Baroque Tendencies in Contemporary Art
Baroque Tendencies in Contemporary Art

Edited by

Kelly A. Wacker

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To Amy, for always being there.
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The fingers of a pair of hands insert themselves into the openings of an origami fortune teller, poised to open the paper folds to expose a previously unknown event. In this case, however, the fortune teller folds fail to carry the familiar numerical symbols that peel back to reveal the fate of the individual who selects them. This time, enclosed within the confines of the origami, the viewer looks on at an image of a vast galaxy that appears to be folded in on itself. This event is one that’s depicted by the Australian artist Cassandra Laing. This graphite drawing entitled “Fortune-teller (it will all end in stars)” (2007) is monumental in scope—not only because of the scale of the work, which is well over one metre in height and width, but because of its subject matter. What we look upon is the artist’s hands as they ready themselves to open up four fragments of the Andromeda Galaxy to reveal further vast vistas in the layers that lie in the deeper folds of the fortune teller origami. In another drawing, “Stargazer” (2007), we look on at a depiction of Eleanor Arroway (played by Jodie Foster) from the film *Contact* (1997); her profile is framed against the backdrop of an infinite universe, but this image is itself framed by a blank white space on which the drawing is placed. Like the Andromeda Galaxy, Eleanor Arroway had been contained by a complex series of origami folds, but in this case the origami has been taken apart and partially flattened, its folds lying crumpled and battered as if all hope has been lost.

In these and many of her other works Cassandra Laing returns to a baroque understanding of the world. Like the astronaut Eleanor Arroway, we simultaneously glimpse and experience the vastness of the cosmos while also going nowhere. Recalling the baroque philosopher Gottfried Leibniz’s description of the monadic logic of the universe, and the baroque “folds” described by Gilles Deleuze, each monad or fold exists as a logical entity while also belonging to a grander whole. One section of the galaxy opens up and links serially into another section, and yet another. Everything connects fluidly so that there is a complex interconnectedness of the system as a whole: in fact, humans themselves will abandon their singularity to eventually become one with the universe as the property of stardust. Yet true to baroque logic, time and space are not as straightforward as they would first appear to be, for this cosmos that...
is the Andromeda Galaxy is also just a representation: the macro becomes micro in the hands of the artist who literally holds a universe in her grasp. The series of monadic folds eventually create a complex Unity—the individual/the cosmos, the fragment/the whole—but only after the viewer has traveled the intersections of a series of creases that fold and unfold like a convoluted labyrinth, revealing magical possibilities at every turn.

Elsewhere, I’ve explored the “baroque” as a transhistorical state that’s extended beyond the historical confines of the seventeenth century—a period traditionally associated with a baroque order of vision. In particular, my interest has been in the way the baroque manifests itself in new guise—as neo-baroque—in contemporary entertainment media. Neo-baroque entertainment, which is the product of conglomerated entertainment industries with multi-media interests, presents contemporary audiences with new baroque forms of expression that are aligned with late twentieth and early twenty-first century concerns. The neo-baroque combines the visual, the auditory and the textual in ways that parallel the dynamism of seventeenth century baroque form, but that dynamism is expressed in technologically and culturally different ways.

A central characteristic of the baroque is its lack of respect for the limits of the frame. Closed forms are replaced by open structures that favour a dynamic and expanding polycentrism. Stories refuse to be contained within a single structure, expanding their narrative universes into further sequels and serials. Distinct media cross over into other media, merging with, influencing or being influenced by other media forms. The grand illusions of entertainment spectacles such as theme park attractions like the Revenge of the Mummy Ride (2004) at Universal Studios and special effects films like Transformers (2007) seek to blur the spaces of fiction and reality. The discovery of “meaning” and order in the universe is reliant upon an audience that’s capable of traversing multiple “texts”: a “fuller” understanding of the Lost television series, for example, relies on an audience that engages with an array of texts—the television show, The Lost Experience mixed media role-playing game, online games, all collide to offer and depict a richer fictional universe. The baroque confronts its viewer/participant: being plunged into a polycentric world that’s driven by serial logic, we’re continually challenged through our interpretative and sensory capabilities to make order out of chaos. But we need not only look to the world of entertainment to see this in action—the formal properties of the baroque have infiltrated our society on a grand scale.

In Universe of the Mind Yuri Lotman argues that cultures operate within the spatial boundaries of the semiosphere, the semiosphere being
the semiotic space in which cultures define their borders. Symbols, he explains, are “important mechanisms of cultural memory” that relate to and are the products of their cultural context. The semiotic space that is culture generates smaller units of *semiosis* that may take the form of cultural artifacts such as paintings, architecture and films. In his *The Life of Forms in Art*, originally published in 1934, Henri Focillon arrives at similar conclusions, but through alternate means. For Focillon, art is also understood in spatial terms: “everything” he stated “is form and life itself is form.” For Focillon, formal patterns in art are in perpetual states of motion, being specific to time but also spanning across it, as such, form in art is an entity that isn’t limited to the constraints of time or specific historical periods. As such, baroque form continued and continues to have a life, despite being codified specifically in relation to the rough temporal confines of the seventeenth century. Can cultures at different points in time create and repeat dominant spatial forms that perceptually, sensorially and intellectually engage their audience in like-minded ways? This is a difficult question to answer, and perhaps it is one that can never be answered with certainty. One thing that’s clear, however, is that writers have persistently located a baroque logic in works that have escaped the limits of the seventeenth century. The uncanny worlds of Edgar Allan Poe, the delightful realm of Frank Baum’s Oz, the miniature worlds contained within peep boxes, the grand spectacle and exuberance of early Hollywood within and beyond the movie palaces, the political and politicized fictions of South American literature—these examples, which span the centuries, have all been categorized as generating a baroque spatial order that places its audience firmly within its shifting borders, asking that we engage with it according to its own brand logic (see Klein, 2004; Alvarez-Borland & Borland 1998; Calloway, 1994).

Throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, baroque form continued to alter its identity as a style in diverse areas of the arts, continuing restlessly to move on to new metamorphic states and cultural contexts. Yet it’s been in the last few decades that a neo-baroque logic has taken deeper root across diverse areas of the arts, continuing restlessly to move on to new metamorphic states and contexts while being nurtured by a culture that’s attracted to the visual and sensorial seductiveness that’s integral to baroque form. A baroque mentality has again become

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2 Ibid., 104.
crystallized on a grand scale within the context of contemporary culture, and this anthology presents the reader with new articulations of this neo-baroque expression: the paintings of Emilio Vedova, Lucian Freud, Jenny Saville and Jeff Koons; the complexities of Chaos Theory and the Mandelbrot set’s visualisation of the spatial properties of the fractal; the intensely intertextual and self-reflexive art of the Mexican artists Rodolfo Nieto and Daniela Rossell, and the Brazilian art of Adriana Varejão; and the wondrous, fluid lines that generate the architectural spaces that burst from the mind of Frank Gehry—these and other artists of our times are viewed through the lens of the baroque, with the result that exciting new discoveries and interpretations emerge.

Angela Ndalianis
University of Melbourne

Works Cited


A number of recent exhibitions have focused on contemporary responses to the Baroque including *Going for Baroque: 18 Artists Fascinated by the Baroque and Rococo* at The Contemporary / Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore (1995), *Eine barocke Party* at the Kunsthalle in Vienna (2001), *Ultra Baroque: Aspects of Post-Latin American Art* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego (2001), and *Baroque and Neo-Baroque: The Hell of the Beautiful* at Domus Atrium 2, Salamanca (2006). Just what are these Baroque tendencies? In order to answer that question one must first ask a deceptively simple question, what is Baroque? Scholars keep asking this question and every period seems to produce a distinctly different response. The term seems to have been first coined in the eighteenth century by Johann Winckelmann and Heinrich Wölfflin was the first art historian to try to define a Baroque style in his *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (*Principles of Art History*) (1915). His methodology was based on binary oppositions, placing characteristics of the Baroque in contrast to those of the Renaissance. Thus, he created an antagonistic relationship between styles and a method of organization that breaks down when more variables than he chose are entered into the system. Over time the Baroque came to be understood as an anti-classical style (although it often incorporates or builds upon the classical) and has been commonly characterized by drama, extravagance, extreme virtuosity, and excess, in general. The main problem of the Baroque is the question of its definition. A notoriously derogatory term when first coined, does it represent a definable style or a place in space and time (Europe and its colonial diaspora in the seventeenth century)?

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1 Concise, but cogent, discussions of the development of the concept of the Baroque can be found in John Martin, *Baroque* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977),
definition is that there are vast differences between, for example, the work
of seventeenth century Italian ceiling fresco painters, Dutch still life
painters, and French landscape pastoralists. The problem with the second
definition is that it is so broad and all-encompassing one wonders just how
it can help us to conceptualize the art of the period. John Martin discussed
this “problem of style” and stated

Let us admit at the outset that this is an impossible task. Not only is there
no homogeneity of style in the Baroque period, but one is tempted to speak
of the very diversity of styles as one of its distinguishing features.  

I would argue that this diversity is indeed a general characteristic and
perhaps this is partly why, in the millennial period, there is so much
interest in the Baroque—we are seeking ways to find parallels between the
art of then and the art of our own diverse, pluralistic culture. Kerry
Downes has commented that the Baroque, because of its direct appeal to the
viewer, “is an art related more immediately to the beholder than to
abstract principles” and in our culture, one that puts so much emphasis on
the psychology and needs of the individual, the Baroque can feel quite
familiar.

The concept of the Neo-Baroque emerged in the 1980s with the
publication of several notable studies in France: Christine Buci-
Glucksmann’s La raison baroque: de Baudelaire à Benjamin (Baroque
Reason: From Baudelaire to Benjamin) (1984) and La Folie du voir: de
l’esthétique baroque (Madness of Seeing: the Baroque Aesthetic) (1986)
found Modernist characteristics present in the Baroque period; Gilles
Deleuze’s Le Pli: Leibniz et du baroque (The Fold: Leibniz and the
Baroque) (1988) asserted that “the Baroque can be stretched beyond its
precise historical limits”; and Omar Calabrese’s L’Età neobarocca (The

4 Use of the term “Neo-Baroque” here should not be confused with that used to
describe the architectural revival style of the nineteenth century such as Charles
Garnier’s Paris Opéra (1857-74). In addition, it is worth noting that all of these
books were not available in English translation until the 1990s and so a broader
response to them, whether critical or in practice, has been a bit delayed in
American scholarship. Admittedly, my discussion of these complex works is
cursory.
5 Gilles Deleuze, The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque, trans. Tom Conley
(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 33.
Age of Neo-Baroque) (1987) sought out a kind of unified field theory of culture to find a “contemporary ‘taste’ that links the most disparate objects, from science to mass communications, from art to everyday habits.” Calabrese defines the Neo-Baroque as “a search for, and valorization of, forms that display a loss of entirety, totality, and system in favor of instability, polydimensionality, and change” and, as such, his ideas are rather similar to those of Postmodernism in general. In this respect he has been criticized for trying to replace “Postmodern” with “Neo-Baroque.” Nonetheless, Calabrese strongly informed Angela Ndalianis in her increasingly influential study Neo-Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment (2004). Ndalianis defines the Neo-Baroque as a multivalent system that evolves in a complex, sometimes indirect, manner and is characterized as cyclical, serial, reflexive, and spectacular. She notes that, instead of rigidity, “boundaries are fluid, and each new fragment introduced into the series whole by necessity transforms the whole.” This is not so very different from Jakob Rosenberg’s premise that the Baroque is best understood as a system of progression in which there are multiple components that comprise the whole of the Baroque.

Overall, Ndalianis describes a present that is highly interactive with the past; in this regard, she states:

We have reached a point at which the old and the new coexist, when older paradigms that dominated throughout the modern era are being unsettled and contested. This is a time of cultural shift; chaos and uncertainty appear to reign—and from the ashes a new order emerges.

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7 Ibid., xii.
8 Roger Scruton, “Neo-Baroque,” The Times Literary Supplement no. 4681 (December 18 1992): 3. Scruton acerbically states: “Unfortunately Calabrese has come too late on the scene; ‘neo’ will never again be tempting to those who have tasted the delights of ‘post.’”
9 Ndalianis, Neo-Baroque Aesthetics, 64. It is important to note that although Ndalianis draws from art history, her study focuses on entertainment media, especially the intertextuality of film, comic books, graphic novels, and video games. Many of her ideas are being transformed and applied back to art.
Is Neo-Baroque just another term for Postmodern? The answer is yes and no, because while the Neo-Baroque is certainly a Postmodern manifestation, not all Postmodern trends are Neo-Baroque. Postmodernism and the Neo-Baroque represent not dissolution, but new beginnings; in this respect they represent a new kind of “new.” Whereas Modernists constantly strived for new methods and modes of expression that broke cleanly from the past, Neo-Baroque (and Postmodern) artists have sought to incorporate or reflect upon the past. To use Deleuze’s way of looking at things, they are folding the past into the present.

This book began with a call for papers for a session titled “Baroque Tendencies in Contemporary Art” at the Southeastern College Art Conference in 2006. Part of my rationale for organizing this session was to test the waters, as it were, to see who else was also currently working with these ideas. I was pleasantly surprised by the number of fine and interesting proposals for the conference and saddened that I would have to refuse so many. Eventually, I came to the realization that there was a need for a publication on this topic which would come from diverse points of view and, informed by theory, would focus on artistic practice and production.

The essays are presented in a roughly chronological progression in terms of when the works of art discussed were produced. The first three essays deal with work from the 1960s through the early 1980s and in this respect they mark the transitional period from Modern to Postmodern. Laura Petican’s essay focuses on the postwar Italian movement, Arte Povera, and describes it as a reaction against modernist trends and notes how it was influenced by the Baroque. Using the term “baroque-centricity” Petican sees Arte Povera as akin to theatre in terms of how it manipulates space and defines viewer relationships and she expands Thomas Munro’s taxonomic explication of style as a way of characterizing styles by traits, not by visual characteristics. In this way it is not so very different from the concept of integrated media and coextensive space often referred to in Baroque art and architecture as gesamtkunstwerk. Adrian R. Duran also focuses on artistic production within the Arte Povera movement and positions them in a transitional zone between eastern and western political forces and between abstraction and representation. In particular, he focuses on the work of Emilio Vedova, especially his plurimi, as representing a trend away from High Modernism and movement toward what he describes as the heterogeneity of the late 1960s. Notably, he envisions the Baroque phase of contemporary art as the beginning of Postmodernism. Also focusing on transition, Hélène Trespeuch examines the transformation of Frank Stella from Minimalist to
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Neo-Baroque artist. Expanding upon ideas presented in Irving Lavin’s essay, “Going Baroque,” and emphasizing Stella’s significant art historical training, she observes how the Baroque offered artists a way out from the limiting, absolute style of Abstract Expressionism. She finds similarity in how the Baroque (counter-reformation art, specifically) and Postmodernism have both been born out of crisis. Interestingly Trespeuch also analyzes Stella’s reception in France as connected to the time when significant new interest in the Baroque and Neo-Baroque was emerging.

Both Michelle Lang and Catherine Wilcox-Titus deal with figurative painting and issues of the female body. Lang, focusing on British realist painter Lucian Freud, examines his relationship to Rubens and Rembrandt, to whom he is often compared, as well as to his younger contemporary, Jenny Saville. She also explicates Freud’s equivocal position regarding how he both invoked and avoided comparison with the Baroque and Neo-Baroque. Catherine Wilcox-Titus, also concerned with figurative painting, studies the work of Jenny Saville, Lisa Yuksavage and John Currin. She focuses on the centrality of the female body as spectacle in the contexts of both Baroque and contemporary painting after its short hiatus during the High Modernist period. She describes the slippery meta-narratives in the work of all three artists as a kind of mutation as well as addresses the complexities of Saville’s and Yuksavage’s situation as women artists painting women. Transformation is also at the root of Raphaël Bouvier’s challenging new way of thinking about Jeff Koons—not as Neo-Dada commodities broker (although this role is certainly important) but as an artist working with a larger program of transforming the common viewer, of creating a situation for the viewer where the banal becomes the tool of metamorphosis and baptism its iconographic index.

Miranda Lash and Christopher Fulton bring a much-needed broader context to this discussion by situating their explorations in the art of Latin America. Lash explicates the sources of Adrianna Varejão’s Tileworks series which link seventeenth century Portuguese azulejo tiles, accounts of Brazilian cannibalism, and Oswalde de Andrade’s 1928 modernist “Cannibalist Manifesto.” Building upon Elizabeth Armstrong and Victor Zamudio-Taylor’s assertion of the Baroque as an attitude rather than a style, she characterizes the Latin Neo-Baroque as a de-centered, postcolonial hybrid (in some ways not so different from Wilcox-Titus’ mutant) in which cannibalism—absorbing the enemy and cannibalizing the past—becomes symbolic for dynamic hybridity. Fulton argues that Mexico maintains the closest ties to the Baroque even after periods of calculated distance and he demonstrates that that the rise of the Neo-Baroque in Mexico runs concurrently with its increased global
connectivity. Fulton asserts that Mexican artists, by reassessing (or “re-educating”) their position in relation to the Baroque, have recalled and reformed the Baroque into new contemporary artistic practice.

Irene Nero, in her meticulous study of Frank Gehry’s highly acclaimed Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, concentrates on architectural space. Nero envisions the museum in Bilbao as historicist but not as a revival style and, defining it as the first truly Neo-Baroque building, she uses it to classify a new style: techno-morphism. Nero situates the building into context and illuminates its historical precedents and influences, geo-political issues and pressures, and the use of new technologies to create dynamic, interactive, theatrical and, in some ways, hyperreal space.

The volume concludes with an essay by artist Richard Reddaway who is strongly interested in the visual semblance of Chaos Theory and the Baroque. Reddaway asks many questions about similarities—how we find and make correspondences as well as how we understand the relationship between ideas and objects.

The essays in this book provide a representative sample of scholarship as it is developing in this increasingly important area of research. This book is not intended to be all-inclusive nor definitive and it is my hope that it provides broader context and a point of departure for more analysis of how the contemporary meets and deals with the Baroque.

Works Cited


CHAPTER TWO
BAROQUE-CENTRICITY IN ARTE POVERA
LAURA PETICAN

In 1967, the Italian art critic Germano Celant held an exhibition at the Galleria La Bertesca in Genoa in which a group of artists were presented to the local art scene as a conceptually integrated movement. The exhibition, titled “Arte povera—Im spazio,” included Alighiero Boetti, Luciano Fabro, Jannis Kounellis, Giulio Paolini, Pino Pascali and Emilio Prini. Later, the group expanded to incorporate Giovanni Anselmo, Pier Paolo Calzolari, Piero Gilardi, Mario Merz, Marisa Merz, Giuseppe Penone, Michelangelo Pistoletto and Gilberto Zorio. These artists were united in their interest in aesthetic experience as a vital act, one removed from the consumerist impulse of the 1950s and the industrial homogenization of contemporary reality. They sought to return the artistic act to its essential elements and readdress the relationship between art and spectator, drawing on the expressive capacity of natural and synthetic materials and their manipulation in space and over time.

With an experimental conception of the aesthetic act, the classical tradition so pervasive in the Italian aesthetic context represented an outmoded and restrictive language of investigation. As these artists worked towards a representation of their contemporary reality that reached beyond the local and specific, Italy’s cultural identity entered a new phase that signaled a rupture with traditional modes of representation perpetuated in the derivative tendencies of Italian abstraction and social realism characteristic of the immediate post-war era.

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2 Kounellis was born in Piraeus, Greece in 1936 and emigrated to Rome, Italy in 1956.
However, the innovation and experimentation that has characterized the group’s work was not born in isolation; as Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev states, “they did not emerge from a vacuum.” In this sense, the break with tradition has perhaps been overstated in scholarship on Arte Povera. The works, while unprecedented in the collusion of materials, energetic forces and spectator involvement, draw on a national cultural heritage that has informed artists’ aesthetic sensibility and provided historical context for the movement. The baroque has manifested in Arte Povera as a series of pluralistic contrasts: it has provided a compendium of themes, concepts and techniques in which to base new expressions while remaining open enough to facilitate the departure from obsolete artistic practices. Works carry reminiscences of past and present, innovation and tradition, while the movement’s protagonists, its artists and followers, have recognized the role played by the baroque in establishing both a new visual vocabulary and a national identity. Baroque tendencies represent an environmental influence on these artists and their works, while association with the authority and renown of a national, historical cache of cultural capital has been instrumental in establishing a place in the international artistic arena. As Paolo Portoghesi writes:

Just as grandchildren often resemble their grandparents, and certain features of the family reappear after centuries, the world now emerging is searching freely in memory, because it knows how to find its own “difference” in the removed repetition and utilization of the entire past.

Art historians and critics have since responded to the works and primary texts. Celant’s text centers on themes connecting the conceptual and the concrete, forming alliances between materials, their energies and the viewer, in situations of heightened awareness and dramatic vitality. These concepts form the ideological and practical foundations of Arte Povera and are echoed in the wider reception of the group. References to the baroque in Arte Povera scholarship and artists’ statements take the form of both literal analogies between works and conceptual allusions. Notions of the relationship between art and nature, the idea of the work of art as a dynamic, living experience, a tactile interpretation of materials and

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5 See note 1.
their inherent energies and a preoccupation with the expressive capacity of essential elements (space, time, light, gravity), while informing the major tenets of baroque scholarship, pervade discussions of Arte Povera. Jannis Kounellis refers unambiguously to baroque works, among others, in a statement of 1979 that speaks to a general atmospheric influence of the baroque in his artistic production:

my work is not surrealistic, the effect is theatrical, it is baroque….Baroque is: the cupolas of Borromini, Bernini’s obelisk with the little elephant, a few works of Michelangelo, the fronts of many Venetian churches, the Neapolitan Madonnas, the Roman fountains, and this kind of dramatic artifice that is around all Baroque art.6

A repertoire of common themes and conceptual alliances among Arte Povera artists and their works contributes to the notion of a baroque-centric tendency in their works, conceptualized below in a review of scholarly works on the baroque and exemplified in statements such as that of Giovanni Anselmo in 1969: “I, the world, things, life, we are situations of energy and the point is not to crystallize such situations, though maintaining them open and alive is a function of our living,”7 or Alighiero Boetti’s interest in nature: “There are extraordinary things which derive from the mineral world, the vegetable world and the animal world.”8

The emergence of Arte Povera on the national and international artistic scene in the 1960s marked an evolving relationship with Italy’s past, based on a re-evaluation of its cultural heritage. Prior to World War II, the achievements of the Italian Renaissance provided the standard for cultural criticism, summoned in efforts to assert cultural authority, as in Mussolini’s rationalist architectural program and a general “call to order” based on classical aesthetic principles. As George Mosse writes, “the Italian fascist political style attempted to concretize the glorious past even while calling for the new man of the future.”9 Arte Povera’s efforts to move beyond such doctrine demanded consideration of its legacy in order to surpass its constraints. As Christov-Bakargiev states, these artists,

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6 Robin White, “Interview with Jannis Kounellis,” View, no. 1, Oakland (March 1979), 8-21, quoted in Christov-Bakargiev, Arte Povera, 249.
like their Baroque predecessors of the 1600s—seemed particularly drawn to a vision that would disrupt the traditional boundaries between the real and the fictional, the natural and the artificial, the past and the present, the historical in art and the “new.” This was done by engaging in a translation of their cultural heritage into a contemporary language and context.  

A new perspective on the past did not imply abandonment, but a conscious acknowledgement of an inheritance and the capacity to develop and adapt its characteristics to a dramatically altered environment in the post-war era. The new course of artistic enquiry stemmed from advances forged by the Futurists, with their dynamic, machine-inspired interpenetrations of space, and later, by the tactile, spatially interactive works of Informel in the 1940s and 1950s. Works by Alberto Burri, Lucio Fontana and Emilio Vedova paved the way for Arte Povera. In this sense, Arte Povera is considered not a later manifestation of its immediate predecessors or the baroque per se, but an expression of “baroque-centricity” integrated with contemporary invention and originality.

Analysis of “baroque-centricity” in Arte Povera, based on general concepts or themes associated with the baroque, requires consideration of the term itself, taking account of the baroque’s complex historiography and evolving meaning. Seminal works in baroque historiography have sufficiently outlined the ongoing debate with respect to the term’s definition. Its wide range of meaning attests to its flexibility as an art historical term, but a measure of confusion has accompanied its evolution from a period term to contemporary associations with popular entertainment and spectacle. As Eric Cochrane wrote in 1980,

The meaning of the term “Baroque” has been the object of considerable controversy ever since it was first used in a derogatory sense by the Arcadian literary critics and the neo-classical art critics of the eighteenth century; and to judge from the many academic conferences and colloquies that have been dedicated to it in the last twenty-five years, the controversy is by no means at an end.

The debate that Cochrane refers to has unfolded in a body of scholarship employing the term baroque, in one sense, as an historical, chronological delineation for the art and culture of the seventeenth century, and as a Zeitgeist or general understanding of a unified style or cultural expression

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10 Christov-Bakargiev, “Thrust Into the Whirlwind,” 22.
of an era, a spirit of the age that is recognizable and distinct. From our current perspective, early negative conceptions of the baroque are limiting and outdated, denoting mainly what is described as “a florid and elaborate style in art, architecture, music or literature.”

But beyond the historical trajectory of baroque scholarship, Timothy Hampton writes that the term has become important in poststructuralist criticism and theory. Even as Heinrich Wölfflin stated in 1888, “One can hardly fail to recognize the affinity that our own age in particular bears to the Italian baroque.” The baroque has evolved into an inclusive phrase for postmodern cultural phenomena that defy classification. This neo-baroque is perceived in terms of “instability, poly-dimensionality and change,” and attempts to define the multiplicity and heterogeneity characteristic of late twentieth-century popular culture, as in Omar Calabrese’s *Neo-Baroque: A Sign of the Times* (1992). A seminal work in the field, Angela Ndalianis’ *Neo-Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary*...

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12 See Bernard C. Heyl, “Meanings of Baroque,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 19, no. 3 (1961): 275. Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768) formulated one of the first applications of the term in a biological model that developed according to a process of origin, maturity and decline. See also Eric Fernie, *Art History and its Methods* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1999), 68. Fernie discusses this model as outlined in Winckelmann’s *Gedanken uber die Nachahmung der Greischiechen Werke* of 1755, and *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums* of 1764. Derogatory evaluations of the baroque continued in works such as Jacob Burckhardt’s (1818-1897) *Die Cicerone* of 1855, and his *Die Kultur Der Renaissance in Italien* of 1860, which proposed that the artistic production of the seventeenth century represented a decline into overt sensuality and naturalist tendencies.


14 Timothy Hampton, “Baroque Topographies: Literature/History/Philosophy,” *Yale French Studies* 80 (1991): 2. Hampton writes, “Michel Foucault’s influential work on early seventeenth-century models of representation and on seventeenth-century institutions of normalization, Walter Benjamin’s often mentioned but rarely studied thesis on the German Baroque *Trauerspiel*, and Michel de Certeau’s studies of mystical discourse, to name only the most famous, all suggest the importance of the Baroque in both the genesis of modernity and the critical vocabulary of what has come to be called postmodernism. Indeed, some writers have even spoken recently of a ‘neo-Baroque’ characterizing modernity, or of a post-modern Baroque.”


Entertainment (2004), is concerned with notions of seriality and the interactive aspects of postmodern mass entertainment and spectacle. These works focus on the baroque as an expression of the spectacular nature of postmodern, popular culture, where imagery is multiplied, disseminated and consumed in an ever-increasing demand for sensory stimulation.

The novelty and openness of this notion of baroque has allowed for a wider dissemination of the term, occasionally interpreted according to its early negative connotations. With respect to an exhibition titled UltraBaroque: Aspects of Post-Latin American Art, Edward J. Sullivan writes, “The work of the de la Torre brothers is baroque in the sense of utilizing their additive esthetic to defy conventional notions of taste and propriety.” The exhibition in its entirety offers various possibilities for a contemporary baroque expressed through notions of drama, theatricality, an exploration of the senses and the role of the viewer. Similarly, Going for Baroque: 18 Contemporary Artists Fascinated with the Baroque and Rococo, proposed an open reading of the baroque and juxtaposed contemporary and historical works to examine their interconnections, guided by curator Lisa G. Corrin’s interest in the “intersections between the past and present through presentations of cultural artifacts in fresh contexts that raise issues which cross time periods and disciplines.”

Irving Lavin’s catalogue essay conceptualizes the historiography of the baroque and contextualizes contemporary artists’ appropriations of its motifs. He describes Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s 1995 work with Berlin’s Reichstag as, “a mighty baroque extravaganza—the exuberant spirit of joy and celebration are all features we associate with European culture in the period often defined spiritually as the age of the Counter Reformation, politically as the age of Absolute Monarchy.”

With this compendium of historical periods, styles, texts and cultural phenomena, the necessity of establishing a base of “common denominators” consistently associated with the baroque becomes apparent. In a discussion of baroque tendencies in Arte Povera, a measure of

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openness will ensure that the heterogeneity of the works in question is observed without imposing an overly rigid system of analysis. This analysis will address questions such as that posed by Heyl: “What pervading quality or what several qualities...does one find in the Baroque period?” “Pervading qualities” are general concepts that have persisted throughout the baroque debate; pervasive, yet not uniformly present in all works of baroque art and culture. The term baroque will be conceived “as a varied style, wide in scope.” However, this breadth and flexibility is not without limits, which are defined according to general concepts factoring consistently in the evolving meaning of baroque. This conceptual model represents a generalized impression based on common threads that weave through key texts.

In this sense, Thomas Munro’s essay, “Style in the Arts: A Method of Stylistic Analysis” (1946), offers a practical tool for defining style in a checklist of terminology and process. He identifies traits, types and styles, wherein traits are conceived as descriptive or evaluative; i.e. “red” or “beautiful”; “simple” types are composed of one or more traits, “compound descriptive types” are composed of multiple traits and “style” is defined as follows:

A style of art is a compound descriptive type which requires a comparatively large number of specifications for clear definition. It consists of a combination of traits or characteristics which tend to recur together in different works of art, or have done so in the art of some particular place and period. It is a recurrent trait-complex; a distinctive cluster or configuration of interrelated traits.

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22 Ibid., 279. Heyl qualifies his position: “Multiple meanings for that style do not deny a certain kind of stylistic unity. The recognition by all critics of telling stylistic differences between the art of the Baroque period and of any other proves this...Imprecision and complexity are inherent in the only concept of Baroque style that is useful and meaningful. This conception is meaningful in a manner similar to our conception of Gothic art: that is to say, we may recognize in Baroque art, as we do in Gothic or in Renaissance art, many different stylistic qualities. All these are implied by the general terms. The importance of each quality will vary considerably because of differences in artists, times, and places. Some qualities will be present and some may not. But together they form composite images which make up the broad stylistic concept.”
24 Ibid., 129.
He explains that traits are sometimes “complex and variable in themselves” and can be called “constituent trait-complexes, which combine and cooperate to produce a style.”

In establishing a set of concepts central to the baroque, Munro’s notion of the compound descriptive type will be employed, identifying abstract, recurrent traits—a constituent trait-complex. With this, Munro’s notion of the changing history of a style-name will be called upon, wherein the term baroque undergoes a transition in which an historic division (the seventeenth century) becomes a concept of style (or vice versa). This style concept (series of traits) becomes a recurrent type. For Munro, the construction of a trait-complex poses the question of whether a new name for the resulting style is necessary or if the term in question continues to be useful and appropriate. In this model, when applied to an analysis of the baroque in Arte Povera, the conventional style name baroque, maintaining a generalized conception of its referents, will be adapted to “baroque-centricity,” to emphasize that its application to Arte Povera works does not suggest a literal appropriation or imitation of the baroque, nor a neo-baroque expression of spectacle and seriality, but a mode of expression centered on abstract baroque traits. In this compound descriptive type, the constituent trait-complex represents key concepts or traits found in major scholarly works on the baroque. A further qualification of terminology introduces the notion of general essentials, defined as “traits regarded as most characteristic, basic, necessary and distinctive for the style in general, conceived extensively, as applied to the whole main field of distribution.” In this constituent trait-complex, the general essentials define those characteristics most central to an abstract, generalized conception of the baroque. An interpretation of Munro’s terminology and process in this construction appears as follows:

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25 Ibid., 130.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid., 136.
28 Ibid., 134. Munro notes that in the abstract, recurrent form of “baroque,” the term is uncapitalized. The uncapitalized form will be used in this study.
29 Ibid., 142. Munro writes, “Historians of art and culture, noting occasional surprising resemblances between remote styles of art, sometimes describe them by extending the concept of a familiar historic style (esp. European) to cover such remote but similar styles. Replacing former different names for similar styles, or supplementing them. A phase in the broad, comparative approach to cultural history.”
30 Ibid., 137. Munro’s “field of distribution” refers to “the style; the place, period, division of history, art or arts, etc., in which the style is regarded as having flourished.”
Compound descriptive type: “baroque-centricity”

Constituent trait-complex (general essentials):
Trait 1  Trait 2  Trait 3  Trait 4  Trait 5

Arte Povera works

For an analysis of baroque-centricity in Arte Povera, the field of distribution for baroque works is centered on Italian examples, considering the geographical location of the artists and the national context in which their production evolved. Other European baroque works will be cited where appropriate, originating from a period loosely designated as the seventeenth century, and reflecting the porous quality of spatial and temporal boundaries in both artistic production and baroque scholarship. On the other hand, Munro cautions that a definition may be “too broad and vague to exclude other styles as intended.”31 The trait-complex outlined will indeed appear general, but its specificity is disclosed in the particular manifestation of general essentials in Arte Povera works; a distinctive baroque-centric expression transpires.32 This analysis will support a “conceptual approach to definitions of historic styles,”33 employing an inductive method that draws its constituent trait-complex from analysis of specific scholarly texts.

Taking works of Wölfflin, Marshall Brown, William Fleming, Giuliano Briganti and John Rupert Martin as representative of the larger debate on the baroque, a body of traits commonly associated with the baroque is identified: an interest in space, time, nature, a preoccupation with the energy or dynamism associated with materials and the theatrical expression of emotion and sensation.34 While these authors may continue

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31 Ibid., 138.
32 Ibid., 144. As Munro explains, “A style will appear as a distinctive and relatively persistent set of important correlated traits during a certain period. It is an unstable system of variable factors in art which has reached a condition of temporary, partial equilibrium.”
33 Ibid., 139.
the debate with respect to the relative value of these themes, it remains that their persistence within baroque works of art, as well as in baroque scholarship, is constant. These are the same themes that are identified in such disparate, baroque cultural forms as neo-baroque mass entertainment and spectacle. Their adaptation to a definitive model of baroque-centricity appears as follows:

Compound descriptive type: “baroque-centricity”

Constituent trait-complex (general essentials):

- Trait 1: **Space**
- Trait 2: **Tension and Theatricality**
- Trait 3: **Time**
- Trait 4: **Materials and the Senses**
- Trait 5: **Nature**

Arte Povera works

These five traits or general essentials form a working definition of baroque-centricity that will be applied in an analysis of Arte Povera works. The traits are general and abstract and may be applicable to other periods or movements, however their specificity becomes apparent in their particular expression in Arte Povera works. The works will be analyzed under the heading of one trait, but may also be found under other traits; i.e. an exploration of space in Pistoletto’s *Mirror paintings* does not preclude an interest in time, materials, and tension and theatricality, for example.

Pistoletto’s, *Quadri specchianti*, a body of works begun in 1961, exemplify baroque-centricity in their use of space and time as subject matter, material and protagonist and emerge from the tradition of painting in their two-dimensional surface and flat application of material. But the choice of unconventional “painting” materials—photographic images transposed onto tissue paper and applied onto a two-dimensional, reflective surface—renders these works living entities that extend into the space and time of the spectator, eclipsing even the three dimensions of a sculptural work and eradicating the boundaries between life and art, the past, present and future, real and fictive space. 35

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35 Germano Celant, *Pistoletto* (Venice: Palazzo Grassi, 1976), 93. The *Mirror paintings* do not use mirrors in fact, but the reflective surfaces of polished metal. A mirror was understood to impose a distance between the work and spectator, as the silvered surface and transposed image are separated by glass, occupying different spatial planes. The polished metal surface permits a closer spatial integration