the fabric of screens, as well as the fiber of sites. By connecting these surfaces together, I began to think about materiality as present not only in objecthood, but also as evolving in material space. I engaged screen space since the fabric of the screen is itself a material that reflects and projects light. So, in Surface, I understood the screen texturally, challenging the idea that it is simply a flat, invisible, imperceptible place onto which images are projected. Rather, I focused on the screen itself as a presence, treating it as a material surface that not only absorbs light and projects outwards but is a kind of skin, or rather a membrane. Such a luminous membrane enables access to the space of imaging.

So, thinking of light, a shift happened for me from the material turn to the environmental turn, which is realized more in *Atmospheres of Projection*. Here I further articulate the idea, started in Surface, that this material object, the screen, originated in architecture and the built environment, where it had an atmospheric function. Its origin is not necessarily simply locked in Plato's cave. The screen actually developed as an environmental medium, even etymologically. As it emerged in early Renaissance, the term *screen* designated a sheet of translucent material that could be paper or fabric and that was stretched on a wooden frame. This framed object was positioned on windows or in interior spaces to filter light, or it divided zones of habitation, as seen today in Japanese architecture. It was this luminous, atmospheric quality of the screen that was later transferred to a projective surface. By the nineteenth century, the screen came to define a new type of translucent membrane: a light-reflecting fabric for the transmission of luminous images.

So, there is a real environmentality in the origin of the screen as an architectural object that creates ambient space through waves of light, through

projections of luminosity. So, finally, yes, the process that transforms sites through this filtering of light is the twilight of materiality and immateriality. And in relation to your other question about light coming from the back or the front of the screen, which we just talked about, I wondered whether this kind of ambiguity had always been there in screening. The act of screening is an act of filtering, right?

Hamburger

Can you talk about the metaphor of the portal in relation to this?

Bruno

I am more attracted to the threshold, because the portal sometimes signifies entering into another space. I'm more interested in transitions, in possibilities, in inception, in the brink of passage. That's why I also like the idea of filtering. And that's why I stress that the act of screening is a form of filtering that allows the outside in, and the inside outside, which is exactly what a window screen was originally doing on a window. This kind of threshold — a transitive environment — is where the term *screen* actually came from genealogically. As I pointed out, the screen was not born as a technical medium but it was born environmentally as an atmospheric architectural object that screened light and air.

Hamburger

In the Muslim world, the screen in the window was used to filter the light…

Bruno

…the light that allowed women, who couldn't go out, to look out. In fact, in *Atmospheres of Projection*, I talk about this kind of filtering of light in relation to the artist Cristina Iglesias, who takes the Moorish window screen, which combined Arab and Spanish gridded structures, and reimagines it as a kind of screening agent that's both sculptural and projective. She translates the latticed structure of the Arabic *mashrabiy'ya* into the Spanish *celosia*, which also means jealousy. So, her screen, whose atmospheric filtering functioned to create a "curtained space," a sense of intimacy, especially for women, even involves an affective meaning.

Speaking about the screen in different cultures, it is also interesting to note that the English term *screen*, which has a Germanic root, corresponds today to the French expression *écran* or the Italian *schermo*. How do you say it in Portuguese?

Hamburger

Tela.

Bruno

Oh, *tela*, it's a fabric. Even better! The Portuguese term contains the notion of fabric, of canvas, which is a curtain, too. I mean, the curtain *is* a screen. So, the term *tela* is perfect, as it speaks to the function of the curtain, which is also an object that filters light. In *Surface*, I also theorized the screen as a kind of *tela*, as a fabric that has a haptic, material fabrication. For me, the screen "projects" this hapticity — a sense of touch and contact. It has much less to do with an optical geometry or dominant, perspectival codes of visuality, and it has much more to do with fabrics and fabrications, textures and textiles, curtains and pleats, and even a cultural coding of femininity, if you'd like. After all, as a domestic object, the screen participated in the negotiation of privacy and publicness, and thus in the structuring of gendered space.

Cristina Iglesias, *Alabaster Room*, 1993. Installation view, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, Spain, 2013. Photo: Attilio Marazano.

So, to further respond to your prompt, asking me to articulate the materiality of atmospheres and projections, I can stress the relation between environmentality and a specific materiality: the fabrication of material space. In *Surface*, I note that this material turn signaled a shift from representation and figuration to surface materiality. And it's important to talk about surfaces, for they are not at all superficial!

Think of the surface of the face, a membrane that projects our affects out, or the clothes that project our gender or social identity, or the *tela*, that is, both the texture of canvases and the fabric of screens. So, in *Surface*, materiality is this form of ambient transmission: the possibility of different kinds of surfaces interacting ambiently and creating a projective environment.

And this is what led me to atmospheric and ambient environmentality, to this vaguer field of interactions, and to the more aerial, ethereal, even immaterial concept of atmosphere, which was difficult to define. But I didn't mind it: I like atmosphere *because* it is vague. The root of *atmosphere* is in fact composed of two elements: ατμός [*atmós*], meaning "vapor," and σφαίρα [*sphaíra*], or "sphere." This is a sphere of vapor. So, it's something intangible and yet very tangible. Most people have the experience of feeling an ambiance, but defining it in a book was not easy because it is both incorporeal and very real, like so many things in life.

As I articulated this realm of ambiance — this cloudy space — I was obviously thinking of the atmosphere of projection, which is itself both luminous and shady, as well as both virtual and material. So, finally, I think that the virtual has a materiality and that the material contains a form of virtuality. Virtual also means potential. It refers to imagining and imagination, right? And, as we were discussing, the "projective imagination," which is a mental, virtual space, is forged materially. I would say that it is even *architected* in the design of the screen.

Mello

Thinking about the screen as a piece of interior design, it occurred to me that, in China, the screen was often used to create dissymmetry rather than connection. It would, for instance, be used to separate men and women, the emperor from the servants, and so on. It was seen as something that divides, shields, and hides, something that blocks rather than a porous, elastic, or permeable surface, a potential that you bring up in your book and which is so important.

Bruno

You're totally right. This idea of the screen as something that "screens out" — that partitions, conceals, obscures, and obstructs — is pervasive in many cultures. But this is precisely why I tried to rescue the screen of projection from such a divisive negativity. I wanted to move the media genealogy of the screen away from this blockage, from seeing this cultural object only as a shield. Yes, you can certainly talk about the screen as being born with Athena's shield, which does not simply

block out or shield but is even a military technique. But you can also look for a different kind of genealogy, for there were others. You can unearth a different one and root the act of screening in a more haptic, environmental, and relational ecology, emphasizing the act of filtering, the agency of transitioning, the functions of thresholds and membranes. In this sense, you can even think of screen fabric as a skin, what in French is called *pellicule*, a word that also means film strip.

Mello

Your work is mainly concerned with Western cultural materiality and history, but you have written about Tsai Ming-liang in Public Intimacy: Architecture and the Visual Arts*, and you dedicate a whole section of* Surface *to* Wong Kar-wai, *who is also present in* Atmospheres of Projection*. Could you tell us a bit about why these two Asian filmmakers were important to you?*

Bruno

I was attracted to Tsai Ming-liang because of his sense of environmentality. He positions the camera in an observational way that allows the environment to speak for itself. When you view his films, you are not a voyeur: you are a distant participant. He creates the possibility of not peering into someone's life, as some conventional Western filmmakers often do. Voyeurism had been such a cornerstone of thought about projection in film theory, but the work of Tsai Ming-liang allowed me to get out of this trap and talk about how you can observe a space and people without feeling like an intruder. But, in the space of his films, you also do not feel entirely like a participant, as if you were totally immersed in it; rather, you're absorbing the space from a distance created by a boundary you can visibly sense.

Furthermore, Tsai Ming-liang practices a "slow cinema," and duration allows for the possibility of slowly perceiving what's unfolding in an environment. In *Public Intimacy*, I was attracted to non-Western traditions that understand the importance of slowness. This was before the term *slow cinema* was coined. But duration could be conceived as *longue durée*, adapting the notion of long-term formations by the French historian Fernand Braudel, who wrote about the Mediterranean environment, incorporating climatology, geology, and oceanology. Slowness does indeed contribute to the creation of *environmentality*. This is in fact not just about *space*; it's also about *time*. And that's what Tsai shows, producing forms of contemplation that project an interiority, contemplative forms that are connected to Buddhist culture and forms of meditation. As I engaged in this Eastern perspective, it gave me access

to ways of thinking about interior space. In a different way, Chantal Akerman's own creations of ambiance and atmosphere, also allow for the possibility of letting you be in that space, of being there in distant intimacy.

I also relate to Tsai Ming-liang because of his interest in the architecture and the design of movie theatres, which I think is an important influence on how we watch and respond to film. Writing about theatrical architectures, about how they "design" spaces of projection, is a project that I've carried from *Atlas of Emotion* to *Public Intimacy* all the way to *Atmospheres of Projection*. We talk about *the* film, but the film is just the text. How we watch it, and where we watch it, really changes the whole experience of what cinema is or can become. Tsai Ming-liang addresses this in a remarkable film, *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* (2003), about the decline of the movie theatre or, rather, about the closing of an old movie palace in Taipei. Interestingly, he focuses not on the film being seen, but rather on film architecture, on what happens in the "public intimacy" of the movie theatre. The film is a meditation on the public space of spectatorship, on the transmission of desire, on the different kinds of attraction between people, such as gay cruising, that all happen in a movie theatre.
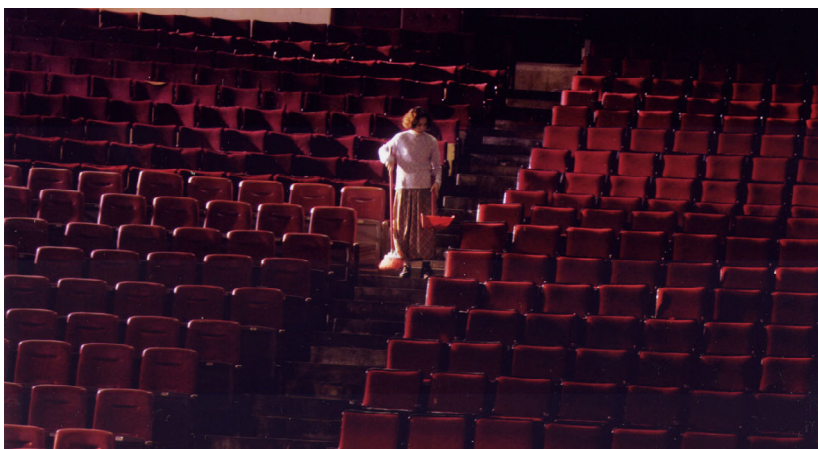
Goodbye, Dragon Inn (*Bu San*, Tsai Ming-liang, 2003).

As for Wong Kar-wai, I just fell in love with *In the Mood for Love*. What can I say? It is a fabulous film! I devoted significant space to this film in *Surface* because it resonated with how I was theorizing the materiality of screen surface as a *tela*, as a canvas, fabric, or curtain, in terms of something that folds, such as pleats. And, with pleats, there is no division between inside and outside, because the interior and the exterior are reversible. I was interested in this movement of time and surfaces,

and I articulated it through the philosophy of the fold put forth by Gilles Deleuze in *The Fold*, "a book that even addresses forms of drapery in the Baroque house.

    In the Mood of Love came to play a part in this theorization because it is a film in which fashion and fabrics are crucial. The only way you can tell the passage of time in the film is by the outfit changes of Su Li-zhen, played by Maggie Cheung, and by paying attention to the different *qipao* that she wears. But you never know if it is two minutes or a year, for the change of clothes creates a kind of folding of time that is not linear, but rather moves as folds of fabric. Here, fashion is also about the fashioning of space as well as time. There is an enveloping environment being created, as the floral patterns of her clothes are connected to the pattern of the curtains and even to the decoration of the lamp shade. When she looks out of window, the outdoor plants meet the natural *décor* of the wallpaper inside, further enveloping her attire in this pleated environment.

In the Mood for Love (*Huayang Nianhua*, Wong Kar-wai, 2000).

    So, everything is folded and enveloped together: architecture, fashion, and film. Even plant thinking! These are some of the main topics of my interdisciplinary investigation, which have expanded in my current approach to the ecology of the visual arts. With this film, in particular, I was able to theorize an atmosphere of aesthetic envelopment, which is very different from immersion. Envelopment is a more active modality, which allows for agency and the possibility of critical interaction.

    And it is from there that I moved to theorizing the notion of environmentality in *Atmospheres of Projection* as a kind of atmospheric envelopment and space of

becoming. Ambiance is not a static state, but rather a space that shifts and moves. Ambiance actually comes from the Latin verb *ambire*, which means "to go around." And this term does indeed go around, even moving across different meanings, because the idea of atmosphere emerged from, and was forged in, different disciplines. This penchant for transdisciplinarity also shaped the cultural cartography of *Atlas of Emotion*, its mapping of the relation between motion and emotion, its way of placing motion pictures in the mobility of modernity. So, finally, I think of environmentality as a "moving" interdisciplinary zone of interactions.

Hamburger

And speaking of that interdisciplinarity, as well as the way you use cartography as a method to traverse literature, photography, art history, urban studies, and film history, how does feminism enter into this? Is the cartographic method a way of expanding feminist approaches?

Bruno

Feminism is in my bones. I came of age with the feminist movement, which was crucial to my personal, cultural, and political development. It is so much part of the way I think and look at the world that it is literally ingrained in my body.

I co-edited my first two books on feminist issues when still a graduate student. I had just been awarded a Fulbright Fellowship to go to New York to study film because, at the time, in Italy, there were no PhDs in film studies. I was also interested in contemporary art history, and Italy was all about the ancient world. Moving to New York, I came to realize that there were two different strands of feminism. On one hand, there was Anglo-American feminism, which theorized that the gaze was male and that the female was relegated to a "to-be-looked-at-ness," and this position was led by Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." On the other hand, there were the Italian feminists who were asking a different question: "Where are we as women if there is no female desire?" It was not about voyeurism or fetishism, but more about, "where is our pleasure and place in the world?" and "why are we interested in film if all that classical cinema offers us is objectification?"

I've always had an interest in thresholds and migrations, in connecting and in relationality rather than divisiveness. So, I thought these two worlds have to talk to each other. And so, I co-organized a conference in New York with Maria Nadotti, and just about everybody who was a feminist film theorist at the time came. I don't even know how it happened, with such little money. We staged this dialogue,

and then we edited two books from there. In 1991, with *Immagini allo schermo: La spettatrice e il cinema* [*Screening Images: Cinema and Female Spectatorship*], we introduced Anglo-American feminist film theory to Italy. In 1988, with *Off Screen: Women and Film in Italy*, we introduced Italian feminist thinking to Anglo-American scholars. The aim of the exchange was to break a divide and change perspectives. Laura Mulvey herself made a change, not only with "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,'" but also by supporting the publication of *Off Screen* and writing a preface for it.

I was also involved in Italian feminist magazines in Italy and began writing in *Camera Obscura* in the US. And then the first book I authored, *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map*: *Cultural Theory and the City Films of Elvira Notari*, clearly mapped a feminist cultural history and theory. So, as you suggest in your question, yes, my engagement with interdisciplinary mapping has indeed been accompanied by a rethinking of feminist theory and historiography, beginning in 1993 with this book, before *Atlas of Emotion*. The book is about silent cinema and women filmmakers that were silenced. It is devoted to Elvira Notari, a woman filmmaker from Italy, actually from Naples (which is the city where I come from). Between 1906 and 1930, Notari made sixty feature films, over one hundred documentaries, and hundreds of shorts commissioned by Italian-American immigrants in North and South America, including Brazil. She was silenced by the fascist regime and the coming of sound, and she had to cease production. But her production was huge! And she was not only the director but also the screenwriter of all the films, as well as the head of her own production and distribution company, Dora Film, named after her daughter.

Unfortunately, of these sixty feature films, only three remained. I wanted to tell her story, and I could have done what was common at that time, which would be to write a textual analysis of the three remaining films or a monograph on Elvira Notari. But I decided to shift the authorial and textual course of feminist thinking and to write instead about and around the loss, the margins, and the lacunae. I choose not to resurrect this filmmaker in a biography, but to do what archeologists and preservationists do, which is make clear the voids and also make clear what is the tissue of those voids.

So, in excavating into "marginal" history, I did what today is called media studies or even media archeology. I set in motion a method of feminist interdisciplinary inquiry across different media formats, promoting an intertextual, material history of the film medium. I searched for the detailed film programs, which were printed booklets that summarized and illustrated her narratives, and searched as

well for other materials that told her stories, such as the literature that inspired her, which was mostly popular women's literature. And I also weaved together a relation between her visual style and the history of realist photography and the representation of urban environments, as well as the iconography of Italian art history. Many of Notari's stories were shot on location in popular neighborhoods and revolved around poor women who resembled the martyrs and saints who were so popular not only in popular culture, but also in Italian art.

I also asked myself, where were these films shown? Environment and architecture have always been important for me, and I discovered that, in Naples, places of urban transit like the arcade and the train station were two important sites of films exhibition. This started making me think that motion pictures were deeply related to the movement of modernity, and I wrote not just about the modernity of this medium, but how at that time, with cinema, it was possible for women to participate in this modernity. Doing research on Elvira Notari, in fact, I also rediscovered a number of other Italian women filmmakers working in silent cinema. So finally, this kind of feminist historiography became a way to bridge the divide, at the time very strong, between film history and film theory. While engaging with cultural and media history, this book is in fact exceedingly theoretical in the way that it forges a trajectory of fluid interdisciplinarity between cinema, literature, photography, architecture, urban studies, and even the history of the body in medical science.

Hamburger

The split with history has to do with structuralism, too, right?

Bruno

Yes, structuralism did have that effect. But this was the time of post-structuralism, and I was inspired by Michel Foucault's "archaeology of knowledge," by his *savoirs mineurs*, meaning suppressed knowledges or marginalized cultures. And this is an important approach to pursue, and now the marginal is undergoing a contemporary reinterpretation. Young feminist scholars recently approached me saying they wanted to publish a book about feminist historiography today, and they acknowledged that *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map* had led the way to this idea that feminist scholarship must deal with the incomplete, the void, and the unfinished. They asked me if I could write a postscript for the book, and that allowed me to actually reflect back on its trajectory and what it can generate today. Alix Beeston and Stefan Solomon have now edited and published *Incomplete: The Feminist Possibilities*

of the Unfinished Film, an interesting book made up mostly of writings from the new generation of feminist scholars. I don't know what generation of feminists we're in now, and I don't like being a grandmother [laughter]. But going back to my first authored book gave me a chance to link it to what has now become media and cultural archeology while rethinking feminism in relation to both material and urban culture.

I should add that *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map* was also very personal because I was writing about Naples, my hometown, which I had left to move to New York, and it was the first book that I wrote in English.

Mello

We were actually discussing this, this sort of twice-removed perspective: writing about Naples and Elvira Notari, in English and in the US.

Bruno

I needed the distance. It's a bit like Chantal Akerman or Tsai Ming-liang — I needed the distance to be able to be close, to write with distant intimacy. I was too close when I was in Naples. I was in a Baroque city, and the last thing I wanted to do was to write about it while surrounded by its excessive urban corporeality. At that time, I was dreaming of traveling the world, and I was enamored with the aesthetic space of minimalism and the lines of artistic abstraction. Leaving Naples actually gave me a chance to write as I did. The book, as it is conceived, could only come out of a move that was also a separation. It is a reflection on a severed space; it is about the gap and the void, which is also the pain of dislocation, a wound. And it was this wound — of being separated from a language, a culture, a family — that moved me to theorize the undone as I migrated by myself into a world that I knew little about. I'd never been to the States, and I spoke English less than I spoke French.

Now, at a close remove, I can also see how my city of origin shaped some of my method. My way of envisaging a transdisciplinary panorama while also delving into the viscerality and the materiality of environments comes from my city. It stems from the sweeping views of Naples' panoramas, the *vedute* of the Bay of Naples, as well as from the belly of Naples, from the visceral inside. Naples and New York are also on the same geographical parallel, and so I think about what this means. These are two port cities, activated by the movement of the sea and the energies of migration. Naples is volcanic; New York is in, its own way, telluric. Maybe that's why I feel very much at home in this oceanic metropolis, a place that is not in my "home country."

These thoughts resurfaced, when, in 2017, almost thirty years after writing *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map*, I had a chance to rethink my method in a curatorial way. I was asked by Naples' most important art museum, Museo di Capodimonte, which has a collection of 48,000 artworks, if I would curate a show using any object or piece of art in their collection. A challenging idea, but also an amazing opportunity! In *Atlas of Emotion* and in *Surface*, I had reflected on cabinets of curiosities and museum culture. I also feel that what I do with my books is "curate" a careful, relational interweaving of images and text. In a sense, my books are exhibitions. And so, I said yes, but only if I could access the museum's vast storage rooms. I wanted to explore a different art history, to unearth a hidden genealogy, an unseen museology, just as I had excavated the media archeology in *Atlas of Emotion* or in *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map.* This way, I might also be able to make an exhibition connecting the methods developed in all my books.

The exhibition was called *Carta Bianca: Capodimonte Imaginaire*, and it was on view for a year. I ended up choosing Baroque "still lifes," which are also called *nature morte*. But they are very lively: there is nothing still in them! They speak of the "taste" of the city, rendering the organic vitality of the environment of this Baroque city of stone and water. And as I searched through the storage rooms, I also found paintings of natural scenes and landscapes so ruined that the museum didn't know what to do with them. But they were fascinating! They were painted in the seventeenth century but looked as if a contemporary artist had made them, working on the *tela*, on the surface materiality of the canvas. And so, I exhibited them, reconstructing the way in which these ruined canvases are assembled together in a montage in the museum's archive, on a grid that moves on tracks. I also created an exhibition design that enhanced screen surface and movement. I used white curtains that functioned as screens, revealing different views of the artworks as spectators walked around them, moving through the exhibition space. It was very cinematic, this montage of surfaces in motion. So, it was like *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map* meets the cartography of *Atlas of Emotion* and the environment of *Surface*, anticipating the ambiance of *Atmospheres of Projection* …

Hamburger

And media archeology, an expanding field that in some ways you prefigured. And so, in what sense does your emphasis on archeology, atmospheres, ambiences, and the environment involve an engagement with contemporary ecological approaches to the Anthropocene?

Bruno

Oh, that's crucial. My interest in ecosystems started thirty years ago with cartography, geology, and archeology, disciplines that in many ways are concerned with mapping an environment. *Atmospheres of Projection* is totally steeped in ecological thinking. My current theorization of atmosphere and the articulation of ambiance as a form of *ambire*, or a "going around," involves navigating the emerging fields of environmental philosophy and the environmental humanities, traversing different ecological approaches to define my own view of environmentality. And this current environmental approach is related to my earlier cartographic method, which was not an ordering of space, but a fluid traversal of sites. Now, turning to natural environments, I want to move the understanding of the natural world away from human-centric cartographies towards a different kind of environmentality, which even includes a different form of "plant-thinking."

I began to do this in *Atlas of Emotion* with picturesque gardens. That's where my interest in how a natural environment is cultivated begins, because it is walking in this garden that modernity's mobilized movement through space commences. The picturesque garden is made for movement. Its pictures are not static; the views unfold in motion. You can only experience this landscape, atmospherically sense it, by a sequential movement. So, this ambient perambulation — the atmospheric idea of *ambire* — begins with *Atlas of Emotion*, with this shift from the gaze to a mobilized space, which is experienced in receptive observation.

This sequence of vistas created through moving in a natural environment also makes me think of the medium of film and made me want to locate its origin, its media archeology, in this ecology. And so that's when I started to think about film as an environmental medium. Along these lines, I also wrote about how film is like a panoramic wallpaper. These wallpapers depicted natural scenes and were environments from the outside brought indoors. So, the panoramic wallpaper also paved the way to what cinema does, bringing the outdoors in. Furthermore, with this opening to panoramic culture, domesticity could no longer be strictly seen as enclosure. The garden and the panoramic wallpaper could offer the possibility to shift gears with respect to cultivating a relation to the natural world. After all, we should also recall that dioramas were the creation of the natural history museums. So, it is from this very complex modern "ecology" that cinema evolved as a projective environment.

Drawing on this environmental history, in *Atmospheres of Projection* I have engaged even more complicated relations of ecosystems while defining atmosphere

and atmospheric thinking, as well as what ambiance means in terms of the cultural and aesthetic ecology of environmentality. I am indeed engaged in contemporary ecological approaches, but there is a difference between what I propose in this book, or in my essay "In The Air: Atmospheric Thinking," and what is being proposed in other current forms of ecological thinking. Contemporary ecocriticism, for example, tends to be about the negative impact or disasters that humans have caused in the Anthropocene, for which, of course, we are responsible. It's evident that the world is being destroyed and that the climate is a real problem. But I also think that it is important to recognize the potentiality of what we can do if we can at least mentally shift gears from constantly dividing, denigrating, and projecting negativity towards affirming receptivity, attunement, interrelationality, attentive observation, and openness. This kind of exchange can give us, if not a sense of hope, at least not a complete sense of doom.

And that's why I insist on this idea of *environmentality* as a shift in not only in physicality, but also in mentality. Furthermore, in hyphenating *environ-mentality*, I mean to suggest that we need an imaginative process in order to produce a different mentality, that is, a different kind of knowledge. The climate crisis is also a crisis of the imagination. Ecological thinking can shift gears in terms of creating a different discourse that resists divisiveness between the human and the nonhuman, that does not simply eliminate the subjectivity of the human by glorifying the nonhuman. Rather, by recognizing differences, we can also produce knowledge that allows for thresholds, for membranes of connection, for the possibility of interrelationality. I believe that, in this kind of interactive process, a transformation can occur.

This, to my mind, is a positive political point to make. It is a personal line that I've chosen from the beginning, ever since I talked about affects and not only negative emotions or trauma. I think that speaking of interrelational ambiances as transformative sites allows, at least in theory, for the possibility of understanding boundaries without making borders out of them.

Mello

In an interview published in BOMB *magazine in 2014, you stated that you were interested in the death of cinema because when things are dying, they become fascinating. So, I wonder, how do you see cinema, or the death of cinema, today?*

Bruno

I've always been interested in art and art history, and I observe with great interest the revival of film history in the museum and of cinematic forms populating

the contemporary art gallery. There is a sense of aesthetic mixture and vibrant transformation in this phenomenon. I always saw film as this incredibly live place in which so many ideas, as well as media, were converging: a new medium where you had narrative, visuals, music, sound, theatre, architecture. I love this medium! And I never thought cinema was dying, but by the time it turned 100 years old, everybody proclaimed it dead. But, you know, cinema has been dead from the very beginning if you believe André Bazin and his "mummy complex." Zombies and mummies, they're interesting. [laughter] Cinema is dead while it's alive. You record a moment in time; it's gone in real life but becomes permanent in film. Film has this kind of death quality inscribed in it.

Mello

"Death twenty-four times a second", as Laura Mulvey put it.

Bruno

Yes, that's right. But I am more interested in obsolescence than death, I mean, in obsolete, historic forms of pre-cinema coming back to life in new atmospheres of projection. Today, that history has not disappeared; it is not dead. Contemporary artists are reinventing forms of pre-cinematic projections, including panoramas or dioramas, or they are refashioning old screen formats and outdated projective apparatuses to create different forms and even architectures of spectatorship in the art gallery. With *Atmospheres of Projection*, then, I have moved much more into thinking about multiscreen installations in the gallery or the museum. But I'm also interested in the flow of relations between film and art. My interest in Chantal Akerman, who's obviously a wonderful filmmaker, is also because, in the mid-1990s, she was one of the first to engage in the expanded field of film-based installation art.

And now I'm working on a book project with Isaac Julien about his work. Isaac began as a young British filmmaker, and he shifted into making moving image installations. We are doing an art book together on an important art instalation that he made in Brazil in 2019, *Lina Bo Bardi – A Marvellous Entanglement*. The book will be about his impressive nine-screen installation, which is a "marvellous" exploration of the work of the great Italo-Brazilian Modernist architect. I love Bo Bardi's architecture, inventive exhibition design, and writings, and I see a lot of connections with Isaac's work, so I am writing on their "entanglement" with each other, as well as my own thinking on relationality. As I have been long interested in Lina Bo Bardi and have been writing on Isaac Julien since the late '90s, I feel that I myself am entangled

with their extraordinary work. Hence, this may be turning into a meditation on the nature of such aesthetic and intellectual interactions.

Speaking of these interactions, and especially about the flow of relations between art and film, I want to make clear that this is not just a relocation of cinema in the museum. There's something else going on here. The medium of film, as it moves, transforms itself. But the history of film is not to be considered dead; rather, it becomes a potential trove of possibilities of new creations, which were left open because not all the potentialities of history are actualized. And not all the potentialities of projection were actualized in the cinema. When film projection became restricted to a rigid format, in which spectators were sitting theatrically in a chair and looking at a framed geometric screen at a distance, this was just one moment in history. There were others, and there are other ways to envisage architectonics, the environment of projection. And today, with screen-based installations, projection has truly become an environment. And that's why I continue to theorize phenomena of environmentalization in the arts.

Isaac Julien, *Lina Bo Bardi – A Marvellous Entanglement*, 2019.
Nine-screen installation view, Victoria Miro Gallery, London, 2019.

Hamburger

How do you relate your work as a writer, critic, and curator to your work as professor of a graduate program called Visual and Environmental Studies?

Bruno

It's all one thing! I was happy to get this position at Harvard over three decades ago when I was right out of graduate school because the department had this fabulous title: Visual and Environmental Studies. I thought it was perfect! More traditional scholars, however, warned me against it. They skeptically remarked, "you're the only film theorist there, what are you going to do?" But I saw it as an opportunity. This was an offspring of the Bauhaus. The architect Walter Gropius had come to Harvard when he fled the Nazis and became Dean of the Graduate School of Design. And then, in 1963, they built the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, the only building by Le Corbusier in North America, to continue the artistic mission of the Bauhaus. There was photography, design, architecture, painting, sculpture, and film, all together in this one building. So, I thought, this site is just perfect for me. This is a physical architecture for the mental, intellectual architecture I want to create, reinventing the connection between all the arts.

This did not mean nostalgically going back to history, but sourcing the Bauhaus ideas of inter-arts, interdisciplinarity, and intermateriality for a new scope. My aim was to shift the direction of film studies away from its insularity, and position it instead in the larger context of visual cultural histories and environmental studies. So, initiate this alchemy, and see what it would produce! I wrote the first proposal for this program thirty years ago, but institutionally it was not at all immediately accepted or easily implemented, meaning that this idea was ahead of its time. This was also before "intermedia arts" would be made more viable by current technology. Even the title *Visual and Environmental Studies* seemed quite confusing to people for a while.

But, eventually, we managed to create a unique, transdisciplinary Ph.D. program that didn't exist and managed to make a movement of it. I'm extremely proud of it because I believe that this positioning of film in the material space of the environment and architecture, as well as in dialogue with all the arts, is forward-looking. I think that cinema benefits extraordinarily from this interaction with all these other media and ways of thinking about visual space. After all, today, screens are ubiquitous in the environment, and the practice of media arts is so central to contemporary art. These various forms of environmentalization ask us to continue to reimagine the very ecology of projective environments. I find this interactive thinking about media ecologies, including the specific engagement with environmental arts, very creative. Moreover, now, the portability of technology and the experience of being brought up with different media can produce another kind of creative interaction, one between theory and practice, which is also interesting to explore.

I always thought that they should not be separated. Theory is extremely creative. Writing is a form of curating, and making things in the world involves conceptual thinking, or it's interesting when it does. I believe that this the way of the future.

Hamburger and Mello

Wonderful, thank you!

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