

Living and Working in the Ruins of Modernism

Architectural Heritage and Catastrophic Futures
in Adrián Villar Rojas and Lina Bo Bardi

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In an intriguing way, Adrián Villar Rojas personifies the contradictions of a post-global moment in the art world. Born in the city of Rosario, Argentina in 1980, and coming from what he has described as the “márgenes de los márgenes de los márgenes” (Schwerfel, 2015), Villar Rojas’s works quickly found an international audience. On the one hand, his sculptures and installations seem to be part of a global aesthetic phenomenon: monumental and often spectacular for their sheer size, they represent contemporary fears about the end, the Anthropocene, and post-apocalyptic futures. They often use recuperated materials such as plants or waste and mobilize motifs like the ruin or the museum, but also the bestiary, the herbarium, or geological strata. In Villar Rojas’s archaeologies of the future (Ramade, 2017), art is a melancholic reflection that looks back at humanity and evolutionary history from a future moment in time. It harbours the perspective of a present in which humans will have ceased to exist. This tentacular aesthetic of the grotesque and the sublime, for some

observers, includes what art critic María Gainza has termed “melancolía *kitsch*” (Gainza, 2020, p. 199), a certain fascination for what comes after man, mixed with references to pop culture, art history, Japanese manga, and comic books more generally (Ill. 1-4). Since 2008, Villar Rojas’s works have been shown at major art festivals from Documenta to Istanbul to the Venice Biennale, and exhibited around the world, from Argentina to New York, Athens, Los Angeles, and Shanghai.

On the other hand, Villar Rojas’s works are radically site-specific. They are produced *in situ* and thereby integrate the economic, cultural, and material conditions of place into their production process. This also includes a place’s history and, very prominently for Villar Rojas, its climatic and weather conditions. Moreover, these monumental works are at the same time decidedly ephemeral. They are built to perish, having to be taken down or even being left to disintegrate to the influence of the seasons, as most famously happened with *El momento más hermoso de la Guerra* (2009), a truck-sized sculpture of a girl hugging a dinosaur made from unfired clay, which was dissolved by a hail storm less than an hour after it was finished.

This perishable condition frequently makes Villar Rojas’s works unsellable objects. In the words of curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, the fact that he “does not send his sculptures around the world but [...] crafts them on site”, thereby depending on the local working environment, “has a lot to do with the necessity to fight against [...] homogenizing globalization” (Schwerfel, 2015, 0:08:25–0:08:38). It only seems fitting, then, that Villar Rojas has increasingly included his production team’s working process into his representations. As Eungie Joo writes, he focuses “on how to construct, manage, credit, interest, and live within a community of engineers, craftspeople, carpenters, and artists” (Joo, 2013, p. 125).

Ill. 1



Adrián Villar Rojas: *Mi familia muerta* (2009). Unfired local clay, rocks, 3 x 27 x 4 m. Courtesy of the artist. Photo credit: Carla Barbero.

Ill. 2



Adrián Villar Rojas: *Where the Slaves Live* (2014). Stratified layers of soil, compost, tree branches, pigmented plaster, diverse organic and inorganic materials collected in Dover, London and Yangji-ri, 560 x 300 x 240 cm. Courtesy of the artist. Photo credit: Jörg Baumann.

Ill. 3



Adrián Villar Rojas: *The Most Beautiful of All Mothers* (2015). Organic, inorganic, human and machine-made matter collected in Istanbul, Kalba, Mexico City and Ushuaia, 360 x 280 x 220 cm. Courtesy of the artist, Marian Goodman Gallery, and Kurimanzutto. Photo credit: Jörg Baumann.

Ill. 4



Adrián Villar Rojas: *The Theatre of Disappearance* (2017). Organic, inorganic, human and machine-made matter collected in Los Angeles, Istanbul, Kalba, Mexico City and Turin, 330 x 111 x 203 cm. Courtesy of the artist, Kurimanzutto, and Marian Goodman Gallery. Photo Credit: Michel Zabé studio.

In 2012, Villar Rojas was invited by Obrist to create a site-specific artwork in Lina Bo Bardi's *Casa de Vidro* (Glass House), a monument of modernist Brazilian architecture situated in Morumbi, São Paulo. The result of this invitation, a 32-minute-long film called *Lo que el fuego me trajo*,¹ as well as the place where the film was shot, will be the focus of this article. The film is part of an ensemble of contemporary artworks that are interested in the signification of the modern ruin. In Villar Rojas's case, this interest unfolds in the context of a catastrophic future. Architecture, the spatial design of collective life, is a critical tool if we want to think about how to live together in a damaged future; but it is art that can nourish this reflection with aesthetic impulses that allow us to de-automatize and detach it from our standard ways of thinking. As I will argue in this article, *Lo que el fuego me trajo* operates as an audio-visual archaeology of the future,² transforming modernism's architectural heritage into a fossil or ruin, a *memento mori* of human civilization as fossilized in the buildings we will have chosen to inhabit. I will also focus on how working and living in the ruins of modernism becomes a way to invent new forms of conviviality in the film. This invented community resists the danger of dissolution, while critically interrupting the logic of demolition and rebuilding inherent in modernism. The article is divided into three sections: 1) The treatment of space and history in Bo Bardi and Villar Rojas; 2) the representation of the relationship between imminent collapse and collective work in the film; and 3) the perspective on modernist architecture as articulated by Villar Rojas's imagined future.

¹ The title of the film was also the title of Villar Rojas's first exhibition (2008). This exhibition transformed the basement of Ruth Benzacar gallery in Buenos Aires into a ruined museum, filled with bricks, cement, glass, and other debris, as well as fragments of unfired clay statues. Fittingly, then, Villar Rojas began his trajectory with a "proposition for the end [...], suggesting the remains of a long career" (Joo, 2013, p. 122).

² The term is famously discussed in its relation to Utopia and Science Fiction by Fredric Jameson (2005).

1. The Glass House: Space and History in Bo Bardi and Villar Rojas

In the film, we see a group of people working in the woods around the Glass House, as well as inhabiting the domestic space. They fell trees to build a wooden structure, work on miniature models, set up a dolly track, take care of a baby, plant flowers. There is a constant sense of impending catastrophe and apocalyptic ending which seems to emanate from the nearby city. It endangers the house, protected by a cover of lush vegetation. Almost no words are spoken. The narrative mode is generally absent, while what we see and hear is a poetic constellation of sounds and images.

It is certainly not an accidental gesture to situate a film about craftsmanship at the end of the world in Lina Bo Bardi's *Casa de Vidro*. Born in Rome in 1914, Achillina Bo was a rare female student of architecture at the prestigious Roman *Facoltà di Architettura* in the 1930s. After moving to Brazil in 1946 with her husband, the art dealer and critic Pietro Maria Bardi, she became one of the most prominent figures of modernist architecture in the country, known for her Museu de Arte de São Paulo (MASP), the SESC Pompéia, and the Glass House. While modernism's complex articulation of nature and culture materializes in the history of the house, its structure also suggests a certain shift that occurred in this relationship during the second half of the 20th century.

Often described as a paradigm of Brazilian modernism, the Glass House was designed as the Bardi's residence in 1951 and completed in 1952. Situated on a 1.73-acre property in the hillside district of Morumbi, it was the first house in the neighbourhood. In 1950, the district's several hundred lots had just been converted from being a tea farm into what would later become a residential area. Seen from its front side, the house appears to be hovering above the ground, with long window panes reaching from the bottom to the ceiling of the living room area—a massive, freestanding glass box on slim pilotis. Originally, the trees and bushes of the nearby hills had been cleared away in order to permit an unobstructed

view over the surroundings. The living room, an ideal observation point, dominated the cut-back nature (*Ill.* 5-6). Partaking, as Barry Bergdoll has written, “of the mid-twentieth-century obsession with the glazed box as observatory from Mies van der Rohe to Philip Johnson to Charles and Ray Eames to the overall dreams of transparency of the European avant-garde of the interwar period” (Bergdoll, 2013, p. ix),³ the building seems to side with Brazilian modernism. This style, on view for example in the Ministry for Education and Health Building in Rio de Janeiro (1943) or in the pure, reinforced concrete structures that Oscar Niemeyer built in Pampulha, was introduced against the prevailing historicist styles of the 1940s and conceived as a central element of “cosmopolitan nation-building” (Lima, 2013a, p. 39) in a country that was reinventing its tradition. At first sight, Bo Bardi’s house could be seen as representing this uncompromising modernism, as it undertakes a formalistic negation of its surroundings and a radical break with local building traditions and materials. It establishes a comfortable but sublime, elevated position of observation, throning over things converted into its spectacle.

Yet, the house is a more hybrid construction than this description suggests. From the beginning of her career, Bo Bardi was also sceptical about cosmopolitan negations of the local. It is important to note that the representation of the *Casa de Vidro* as a model of modernism has focused almost exclusively on the famous frontal image of the house. This image had first been promoted by an advertising campaign organized by Jardim Morumbi real estate company in order to “sell the remaining almost two hundred lots” (Lima, 2013a, p. 58), which were still empty at the time of construction. When the Bardis came to Brazil in 1946, Lina had seen the pompous buildings of Italian and German fascism and was highly critical of what she called their “elefantiasis” (Bo Bardi, 2016a, p. 185). Later in life, in 1989, she would warn against the abstract ideas of functionalist architecture, whose buildings do not express a local need, but “fall from the sky over its inhabitants” (Lima, 2013b).

³ Other famous examples are Le Corbusier’s Villa Savoye, Mies van der Rohe’s Farnsworth House, or Philip Johnson’s Glass House.

And after meeting Niemeyer, who would later design the heroically sweeping forms of Brasilia's monumental district, Bo Bardi quipped to have been more impressed by his lilac suit than by his opinions on architecture, "unburdened as he was by the experiences of the war and the dilemmas of functionalism" (Lima, 2013a, p. 39). For Bo Bardi, the memory of Europe's totalitarian past inspired ethical concerns with an architecture aiming at the abstraction from individual life.

But Bo Bardi was also a daughter of her time. Shortly after arriving in Brazil, she saw the country as an empty, open space into which her own hegemonic dreams could be inscribed. She idealized Brazilians as "a people untouched by hubris and greed", and Brazil, contrary to Rome, as a land without ruins, a "land 'where everything was possible,' a 'privileged space for artistic creation' and a 'new place for utopias'" (Lima, 2013a, pp. 39-40). Modernist phantasies are also evident in her speech "Teoría y filosofía de la arquitectura" (1958), where Bo Bardi argues that the modern architect should find rational solutions independent from their knowledge of local traditions (Bo Bardi, 2016b).⁴ This ambiguity (characteristic of Bo Bardi's early phase and of Latin American modernism more generally) can also be seen in the Glass House. It manifests itself, for instance, in the contrast between the transparent glass box of the living room and other elements of the house, notably its rear side which blends in organically with the shape of the slope. This back side, with its two stone ovens, "white masonry walls and trellised shutter windows resting on the ground [is] rooted in the simple, popular rural traditions that Bo Bardi prized" (Lima, 2013a, p. 60). (III. 7) The following years of Bo Bardi's career are characterized by the successive integration of elements from Brazilian popular culture into her modernist style, which turns into a compromise or hybrid

⁴ "Un arquitecto no necesita haber nacido en un país o pertenecer a una raza determinada para satisfacer las necesidades específicas de una región. Todos saben que el Hotel Imperial, construido en Tokio en 1916 por Frank Lloyd Wright, resistió el terremoto mejor que las construcciones japonesas. Esto significa que no queremos aconsejar el regionalismo, en su antiguo sentido nacional, político y retórico, a los nuevos arquitectos" (Bo Bardi, 2016b, p. 181).

between modern and non-modern, global and vernacular language—and it is mostly the works from this later period that have contributed to her canonization as the celebrated figure of an ecologically and socially engaged architecture, a “Sustainable Lina”, as a collection of essays recently put it (Condello and Lehmann, 2016).⁵

Ill. 5



Living room at Casa de Vidro in the 1950s, with a view of the neighborhood, photo by Instituto Bardi.

Ill. 6



Front view of the newly built Glass House, 1951, photo by Peter Scheier.

Ill. 7



Outdoor oven, photo by Yghor Boy / Instituto Bardi.

Ill. 8



Contemporary view of the main facade of the Glass House, photo by Nelson Kon.

⁵ The book aims at portraying Bo Bardi as a complex figure, resisting purely modernist interpretations but also avoiding recent “hero worship” that transfigures her into the “patron saint” of a sustainable, regionalist architecture, as Barry Bergdoll writes in the foreword (Bergdoll, 2013, p. vi). In his chapter “Keeping the Existing: Lina Bo Bardi’s Upcycling and Urban Renewal Strategies”, Steffen Lehmann sees a continuous transformation between the earlier phase and the later works, starting with the repurposing of SESC Pompéia. He clearly situates the Glass House in the modernist phase which is “still inspired by the International Style and Structuralism” (Lehmann, 2016, p. 56).

“A land without ruins”: In his film, Villar Rojas transforms this modernist dream into a ruin itself. The idea of a virgin soil to be inscribed with glass and concrete, the heroic utopia of a new architecture, is turned into an exhibit in a future museum of terrestrial history. The first thing that comes to mind is the vegetation. Since the 1950s, a lush, dense tropical forest has grown around and over the house and the surrounding terraces, hiding the glass box but also obstructing the view through the living room’s windowpanes. These plants negate the modernist fantasy of transparency and observation (*Ill.* 8, 9, and 16). It is key to note that in the film, we don’t see the house for the first third of the film, and we never see it from the iconic frontal perspective. Rather, the exploration of the terrain begins in the forest, where a man is cutting a bamboo trunk with a machete, and a woman is planting flowers. The long, calm shots closely follow each step of the work. In the background, we hear birds chirping, but also cars and more abrupt noises that sound like gun shots. What we see is not an untouched retreat of nature, but a tree-filled, overgrown former cultivated park or garden. It is a space where nature and culture entangle, as visible in the terrace outlines on the forest floor or the plastic labels on some of the tree trunks (Villar Rojas, 2013, 0:07:11). Only later do the garage and the inside of the house come to the fore. In the garage, three men are building something that looks like a dolly track, while craftworkers in the house are making small clay figurines, replicas of Villar Rojas’s sculptures for the Argentine Pavilion at the 2011 Venice Biennial. Others are looking at photos of his past expositions, surrounded by furniture designed by Bo Bardi. As the original sculptures have been destroyed, these scenes suggest a melancholic reflection on what remains of an artist’s career. We also see a woman eating and taking care of a baby. The film, then, transforms the house into a liminal space between ruin, museum, and shelter—a station of survival sunken in the forest whose shape and dimensions remain vague.

But the overgrown state of the house is not only a negation of modernism through nature. It is also the completion of Bo Bardi's own project. As early as 1956, she wrote in a letter to her husband:

Our house is very beautiful, the garden is wonderful, but today I would never make a house like that, it is the residue of my beliefs in 'unlimited progress'. Today, I would make a house with a wood stone oven, without windows and surrounded by a large park full of woods. I would throw the seeds at the wind in the woods. (quoted in Anelli, 2018)

The hybrid entanglement of nature and culture that Villar Rojas's film stages was already at the centre of Bo Bardi's own concerns. Living in the Glass House with her husband until their deaths in the 1990s, Bo Bardi had ample time to create the spontaneous garden, selecting the species and sowing the plants at random around a system of pathways. This created a forest so robust that, according to Renato Anelli, the former head of the house, one hundred trees had to be removed to preserve the ensemble—not only because the trees threatened to fall onto the house or because the roots were compromising its foundations, but also because the shadow cast by the treetops endangered the colourful species underneath, making them disappear for lack of sunlight (Anelli, 2018). Not only was culture re-naturalized, but nature also had to be kept in check culturally in order to maintain its diversity. From this perspective, the forest reveals a more complex, non-antagonistic story of the relationship between modernism and nature than the glass pavilion suggests.

2. Collapse and Collective Work

Lo que el fuego me trajo is structured around the semantic antagonism between a vague sense of brooding threat and the quiet, collective work of the group. While work remains tied to the protected surroundings of the house, the sense of imminent disaster is mainly

transported by weather elements (rain and thunder), as well as by the film's audio track, which captures the sounds of the neighbouring city. We hear cars, gunshots, and swelling engine noises but also thunder. The recurring soundscape constitutes a semantic field of the machine and of catastrophic modernity overpowering the sound of the forest, threatening the world of the house. This impression intensifies when Villar Rojas uses montage to violently cut from the outside to the inside of the house (Villar Rojas, 2013, 0:09:05), where silence reigns over the sounds of the city. While the house appears as a protective interior space, the semantic blending of city and collapse is further accentuated by two long shots on São Paulo through an opening in the trees. This shot first appears roughly a third of the way through the film (Villar Rojas, 2013, 0:11:56-0:12:28) and later reappears as the final shot. Seen through the trees encircling it, merging with the sounds of the cars, gunshots, and a human whisper, the city is finally transformed into a visionary symbol, an emblem for the end of humanity. It is crucial for the understanding of temporality in the film to note that while in the first shot, the city occupies only a small space of the frame, in the final shot the ratio has changed, the city seeming to creep up on the trees which are darkening against the grey sky (*Ill. 10*). The confrontation between the city and the house, a heterotopia of conviviality, points towards a climactic ending, even if this is never made explicit.

This brooding sense of imminent disaster is important, because it transforms the filmed practices of collective labour into acts of preparation. The presented future operates under the sign of its own cancellation. In this sense, the collective work done by the actors seems to counter the threat of chaos, a silent, precise, coordinated activity. The actors, who are members of Villar Rojas's workshop that have travelled with him for years, producing his sculptures and installations, can be seen drilling, digging, sweating, and sawing, but also planting and modelling. Several shots present close-ups on their hands and tools. We can see the physical traces of place that work leaves on their bodies, as when Andrés Gauna, member of the team

since 2011, can be seen scraping dirt off his leg with a machete (*Ill. 11*). Appropriately enough, Villar Rojas has compared his and his team's coordinated work to ants, calling the film "a true testimony, or perhaps a lyrical homage, to my team's inner logic of communication and communion" (Villar Rojas, 2020, p. 18). The conviviality of those working in the ruins of modernism becomes a model or metaphor for an alternate future, preparing a resilient "utopian community of collaboration" (Joo, 2013, p. 126) that combats the inevitable end brought about by the collapse of the city. Notably, this community seems to privilege the rural over the urban, and the reconnection to place over the deterritorializing logic of globalization.

In what follows, I would like to make two brief remarks on the juxtaposition of urban collapse and utopian cooperation. The first one is aesthetic in nature: it concerns the elusive quality of the fabricated objects, their practical uselessness. The wooden structure that is being built and covered in plastic sheeting provides protection from the heavy rain which sets in after the first shot of the city — but there is nothing under it to be protected. Just what it was built for remains puzzling, as is the case for the plastic tarp stretched out between the trees, or the little clay figurines. The only use of the set-up and preparations, it seems, is to create images and sounds for the film. The installation of the plastic creates a foil on which the rain, silent before, can be heard and through which the wind, the light and the water can be seen. The produced objects, then, act as a translation of weather phenomena into the medium of film (*Ill. 12*). The goal of their material poetics is not to prepare for disaster but to produce aesthetic signs that will constitute the film itself. They are performances, ephemeral sculptures in movement which are bound to disappear again.⁶ The sole function of construction and craftwork

⁶ In Villar Rojas's work, this ephemeral quality is countered by the fact that the disappearing object is recorded in the medium of digital photography and film. If these works, as Hans Ulrich Obrist suggests, are not "space monuments", but "time monuments" because they dissolve, they are also "erected again [...] as ghostly digital after-images" (Chong, 2013, p. 141).

in the film is “to feed a story to the camera”, as Villar Rojas said in an interview (Obrist et al., 2020, p. 18). In its recursive, self-referential logic, *Lo que el fuego me trajo* subverts the logic of preparation. By documenting the preliminary work for its own production, which is also the final result, the film turns the pragmatic craft of the end into de-pragmatized art.

Ill. 9



Ill. 10



Ill. 11



Ill. 12



Still frames from Adrián Villar Rojas's film *Lo que el fuego me trajo* (2013). All images courtesy of the artist and REI Cine. The frames were taken at 00:12:49 (*Ill. 9*), 00:32:44 (*Ill. 10*), 00:06:02 (*Ill. 11*), and 00:24:22 (*Ill. 12*).

My second remark concerns the political. For one thing, we can ask ourselves whether Villar Rojas's community refutes neoliberal globalism as completely as Obrist claims. Comparing his travelling production crew to a an "itinerant theatre company that wanders around the world" (Sanden and Wolff, 2020), Villar Rojas's nomadic working practices inevitably bear a certain resemblance to the logic of globalized labor and the art market⁷ —although he leaves the sites of production and exhibition in a better condition than before his work, through a practice he calls "housekeeping" (Villar Rojas, 2020, p. 10). For another, Villar Rojas's film ambiguously raises the question of an eventual reproduction of gender norms in the imagined future. Studying culturally constructed images of what is to come also means asking who would want to live in these societies. As noted by Eungie Joo, Villar Rojas's world of collaborative production and camaraderie is mostly a male world (Joo, 2013, p. 125). Similarly, in *Lo que el fuego me trajo*, female characters primarily inhabit the domestic, private spaces within the second and third sections of the house. These areas were designed by Bo Bardi as more conventional spaces of the household, less open to visitors than the living room area. This means that the women can be seen in the kitchen (*Ill. 13*), taking care of a child, or planting flowers, while their male counterparts engage in building objects in the rain or felling trees. The roles of

⁷ In an interview with *Sculpture* magazine, Villar Rojas half-jokingly calls his working process "'the philosophy of limits', as a way to express the enormous collective effort that this series of projects entails". He adds that all involved agents, human and non-human, are "put under great pressure —almost a sort of endurance test— in order to accomplish increasingly exigent goals" (Rosenfield Lafo, 2012, p. 31). Clearly, this ambitious way of producing reflects the logic of the *project*, where identification with work inscribes optimization into the structure of the self. Villar Rojas is well aware of this, as revealed by his project *Brick Farm*, begun in 2012 after two years of travelling to New York, Paris, Shanghai, Venice, Kabul, and Kassel. This project, situated in an old brick-making facility in the outskirts of his hometown Rosario, is a collaboration with local brick artisans, as well as with the Argentinian *hornero* bird. As Eungie Joo argues, it aims at addressing Villar Rojas's "growing discomfort with the methods of employment he has offered to date, countering disruptive interventions and modifications in the lives of many people with a stable place of experimentation and interaction" (Joo, 2013, p. 126).

female team members are cast along classic gender lines, portraying a mothering, domestic force associated with reproduction and care, starkly contrasting with the heroic constructivism of men.

This gendered distribution of space is not a coincidence. Rather, we can see a similar contradiction within Bo Bardi's own work. While advocating for a class-free architecture connected to people's everyday lives, and while being a strong female voice in an almost completely male-dominated field, Bo Bardi, in her house in Morumbi, "preserved the traditional gender and class divisions of wealthy Brazilian homes" (Lima, 2013a, p. 62). Behind the open space of the public living room area lie the more private quarters of the kitchen and bedroom, which suggest traditional gender roles. The servants' quarters are separated from the rest of the house by a courtyard, and it is here that most of the traditional, simple architectural elements of the façade are concentrated. So what are we to make of the fact that, rather than criticizing or transforming the organization of social space from the 1950s, Villar Rojas's team chooses to reactivate it in a mimetic way, inscribing past gender roles into the utopian community of the future? A critical reading might argue that the conviviality of the house is compromised by an unequal distribution of power. The film does not invent a new "distribution of the sensible" (Rancière, 2000), but represents the reproduction of old norms and practices. However, this reproduction can also be read as a commentary on the male role in modernity's history of destruction (particularly evident in the scene depicting the felling of the tree). From this perspective, the allocation of space and labor reflects a critical or pessimistic account of how repetition is mediated by architecture across various layers of time.

3. A Future Archaeology of Modernism: Lina Bo Bardi and Adrián Villar Rojas

How, then, does Villar Rojas frame the relationship between modernism and the cataclysmic future? To answer this question, I would like

to come back to the wooden structure that the group builds in the front yard of the Casa de Vidro (Ill. 14). When it is finally put to use during heavy rain, the structure creates scaffolding to hold a spotlight which shines in from the outside through the windowpanes, reversing the hierarchy between inside and outside, permanent and transitory, known and unknown (Villar Rojas, 2013, 0:22:36). It is a ghostly shot: in the backlight, the furniture that Bo Bardi designed, as well as the objects she and her husband assembled during their lifetimes, appear as spectral silhouettes, like forgotten objects of an extinct species. The suggestive scene makes it look as if someone had left their toys and never come back, the remains to be found by a team of future archaeologists. Time has not only brought back dense vegetation that nullifies the transparency of the observatory. Time has also transformed the house into a buried museum, full of the exhibits, bones, fragments, and skeletons of modernism (Ill. 15). We are reminded of Roland Barthes here, who in his essay “L’activité structuraliste” (1963) wrote that Brecht had tied his idea of Marxism to “the location of a stage spotlight” (Barthes, 1993, p. 1333; my translation). The spotlight in *Lo que el fuego me trajo* transforms modernism’s architectural heritage into a fossil, a memento mori of human civilization as fossilized in the buildings we chose to inhabit. As when he presented Picasso’s *Guernica* (1937) as a cave painting in Bregenz in 2017, Villar Rojas converts modernism into a bygone era that will be excavated in the future. Modernism, with its disdain for ornament, becomes a nostalgic ornament itself. More specifically, modernism’s dream of radical renewal, of development and social progress brought about by a new way of building and living, can now be seen in the light of its connection to the shortcomings of the present. At the same time, by not negating the old functions of the house entirely (which would mean repeating modernism’s central gesture of negation) but inhabiting its remains, by repairing and doing “house-keeping”, Villar Rojas replaces the utopian leap forward with a melancholy desire to persist in the here and now.

In this sense, *Lo que el fuego me trajo* is not an isolated case. It is part of a cluster of contemporary artworks, as well as discussions in historical

and cultural studies, that are interested in the signification of the modern ruin (Olalquiaga, 1992; Folie, 2009; Lazzara and Unruh, 2009; Hell and Schönle, 2010; Gallo, 2011; Blackmore, 2017). These approaches aim to study the ruins of modernity as an archive of contradictory histories, pointing out a more complex evaluation of the recent past.⁸ Seen from the perspective of the twenty-first century, the ruins of modernist architecture not only suggest the failure of modernism's idea of progress; they also shed light on how the modernist organization of space is part of the history of some of the endemic political and social problems of the big cities, not least in Latin America. As Lisa Blackmore reminds us, the critical potential of these ruins lies in how they reveal the mismatch between the conjectured spaces of planning and their subsequent uses (Blackmore, 2017, p. 258). Social segregation, poor living conditions, pollution, and alienation often plague functionalist constructions that fail to develop the bustling street life of old city centres. There is, for example, the (rather different) case of Mexico City's Nonoalco-Tlatelolco, a monumental housing complex planned by architect Mario Pani. The complex not only proved to be a massive planning disaster. It also went down in history as the site of the Tlatelolco massacre in 1968, in which hundreds of demonstrating students were trapped between the walls of the central plaza, where they were gunned down by government forces. What is more, in 1985, the complex was partly destroyed by an earthquake, revealing poor building practices and corruption. As Rubén Gallo has argued, the ruins of Nonoalco-Tlatelolco reveal the dystopic side of modernist planning: "As a modernist ruin, it represents the catastrophic failure of Pani's utopian plans for transforming Mexico City into an orderly, planned city" (Gallo, 2011, p. 69).

⁸ Celeste Olalquiaga's remarkable *Proyecto Helicoide* is exemplary in this regard. It brings together artists and researchers from various domains to study and recontextualize the complex history of El Helicoide de la Roca Tarpeya in Caracas, a spiraling drive-in mall built between 1956 and 1961 that was abandoned several times. Currently being used as a police headquarters and penitentiary center, it was the city's first modern ruin.

Villar Rojas projects this interpretation of modernist ruin further into the future.⁹ In his vision, modernism can be seen as an important factor in the history of the current collapse of natural and social systems. This is also reflected in the film's final close-up, when César Martin's look into the camera seems to pose the question of the human (*Ill.* 16). Modernism's promise of a better future is precisely what brought about this future's cancellation. As Svetlana Boym writes, "the ruins of modernity point to possible futures that never came to be. But those futures do not necessarily inspire restorative nostalgia. Instead, they make us aware of the vagaries of the progressive vision as such" (Boym, 2010, p. 59). Significantly, then, instead of gazing at the modern ruin in amazement over the sublime impermanence of things, or repeating modernism's "dialectic of demolition and rebuilding" (Gallo, 2011, p. 55), Villar Rojas chooses to recycle and aestheticize modern space through forms of convivial work that blur the distinction between nature and culture.

As I hope to have shown in this article, the trajectories of Lina Bo Bardi and Adrián Villar Rojas form a chiasmic relationship in time and space. The same, of course, is true for the trajectories of architectural modernism and contemporary art. In rhetoric, the chiasmus is a reversal of the order of words in the second of two parallel sequences or phrases. Bo Bardi came to Brazil from Europe as part of the globally-spreading movement of modernist architecture, which has shaped (and itself has been shaped by) Latin American cities to this day. Villar Rojas, on the other hand, started out from what he calls the Argentinian "periphery of the periphery" (Schwerfel, 2015) to take centre stage in the globalized art world. In 2011, his works were exhibited at Venice Biennale, just 400 kilometres north of Rome, where Bo Bardi studied architecture in the 1930s. While the early Bo Bardi adopted modernism's forward-looking stance, Villar Rojas looks back at modernism from an imagined future that resembles the pre-modern past without being equal to it. The utopian and

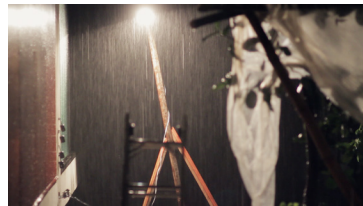
⁹ Of course, the real Casa de Vidro, which houses the Instituto Bardi, is not currently a ruin in Blackmore's or Gallo's sense. What is of interest here is the *imaginary future ruin* of the house that Villar Rojas stages in his film.

melancholy perspectives intersect; they don't, however, cancel each other out. While over the years, Bo Bardi transformed her brand of modernism into a socially experimental style more sensitive to the local, Villar Rojas recontextualizes it as the basis of a utopian future-past, reactivating traditional ways of working and living together. If Bo Bardi broke with the modernist gesture of *tabula rasa* and abstraction from life, Villar Rojas's future resembles the old power structures of Bo Bardi's past more closely than we might expect. Finally, while Bo Bardi stressed that the monumentality of her buildings served to foster the civil life of the people (Bo Bardi, 2016, pp. 185-186), Villar Rojas's artworks remind us of the transitory nature of the monument itself. If Bo Bardi's early modernism advocated deterritorialization, Villar Rojas's site-specific artwork historicizes and recycles this architectural legacy, excavating the remains of modernism in an archaeology of the future that stages its disappearance.

Ill. 13



Ill. 14



Ill. 15



Ill. 16



Still frames from Adrián Villar Rojas's film *Lo que el fuego me trajo* (2013). All images courtesy of the artist and REI Cine. The frames were taken at 0:25:53 (*Ill. 13*), 0:21:25 (*Ill. 14*), 00:22:34 (*Ill. 15*), 00:32:12 (*Ill. 16*).

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