Re-designing the Sensory Order

Forms, Practices, and Perception

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1. INTRODUCTION

In 1963, the Italo-Brazilian designer and architect Lina Bo Bardi introduced her exhibition "Nordeste," the inaugural show at the Museu de Arte Popular (MAP) in Salvador da Bahia, with the following words:

> This exhibition is an accusation. An accusation of a world that does not want to renounce its human condition in spite of forgetfulness and indifference. It is not a humble accusation, and counterpoints a desperate effort of culture to the degrading conditions imposed by men. (Bo Bardi, 1995, p. 5)

Contrary to what one might expect after such an explicitly political announcement, there were no photographs, texts, or other documentary material on view that gave any literal depiction of the social misery of the region. The exhibition consisted solely of ordinary, everyday objects that Bo Bardi had arranged into a modernist display. But how can an exhibition be an "accusation" if it shows us nothing but things?

Starting from this example, I hope to address the following more general questions: What constitutes the social impact of design and to what extent is the political linked to questions of form? What becomes perceivable through the re-arrangement of existing things that would otherwise have remained invisible? And why is it important to think about design when it comes to social inequality under postcolonial conditions?

To answer these questions, I want to spell out the fundamental relationship between the order of the social and the sensory order of forms in the first part of my paper. For this, I turn to practice theory, following mainly Michel Foucault and Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

My guiding thesis is that the subject acquires not only an implicit practical knowledge but also an implicit *perceptual* knowledge through her repeated bodily interaction with the socio-material surroundings. This bodily interaction—and this is my second thesis—is mediated by the intermingling sensorial and formal

qualities or "interface" of the socio-material world, which is to say, its outlines, colors, surfaces, smells, noises, rhythms, constellations, and so on.

As art historians and design theorists have shown in the past, these different formal qualities don't dissolve into an amorphous sensory tangle but assemble into something like a historically and culturally specific pattern or "topology of forms." This topology of forms correlates and interacts with the other elements of the respective governmental dispositive, i.e. with the regularities of discourse, the power relations as well as the technologies of the self. Consequently, forms can't be considered to be neutral; they are always part of social practices and therefore imply cultural valuations, hierarchies, and exclusions.

Against this theoretical framework, I will analyze the general entanglement of power, form, and sensory order more thoroughly using the example of Lina Bo Bardi's "design from below." It will turn out that any design that claims to be critical can't do without an aesthetic. With the term "aesthetic" I neither take up Jacques Rancière's definition of the "aesthetic" as the historically and culturally specific "regime" of Western modern art (Rancière, 2004), nor do I follow Pierre Bourdieu in his assertion that the aesthetic experience is simply a bourgeois invention that aims at social distinction (Bourdieu, 1984).

In my point of view, the aesthetic should be thought of both *more generally* and *more specifically*: it should be thought of as a thoroughly relational practice that explicitly positions itself in dialogue with the prevailing sensory order—and not just in whichever way. As we could say with Adorno, the aesthetic reflects the existing sensory order precisely in the medium in which the sensory order normally reproduces itself—which is to say, in the medium of form. Or to put it another way, what distinguishes aesthetic practices from other modes of critique or reflection is precisely its ability to challenge the sensory order of a dispositive by a re-constellation of its formal elements.

Such an aesthetic intervention is not a privilege of the arts, in the way it has been defined in the West since the Enlightenment. Aesthetic questioning, deconstruction or reordering can take place in all areas of design—including in everyday practices.

2. PRACTICES AND PERCEPTION

One of the central insights of sociological practice theory is that social order is produced neither by anonymous structures nor by a subjective understanding of meaning. Rather, it is reproduced by bodily practices that are conducted mostly unconsciously (Knorr-Cetina, Savigny, & Schatzki, 2001; Reckwitz, 2002; Schäfer, 2016). These bodily practices are guided by a collectively shared, implicit bodily or practical knowledge that the subject performs through repeated and regular interaction with the surrounding social and material environment. However, this is not a uniform

conditioning. The implicit practical knowledge is rather to be seen as a type of flexibly applied program or "generative principle" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 170) that guides the current enactment of practice but doesn't fully determine it. Thus, in the performance of a practice, there can always occur random changes, mishaps, or incoherencies that require spontaneous improvisation or adaptation (Butler, 1990, 1995; Schäfer, 2013).

As for the question of the sensory order of the social and its potential aesthetic provocation by design, we need to clarify to what extent the faculty of perception must also be counted as practical knowledge[1] and what role the socio-material topology of forms plays in this.

First, it must be noted that the social agency of artifacts does not consist only in their material resistance, as actor-network theory and other materiality-centered approaches tend to claim but also in their formal aesthetic qualities: be it the strict rectangular shape of a school desk, the playful typography on a poster, the technical humming of a washing machine, the tactility of textiles, or the spatial constellations of a landscape. All these formal components are part of social practices and its reproduction. Yet how do these forms relate to the perceptual modes incorporated by the actor?

Pierre Bourdieu, one of the thinkers who has strongly influenced practice theory, has astonishingly little to say about this. Though he does speak steadily of "schemes of perception, thought, and action" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 54) as he describes the functioning of the habitus, he gives no further elaboration of the concept of perception. In *Distinction*, he even tends towards a sociologistical stance, by claiming that the disinterested pleasure of the "pure gaze" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 3) has nothing (or not primarily) to do with the characteristics of the artwork itself but with the incorporated cultural capital of the viewer, who has learned to distance herself from the necessities of everyday life.[2] Thus, in Bourdieu's view, the concrete practical interaction with the sensory order of the socio-material world does not play a central role in the development of one's perceptual faculties—it's rather the upbringing which shapes the disposition of taste. But also Bourdieu's sociological counterpart, Bruno Latour, is of little help here. Although Latour has laid emphasis on the social agency of things as no other sociologist has, his strict rejection of the subject-object dichotomy doesn't allow him to develop either a concept of the body or a concept of perception. Apart

1 For a broader overview of theoretical approaches dealing with the interrelation of sensuality and the social, see also (Prinz & Göbel, 2015).

2 In doing so, he not only falls short of his own claim to want to combine the "external" analysis of the social conditions of art production and reception with an "internal" analysis of the work of art (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 233). As Juliane Rebentisch emphasized, he also overlooks the fact that in the 1960s both art production and the theoretical definition of aesthetic autonomy were no longer based on the ideal of an aestheticism detached from the everyday world (Rebentisch, 2013, p. 167 ff.)

from the term "affordance" (Akrich & Latour, 1992, p. 259), which he adopted from psychologist James J. Gibson (1979, pp. 127–137)[3], the formal and aesthetic dimension of material culture remain quite underdetermined in ANT.[4]

In order to sketch out the interrelation between the "sensory order" of the socio-material forms and the modes of perceptual practices, I therefore take a different theoretical path, namely a re-reading of Michel Foucault's concept of dispositive through the lens of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*.

At first glance, this approach seems to be quite similar to Jacques Rancière's notion of the "distribution of the sensible," which can be interpreted as a further development of Foucault's theory of power (Rancière, 2004). But besides the general claim, that power relations always correlate with certain sensory orders, Rancière doesn't systematically spell out how this connection comes into being, let alone which role design and form processes play in it. Strangely enough, he also defines the aforementioned "distanced contemplation," which Pierre Bourdieu condemned as a bourgeois strategy of social distinction, as a political practice.[5]

In order to gain a more precise theoretical toolbox for analyzing the governmental "sensory order" of a time, I propose to expand Foucault's analysis of discursive formations to the topology of socio-material forms.

In his archaeology writings, Foucault famously distances himself from the classical philosophical assumption that the subject possesses an innate cognitive faculty. Instead, he locates the conditions of possibility of speech and thought in the empirical orders of the external "objective" world: In his view, the empirical formations of statements are what underlie thought, and not the other way round (Foucault, 1972). The cognitive faculty is thus dependent on a subject's empirical conditions of existence and, as a result, is historically and culturally specific.

This basic theoretical figure of inverting the conditional relation between the subject of knowledge and the outer world can also be transferred to the faculty of perception: The perceptible is thus not based on the a priori "forms of intuition" and the innate "power of imagination" (Kant), but also—and analogous to the think-

3 Before Latour took it up, the term "affordance" was already used by design theory (Norman, 1988).

4 Nonetheless, the Actor-Network Theory was taken up by some art sociologists to point out the sensory "interactivity" between artist, artwork, and viewer. Strangely enough, the aspect of form, which was of decisive importance for the art-historical debate at least in the 19th and early 20th centuries, was not taken up in this context, either.

5 To be fair, one has to admit that Rancière's argument is more precise: For him, contemplation becomes political when the worker, who isn't normally part of the world of art and aesthetics, lays down his hammer and begins to contemplate the beautiful view from the window. In this regard, contemplation is only political in relation to the social position of the agent and the situational context of practice (Rancière, 2009, p. 71).

able—on an empirical order: namely, the synesthetic "topology of forms."[6] However, in order to clarify the process of incorporation of outer forms into the perceiving body and the development of an implicit perceptual knowledge, Foucault's archaeological model has to be extended.

At this point, it's worth taking a closer look at the *Phenomenology of Perception* by his teacher Merleau-Ponty, from whom Foucault—in a gesture of a philosophical patricide—had sharply distanced himself. In contrast, however, it quickly becomes clear that Merleau-Ponty's writings contain some insights that Foucault and other practice theorists have partially taken up (Crossley, 1994, 2004; Prinz, 2017).

Following from Martin Heidegger's concept of Dasein, Merleau-Ponty already assumes a broadly decentralized subject model, according to which the formation of subjectivity cannot be conceived independently of its particular worldly context. For Merleau-Ponty, the active body plays a central role here, as the body is "towards the world" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. XV) even before the subject has developed the capacity to think and act. More than that, it is only through its active engagement with the practical requirements of its environment that the body acquires a functioning "bodily schema" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 273) which enables it to orient itself in the world. Consequently, perception holds a primary function, because without identifying individual entities, movement patterns, and contexts, conscious reflection and action are left with no points of reference.

But these units are not present from the outset; rather, proceeding from gestalt psychology, Merleau-Ponty assumes that the body must actively synthesize the polymorphic noise of its environment into individual, meaningful configurations. For Merleau-Ponty, to perceive *something* means being able to perceive forms as such.

This sort of synthesis is necessarily linked to a process of abstraction: Identifying a form as a self-contained, practical unit implies, at the same time, excluding certain sensory information or views that could frustrate this impression of a coherent form. Every perception thus always implies a non-perception. All seeing is, at the same time, blind.

But not all subjects perceive in an equal manner in every place and at any time. The ability to distinguish meaningful forms from their backgrounds depends rather on which stimulus patterns the perceiving body is accustomed to dealing with. In other words, to see the gestalt is contingent upon the synesthetic demands of the world. Or as Merleau-Ponty himself put it: "The sensible gives back to me what I lent to it, but this is only what I took from it in the first place" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 249).

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6 Foucault's early texts on painting, which were written parallel to his concept of discourse, are especially helpful in discerning the initial approaches to such a theory on the historical conditions of the visible. (Prinz, 2014)

Even though sociological questions basically play a subordinate role for Merleau-Ponty, he nevertheless seems to adopt a theoretical perspective entirely in keeping with my initial intuition to transfer Foucault's concept of discourse to the topology of forms. And indeed, throughout his writings there are considerations that open up his theory of perception to the question of social practices.

Thus, he makes repeated reference to Marx's concept of praxis, according to which work is to be understood as a concrete "sensuous human activity, practice" (Marx, 1964, p. 421) that creates the social conditions under which man lives. And in the *Phenomenology of Perception* he observes that the subject does not develop an individual facility for perception, but necessarily takes over a cultural "tradition of perception" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 279) on the basis of his social being "towards the world."

Merleau-Ponty himself names at least three "objective" media of the empirical world through which this tradition of perception is passed on: first, through the bodily movements, performances, and choreographies of the other subjects; second, through "spoken" or conventionalized language; and third—and this is of particular interest for the question of design—through the "silent" world of artifacts. With this in mind, Merleau-Ponty's *Marxism and Philosophy*, states:

> The spirit of a society is realized, transmitted, and perceived through the cultural objects which it bestows upon itself and in the midst of which it lives. It is there that the deposit of its practical categories is built up, and these categories in turn suggest a way of being and thinking to men. (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b, p. 131).

Not only does this mean that the things, technologies, and pictures a society uses can be regarded as a concrete manifestation of a historically specific being "towards the world", but also that they demand a certain perceptive attitude, bodily interaction and practical usage. The synesthetic "affordances" of the socio-material forms thus function as a medium for the reproduction of a collectively shared perceptual knowledge. Or to express it once again in a Foucauldian way, the "topology" of socio-material forms constitutes the historical conditions of the perceptible of a particular time.

Before turning to the example of Lina Bo Bardi, I would like to add some general thoughts on both the term "form" and the term "topology" and how they are used in this context.

3. TOPOLOGY OF FORMS

The concept of "form" and questions of formal aesthetics have a long history in philosophy and art history, but have rarely been discussed in sociology or cultural studies. The reason for this lies not only in the anti-aesthetical and anti-sensual bias of

sociology (Reckwitz, 2015) but also in the traditional understanding of form as being opposed to questions of materiality, content, and society.[7] The introduction of the concept of form into the practice-theoretical debate on perception, sensuality, and aesthetics thus also aims to break down these long-established dichotomies. The social order of practices, according to the thesis pursued here, is also reproduced and stabilized through the sensory order of socio-material forms.[8]

As already suggested above, this sensory order of forms can be described as a topology. Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of the discourse, the term "topology" here means an arrangement of formal elements that exhibit a certain regularity both in their distribution and in their relationship to each other. This regularity is not to be understood as a quasi-metaphysical structure underlying all perceptions and sensory practices. Following Foucault's definition of the cultural archive as a "general system of the formation and transformation of statements" (Foucault, 1972, p. 130), the topology of forms can rather be described as a dynamic "interpositivity" or constellation of heterogeneous elements that constantly (re-)assemble into historically specific patterns and formations on the surfaces of the empirical world.

In this context the term "form" does not simply mean the positively determinable shape of an individual picture, object, or body. Following Merleau-Ponty's late immanence ontological reflections (Merleau-Ponty, 1968) or Derrida's concept of "trace" (Derrida, 1976)[9], becoming form is rather understood here as a fundamental process of differentiation, organization, and ordering through which the socio-material world appears to be perceptually, practically, and intellectually accessible in the

7 The New Art History, which is very much influenced by Cultural Studies, has therefore largely ignored the concept of form, since pure formalist analyses were per se suspected of failing to take into account the necessarily social and political dimension of art. An important exception are the works of the Marxist art historian T.J. Clark (Clark, 1999).

8 This intuition is in some ways similar to Henri Focillon's vitalist approach to the *Life of Forms in Art* (1948) and its further development by George Kubler in *The Shape of Time*: "History of things is intended to reunite ideas and objects under the rubric of visual forms … From all these things a shape of time emerges. A visible portrait of the collective identity, whether tribe, class, or nation, comes into being." (1962, p. 9) Unlike Kubler, however, I do not assume anthropologically constant processes of becoming and passing away of form, nor would I draw conclusions from a topology of forms to a "collective identity." In literary studies, too, the concept of form has recently been reformulated in terms of a more comprehensive concept that also includes social arrangements (Levine, 2015).

9 Similar to Merleau-Ponty's late reflection on the self-differentiation of the "flesh of the world" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968), Derrida's concept of the "originary trace" assumes that appearance and meaning can only come into being by establishing a differential order: "It is not the question of a constituted difference here, but rather, before all determination of the content, of the *pure* movement which produces difference. *The (pure) trace is difference.* It does not depend on any sensible plentitude, audible or visible, phonic or graphic. It is, on the contrary, the condition of such a plenitude."(Derrida, 1976, p. 62)

first place.[10] Or to take up the expression of Jacques Rancière, the setting of differential forms is a basic operation of the "distribution of the sensible."

The assumption that forms must be understood as fundamental modes of differentiation leads to another basic insight, namely that socio-material forms can never be analyzed in isolation. Rather, the dynamic interplay, i.e. the rhythms (Lefebvre, 2004), superimpositions, analogies, transitions, limitations, and resonances between the various formal elements must always be taken into account. This formal network of relationships crosses the usual theoretical classifications[11]: On the one hand, it transcends the established dichotomizations of subject/object, body/technology, nature/culture, or analogue/digital. That is, it comprises such diverse phenomena as bodily surfaces, digital interfaces, spatial demarcations, soundscapes, plant structures, landscapes, technical rhythms, writing, social choreographies, movement figures, and so on.[12] On the other hand, the "topology of forms" is not limited by any social or cultural boundary—be it between social classes, milieus or fields or between epochs, nations, or "cultural areas". Even if the formal characteristics of historically specific practice complexes can be analytically distinguished, a "migration of form" (Buergel & Prinz, 2023) always takes place between spatially, temporally, and socio-culturally disparate dispositives.[13] In this sense, the form-finding in design not only gives shape to a single object or image but is necessarily part of a broader orchestration of entangled socio-material forms. Or as Keller Easterling put it in her recent book on design: "Forms orchestrate an interplay between forms" (Easterling, 2021, p. 38).

Thirdly, it can be assumed that materiality does not simply take a passive role vis-à-vis the "active" form, as it has been claimed following Aristotelian hylomorphism, but is involved both directly and indirectly in the process of form making.[14] In particular, the development and processing of new industrial materials such as cotton,

10 In this respect, there is also a conceptual overlap with George Spencer Brown's *Laws of Form* (1969), which have been adopted by systems theory. For an application of the systems theoretical concept of form to design, see the works of Sandra Groll 2021.

11 George Kubler also stated that the concept of form makes the distinction between art and non-art superfluous: "The term [visual form, S.P.] includes both artifacts and works of art, both replicas and unique examples, both tools and expressions—in short all materials worked by human hands under the guidance of connected ideas developed in temporal sequence" (Kubler, 1962, p. 9).

12 On the latter, see, for example, Hanna Göbel's forthcoming work on disability, the body, and forms of movement.

13 Global art history in particular has dealt with these transculturalization processes in recent decades.

14 Such a perspective on the activity of the material was especially developed by the Bergsonians Henri Focillion and Gilbert Simondon (Focillon, 1948; Simondon, 2017). The theorists of New Materialism also emphasize the inherent dynamics of non-human materiality but have not yet worked with the concept of form.

steel, or rubber has shown that inherent to materials is not only a certain potential for practical functionalization but also a spectrum of design (im)possibilities and sensory qualities that can introduce new differences and relations into the socio-material topology of forms. The reproduction of forms is thus not solely dependent on human practices, let alone a cultural "will-to-form" (Riegl), but also on the activity and logic of the materials brought into use.

Finally, with reference to Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory, it must be taken into account that the sourcing and processing of material is always embedded in larger socio-cultural, economic, and ecological networks, which in turn produce formal effects: Think, for example, of the massive extraction of raw material in the colonies and the power technologies associated with it, the emergence of the chemical industry, which invents new materials, each with its own design possibilities, the exponential expansion of global maritime trade and communication technologies, the rationalization and mechanization of production in the factories as well as the uniformity and sheer abundance of industrially produced goods—all these processes contributed to a literal transformation of modern lifeworlds.

In summary, all dispositives are characterized by a specific differential topology of socio-material forms. This topology does not exist independently but is always interwoven with the other orders of a governmental dispositive. Together they form the historically specific conditions of existence on the basis of which all socio-material practices, and that means also design practices, are carried out. And just as the discursive formation or the technologies of power are not fixed once and for all, the topology of forms is not to be understood as a rigid pattern. Rather, it depends on repeated practices and processes of form-giving, which always hold the potential to change—be it through decay and destruction, through mistakes and mishaps, or through deliberate de- and transformations. But all these changes and transformations do not take place in a vacuum, nor can they simply disregard the topology of the forms as their generative basis.

In this sense, one could say that the existing topology of forms does not fully determine either the modes of perception or the processes of forming but is rather to be understood as a field of formal possibilities that makes some perceptual experiences, formal compositions, and design practices more likely to occur than others.[15] Even more, the formal topologies of various dispositives can differ precisely in whether and to what extent they allow or even provoke certain processes of transformation (as in the case of the creative economy).[16]

15 According to Foucault, governmental power is exercised indirectly insofar as it merely structures the field of possible actions (Foucault, 1982).

16 In this sense, Annemarie Mol and John Law's differentiation of social topologies into regions, networks, and fluids could also be examined in terms of questions of form (Mol & Law, 1994).

This sensory "government" by socio-material forms[17]—be it rather rigid or dynamic—is usually not explicitly reflected in everyday perceptions and practices, but rather can be challenged by an aesthetic constellation of forms that deviate from the sensory order of the dispositive.

4. LINA BO BARDI'S ETHNOGRAPHY OF FORMS

Equipped with this theoretical toolbox, I now come back to the initial question of the aesthetics of critical design by taking Lina Bo Bardi's transcultural design from below as an example. Bo Bardi's work is of particular interest in this context as she herself explicitly refers to a practice-theoretical approach, namely the humanist Marxism of Antonio Gramsci, whose ideas were very influential on the Italian intellectual scene of the post-war period. In order to better understand how and in which respect Bo Bardi's design can be interpreted as an aesthetic challenge in the abovemeant sense, some details about her biography and intellectual background are crucial. Only on this basis does it become clear how Bo Bardi used her specific "perceptual knowledge"—which she acquired in (post-)war Italy—to push the boundaries of the modernistic "topology of forms" and the sensory order of the Brazilian governmentality of the 1950s.[18]

Two years after the Second World War, Lina Bo Bardi (1914–1992), newly trained in architecture and design, emigrated from Italy to Brazil with her husband, the architecture critic Pietro Maria Bardi. During her studies in Rome, Bo Bardi witnessed not only the rise and fall of the fascist regime, but also the attempts of left-wing intellectuals, architects, and artists to establish, out of the country's ruins and broken political promises, new prospects for a modern Italy. These attempts to articulate a post-fascist vision included debates on modern architecture that went well beyond reciting the myths of rationalist planning.

Edoardo Persico and Giuseppe Pagano, for example, had renounced the megalomaniacal formalism of the fascist party already in the 1930s, proposing instead to take the vernacular architecture of the Italian countryside as a model for a new, people-oriented modernism (Marcello, 2003; Sabatino, 2009). Also, the architect Bruno Zevi, who returned to Italy from exile in the United States after the war, advocated a similar vision: inspired by Frank Lloyd Wright's "organic architecture," Zevi placed

17 As Jan-Peter Voß and Michael Guggenheim have recently pointed out, even the way we taste food is governed (Voß & Guggenheim, 2019).

18 This portrayal relies primarily on the works of Zeuler Lima and Silvana Rubino, both of whom have been researching Lina Bo Bardi for many years and helped me to understand the specificities of her work (Lima, 2013; Rubino, 2002).

the interaction between people and their social and natural environment at the center of his architectural theory. Modern architecture should thus fit "organically" into its respective lifeworld and not prescribe certain forms of life (Zevi, 1950).

The debate over architectural theory was flanked by Antonio Gramsci's writings on subalternity, folk art, and modernity, which were widely read in Italy's post-war intellectual circles. Before Gramsci, as chairman of the Communist Party, was arrested and imprisoned by Mussolini in 1926, he had spoken up for the political and social empowerment of southern Italy, which had been subject to exploitation by the hegemonic north. He had criticized, among other things, how the centrally controlled fascist modernization programs overrode local practices and traditions; instead, he advocated for incorporating the knowledge and creative resources of the southern rural population into its political, economic, and cultural restructuring processes (Gramsci, 1985).

Like Merleau-Ponty, Gramsci also referred to Marx's early concept of praxis in order to describe the implicit knowledge reflected in physical labor and cultural products of a time. In this sense, southern Italian folk art, for example, was not simply out of date, as claimed by the apologists of modernism, but has to be understood as a medium for the subaltern "conception of the world" (Gramsci, 1985, p. 189).[19]

When Lina Bo Bardi traveled to her new home of Brazil in the 1950s, she encountered a similar socio-structural problem there: the metropolitan areas of São Paulo and Rio in the south of the country, which were economically and culturally supported by a white European elite, stood in stark contrast to the poor, economically exploited northeast, which was still strongly marked by the feudal systems of colonialism and by the transatlantic slave trade. And much like in post-war Italy, a group of intellectuals, artists, musicians, and theater-makers had come together in Bahia to protest against the planned top-down modernization of the region. In their films, plays, and songs, however, they rather made an effort to pay due respect to local Afro-Brazilian traditions. Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970) can be considered a central intellectual reference of this movement: like Gramsci's

19 In this sense he writes: "Folklore should instead be studied as a 'conception of the world and life' implicit to a large extent … and in opposition … to 'official' conceptions of the world … This conception of the world is not elaborated and systematic because, by definition, the people (the sum total of the instrumental and subaltern classes of every form of society that has so far existed) cannot possess conceptions which are elaborated, systematic and politically organized and centralized in their albeit contradictory development. It is, rather, many-sided […] if, indeed, one should not speak of a confused agglomerate of fragments of all the conceptions of the world and of life that have succeeded one another in history. In fact, it is only in folklore that one finds surviving evidence, adulterated and mutilated, of the majority of these conceptions" (Gramsci, 1985, p. 189).

model for education, it argued for strengthening subaltern knowledge and the self-emancipation of the poor.

Thus, when the governor of Bahia invited Bo Bardi to set up a museum of modern art in Salvador in 1959, she refused to base it on traditional European ideas of art and aesthetics, especially when it comes to the hierarchizing distinction between fine art and decorative art, modern and pre-modern modes of production, or Western and non-Western cultural forms.

Instead, she decided to build a cultural center that would include a museum of folk art as well as workshops and training rooms where aspiring designers could learn directly from local producers. The aim was neither to romanticize the subaltern material culture, as Bo Bardi accused the elitist "Charity Ladies" of doing (Bo Bardi, 1995, p. 3), nor to preserve it in its present state, as is still common in Western museums. On the contrary, she had no illusions about the humble quality of Afro-Brazilian folk art, which was mainly composed of materials that industrial society had spat out as waste: burnt-out light bulbs, tin cans, scraps of fabric, and old newspapers. According to Bo Bardi, these "objects of desperate survival" stood on the "edge of nothingness" (Bo Bardi, 1995, pp. 3,4) yet it was precisely for this reason that they were a testament to people's unrelenting will to shape their own lives.

Along those lines, Bo Bardi's museum project was clearly future-oriented: Her aim was to support the local producers in developing a distinct Afro-Brazilian design language that did not simply adopt the ideology and social models of European functionalism, as it had happened in Brasilia in Bo Bardi's view. In contrast, the modern Afro-Brazilian design had to be developed out of existing everyday practices. It must, as Bo Bardi herself put it, take into account "how one sees, moves around, stands on the ground."[20]

Accordingly, Bo Bardi, together with fellow scientists and artists from the region, undertook extensive research trips to the arid inland areas of Bahia and Pernambuco in order to systematically collect and document the entire material culture of the region. This fundamental inventory-taking included items such as ex-votos carved out of wood, everyday household objects, material textures, and architectural elements. She documented her journey with hundreds of photographs, unedited and unpublished to this day, tucked in a row of cardboard boxes at the Instituto Pietro e Lina Bo Bardi in São Paulo.

Despite her political emphasis and occasional talk of the innate "creative energy" of ordinary people, Bo Bardi adopted a rather sober research stance. Instead of starting with individuals as the central entities of productivity and meaning, as anthropologists of that time would generally do, Bo Bardi's extensive photo archive re-

20 With this approach, she anticipated many basic principles of critical design, which only became established in the USA and Europe in the 1970s. See for example Viktor Papanek's work (Papanek, 1972).

veals that she was mainly interested in the formal aesthetic order of the Afro-Brazilian material culture. Of course, this formalist perspective on socio-material living conditions did not come out of nowhere. As a direct comparison reveals, Bo Bardi adopted her photographic style more or less directly from Giuseppe Pagano, who had conducted an extensive photographic documentation of Italian rural architecture, which was shown in his exhibition "Continuity and Modernity" at the Milan Triennale in 1936. Similar to Bo Bardi's visual ethnography some 20 years later, Pagano's photographs emphasize the efficiency and functionality of architecture rather than its picturesque or romantic aspects.

Thus, you could say that Bo Bardi transferred not only Antonio Gramsci's concept of the subaltern to the Brazilian context, but also a modernist "tradition of perception" (Merleau-Ponty) that she had acquired in Italy during her education years. Because of this specific perceptual knowledge, Bo Bardi seemed to be particularly interested in the formal patterns and regularities that arise unconsciously at the surface of material culture, that is, without any explicitly formulated design intent. And it is precisely in this unintended order, she argues, that the possibility to transform folk art into modern industrial design lies. In 1957, with this in mind, she wrote: "Serial production, which must now be taken into account as a basis of modern architecture, exists in nature itself, and intuitively, in 'popular work'" (Bo Bardi, 2014, p. 95).

Although this may not be how she herself would phrase it, Lina Bo Bardi thus seems to be interested in an interrelationship similar to the one formulated above: namely, the interrelation between the sensory order of socio-material forms on the one hand and its (re-)production or, rather, possible transformation through (unconsciously conducted) practices of design. Thus, the Afro-Brazilian topology of forms can also be interpreted as a manifestation of a collectively shared, implicit practical and perceptual knowledge.

As I will argue in the next section, such an analysis of the socio-material topology of forms is a precondition of any critical design. Only when it works its way through the practices and perceptual habits of a time can it find aesthetic forms that help to reflect and perhaps modify these very habits. Lina Bo Bardi's approach is therefore not only relevant to the historically, culturally, and politically specific circumstances of the Brazilian governmentality of the 1950s; it is also regarded here as exemplary for the inevitable aesthetic quality of critical design itself.

5. CRITICAL DESIGN AND AESTHETICS

The question of whether and how the aesthetic is related to the social and political is one of the fundamental problems of philosophical aesthetics. It should thus be clear that a comprehensive reiteration of the problem field cannot be done here. Instead,

I'll confine myself to formulating some basic thoughts on the critical potential of the aesthetic from a practice-theory perspective on perception.

My approach differs from three common sociological concepts of "aesthetics": firstly, it goes beyond Pierre Bourdieu's understanding of taste. For Bourdieu, the "detached" or "disinterested" gaze that abstracts from the economic and social constraints of everyday life in order to contemplate the formal aesthetic qualities of an artwork has little to do with its actual sensory nature. Instead, it has to be interpreted as a bourgeois attitude or projection that serves the sole purpose of distinction from the lower classes, whose content-based judgments of taste are regarded as illegitimate (Bourdieu, 1984). Because of this fundamental sociological critique of aesthetic formalism, Bourdieu generally tends to neglect both the concrete act of perception and the question of form as an independent medium of the social.[21]

In the course of the cross-disciplinary Material and Practice Turn, some ethnographic analyses of artworks and artistic practices have at least partially filled this theoretical gap. However, a much broader concept of aesthetics has been applied: Following Science and Technology Studies (especially Michel Callon, Bruno Latour, John Law and Madeleine Akrich's Actor-Network Theory), phenomenology as well as pragmatism, the artwork has been reconceptualized as a social actor that stimulates inter-objective perceptions and practices due to its specific materiality and sensual "affordances" (Acord & DeNora, 2008; Born, 2010; Hennion, 2007; Schürkmann, 2017). In this context, aesthetic perception is certainly understood as a specific form of sensory practice, but not—as will be argued here—as an experience that can potentially help to see through collective shared perceptual schemata.[22]

A similarly broad concept of aesthetics can also be found in the more recent sociological debates about an all-encompassing "aestheticization" of lifeworlds in late modern society (Featherstone, 1991; Jameson, 1991; Reckwitz, 2017). Here, aesthetics is understood as a cultural and economic revaluation and intensification of self-referential, sensual experiences and affections, which manifests itself in an individualization of consumption, an increasing medialization of everyday life or the constant expansion of the creative economy. In the face of such a diagnosis, which weakens the critical potential of the artistic, I maintain that the aesthetic can make a differ-

21 As Juliane Rebentisch notes, he also misses the fact that both the production of art and the subsequent theoretical redefinition of aesthetic autonomy since the 1960s have long since ceased to be borne by the notion of an ahistorical "transcendental subject," let alone by the ideal of an world-away aestheticism, which is in any case more likely to be regarded as a philosophical misunderstanding (Rebentisch, 2013, p. 165ff.).

22 Although Antoine Hennion emphasizes that experiences of taste are associated with reflexivity, he means primarily the subject's ability to broaden her perceptual capacities through practices of tasting, and not a broader critical reflection on the historical conditions of the perceptible itself (Hennion, 2007).

ence towards the socially established sensory order of forms, even when the latter is committed to a creative imperative.

In order to gain a theoretical understanding of the connection between the sensory order of forms, the collective perceptual schemes, and aesthetic practice, I instead would like to take up some ideas from Theodor W. Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* (1997). This theoretical move might seem a bit unusual, since critical theory has always been interpreted as an antithesis to phenomenology. But a closer look reveals that Adorno has much more in common with Foucault, Merleau-Ponty, and Rancière than initially thought.

As already described in greater detail, Merleau-Ponty assumes that the bodily subject learns to order the sensory impressions of its environment and to distinguish between form and background, the significant and the insignificant, due to its practical and active being towards the world. However, the perceptive faculty acquired through this is neither ahistorical nor individual. With reference to Foucault, it can be said that the perceptible also depends on the sensory order of empirical, socio-material forms. How and what we perceive is thus connected to our own particular conditions of existence.

However, this does not mean that each individual act of perception has already been mapped out. Depending on the actual social situation, different aspects of the field of perception can be pushed into the foreground or the background, attention can be diverted, or a view can be obstructed. New materials, techniques, and media can be added that require the bodily schema to adapt, or the body may change in such a way that it can no longer perceive as it used to. But these more or less incidental or objective changes within a practice context are not the issue here. What is more crucial regarding the question of the aesthetic is whether and to what extent the subject can influence the conditions of its own perception—in other words, is it in a position to actively engage in the re-ordering of forms?

An initial answer to this can be found in Merleau-Ponty's thoughts on modern painting. Just like the phenomenologist, the painter has to learn to move back behind his incorporated schemes of perception in order to reflect on the way perception functions. The medium of such reflection, however, is not text or language, as in the case of philosophy, but painterly practice, which makes the conditions of the visible itself contemplatable (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a).

Even if it is doubtful from a sociological perspective that such a "pure vision" beyond any cultural shaping can exist at all, Merleau-Ponty's intuition that artistic practice distances itself from an everyday perspective, in order to find aesthetic forms that reveal the underlying schemes of perception, can be made productive for a practice theory reflection on the aesthetic. However—and this would be the difference to Merleau-Ponty—this distinction must be thought of as strictly relational. Accordingly, aesthetic practice must be understood as a highly specific activity that distances itself from the prevailing schemes of perception in order to be able to re-

veal precisely how these very schemes function. Consequently, aesthetic practices always remain connected to the existing topology of form and thus also to the whole governmental dispositive.

To deepen this argument, Adorno's definition of "art's double character" (Adorno, 1997, p. 5) is also helpful here. Following Adorno, the artwork is both a "*fait social*" and autonomous. In contrast to sociological approaches to art, which locate the social aspect of art primarily in the social rules of art production and reception, Adorno is primarily concerned with the formal and material dimension of the work of art itself: "For everything that artworks contain with regard to form and materials, spirit and subject matter, has emigrated from reality into the artworks and in them has divested itself of its reality: Thus the artwork also becomes its afterimage" (Adorno, 1997, p. 103).

Art thus does not stand somewhere outside the governmental framework of the dispositives since it draws on the existing order of forms as its resource (and this, of course, includes the forms of the art field). In other words: During the artistic process, the producer makes use of her practical and perceptual knowledge as well as of the media and materials available to her. However—and this is the difference to pure commercial products or "art market art"—the aesthetic form does not (or not directly) contribute to the mere reproduction of this order. It instead recombines selected fragments and elements of the dispositive in such a way that other differential divisions of the sensory emerge and thus the historically specific entanglement of power-knowledge, self-technologies and the order of forms itself becomes intelligible: "Form [of the artwork, S.P.] works like a magnet that orders elements of the empirical world in such a fashion that they are estranged from their extra-aesthetic existence, and it is only as a result of this estrangement that they master the extra-aesthetic essence" (Adorno, 1997, p. 226).

The concept of the "constellative" plays a role here in two respects: On the one hand, the formal elements of the dispositive and their respective topologies are the very resource for artistic practice; on the other, the aesthetic can only emerge in a divergent constellation, that is, through the shifting or rearrangement of relations among the existing elements. The aesthetic form thus reacts not only to the individual formal elements of the dispositive as such but also to the way they relate to each other (and to the subject).

The aesthetic difference understood in this sense can explicitly turn critically against the practices, modes of subjectivation and mechanisms of exclusion that correlate with the sensory order—as was the case, for example, with the European avant-gardes. But it can also be designed for the continuous increase and perfection of a program of forms, as can be found, for example, in Chinese pottery or in three-

star cooking.[23] In any case, the aesthetic examination, understood as a challenge to the existing sensory order, takes place in the medium of form itself.

In summary, it can be said that all aesthetic practices—whether performed in the art field or otherwise—have a social dimension insofar as they always work their way through the existing topology of forms and, thus, through collective schemes of perception, thought, and action.

Whether and to what extent the forms that emerge in aesthetic practices themselves have an effect on the collective schemes of perception, and are thus able to produce social difference, depends on the context in which they are received and who they are received from. Under certain circumstances, an aesthetic form cannot at all be recognized as such if it is shown incorrectly, if it is withdrawn from the circulation of forms, or if it deviates too far from the implicit perceptual knowledge of its would-be recipients. The aesthetic form thus needs to do both: to stimulate the implicit perceptual knowledge of the recipient and at the same time to introduce a qualitative difference that can no longer or cannot easily be grasped by this very knowledge.

Taking the change of the body schemes of war-disabled persons as an example, Merleau-Ponty shows that the failing of habitualized practices of perception can cause the subject to rework her incorporated "perceptual syntax" and consequently also her entire being "towards the world." Whether and to what extent individual aesthetic forms have similar far-reaching effects is questionable, but repeated interaction with them can undoubtedly help to develop a different perceptual practice. This other perceptual practice provoked by aesthetic forms is not exhausted in the mere irritation of the familiar. In fact, in everyday situations, we are confronted with a lot of puzzles and disruptions that demand some perceptual and practical adjustments. Art, on the other hand, can make the formal organization of social and historical contexts itself contemplatable by using the very medium of form: The irritation of the process of perception is thus not simply a break with the existing order—at the same time, it stimulates a reflexive attitude. Only this double experience of suspending the habitualized perception, on the one hand, and the implicit (i.e. not necessarily cognitively grasped) insight into the contingency of the socio-material order of forms, on the other, turns an experience into an aesthetic experience. From a practice theory perspective, the aesthetic form is thus doubly historically coded: both in its production and in its reception.

23 In *Art as Human Practice*, Georg W. Bertram emphasizes that aesthetic difference doesn't necessarily aim at a rejection of the existing but can also mean to confirm or preserve traditions (Bertram, 2019, p. 152).

6. THIS EXHIBITION IS AN ACCUSATION

With these considerations in mind, I'd now like to return to the question posed in the beginning: How can an exhibition be an accusation if it shows nothing but things?

As the title of Bo Bardi's exhibition "Nordeste" already reveals, it was an exhibition with a programmatic claim: one entirely in keeping with Gramsci's concept of the subaltern and the struggles of local cultural movements. Bo Bardi pursued the political goal of wrenching the cultural products of the northeast, which were taken for granted or even deemed worthless, out of their social invisibility and offering them an appropriate public platform. It was not her intention to prove a supposedly "authentic" or pre-modern "primitive" nature of Afro-Brazilian culture, as is the usual case in ethnological museums, for example. On the contrary, her aim was to highlight the modernity and innovative potential of local design practices.

She achieved this through an aesthetic operation in the sense defined here: namely by making the sensory order of the forms themselves the object of contemplation purely through the re-constellation of existing elements of the dispositive.

For the location of the Museu de Arte Popular, Bo Bardi chose Solar do Unhão, a vacant building complex directly at the sea. Due to its architecture and its history of use, it was a powerful example of colonial Salvador: built as a sugar works at the end of the 16th century, it served over the centuries as slave quarters, barracks, ammunition depot, and tobacco factory. With the exception of a large spiral staircase centrally placed in the main building, Bo Bardi refrained from major architectural interventions: The existing structures were cleared, with all superfluous and decayed elements removed, and the walls whitewashed. When redesigning the doors and window frames of the complex, Bo Bardi opted for a red paint to set them apart from the usual blue found in Portuguese colonial architecture.

The complex opened with the "Nordeste" exhibition in 1963. On the two light-flooded floors of the main building, Bo Bardi showed around one thousand everyday objects from the region that she had gathered on her research trips and from the collections of her friends. Although the objects must have seemed familiar to the visitors, who mainly consisted of the local population, here they appeared in a completely different light: Bo Bardi had staged them in such a way that it was not their poverty that stood in the foreground, but their practical functionality, formal aesthetic rationality, and implicit seriality. In doing so, she pursued two goals: first, to make the sensory order of forms transparent, as these form the basis of the collectively shared implicit practical and perceptual knowledge of the local population, and second, to emphasize that this implicit practical knowledge has an intrinsic creative potential that must be supported and activated for a "modernization from below." In other words, she was interested in nothing less than an aesthetic empowerment.

The argument had to function without any texts, since most local visitors were not able to read and write. Instead, the argument was performatively supported by the centrally located spiral staircase, built using a local construction technique. As the architect Aldo van Eyck noted during his visit, the staircase didn't just convey a sense of grandeur to those who ascended and descended it—it also put them in the spotlight: The socially and economically underprivileged people were given a stage on which they can be seen standing tall (Buergel, 2011, p. 56)

Bo Bardi's display thus represents an aesthetic practice insofar as it creates a distance from the familiar by using the existent socio-material forms: a distance that should contribute both to a change in the self-perception of the local population and to a greater appreciation of Afro-Brazilian culture by the cultural and political elite. However, before this experiment could bear fruit, the Museu de Arte Popular was closed shortly after the military coup of 1964, which was then followed by a twenty-year-long dictatorship.[24]

Nevertheless, the short-lived "Nordeste" exhibition should have made one thing clear: The political in design is always a question of aesthetics. And this for two reasons: firstly, all practices are necessarily linked to a collectively shared "sensory order." This means that the incorporated schemes of acting and thinking are inseparably intertwined with incorporated schemes of perception. Therefore, a critique of existing dispositives and power relations cannot help but take into account the historic specific conditions of the perceptible. Secondly, this collective sensory order is reproduced through the topology of forms—how and what becomes perceptible and what is excluded from the field of vision therefore depends on the regularity and distribution of formal elements. Critical design thus cannot escape its aesthetic responsibility: It must challenge the existing topology of forms and the corresponding sensory order and seek for new forms and aesthetic constellations that bear the potential to provoke a change of perception.

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24 It wasn't until the 1980s that Lina Bo Bardi, in another project, was able to see her cultural-political ideas more fully realized: In 1976, she was commissioned by the non-governmental organization SESC (Trade Social Service) to convert an old steel barrel factory in the Pompéia district of São Paulo into a public cultural and recreational center.

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