

Big Dog Donkey Robot: Cultures of Adaptation and Continuation

Let's start: assembling by cutting, folding and gluing, pin here, stick there one piece of paper to the previous, then on to the next, and the next, and the next, and so on. I have an idea where this paper trail will go, and it depends on the space of the gallery: walls, floor, ceiling and the folds between, the corners and edges of things.

The work is called *untitled (pornography)* and it has very little substance and no "plan". Rather it is an "operation" that unfolds over time to create a meandering, non-linear object that is Chaotic, Complex and looks, well, baroque.

To say this artwork "looks" baroque is to make a comparison on the basis of appearance; this thing I made looks like that thing I saw. *Visual* artists, architects and designers spend a lot of their time considering how things look, and use appearance as a tool with which to construct visual arguments. So this is where I start, whilst being aware that such an approach is not a necessarily straightforward or rigorous way to pursue a hypothesis. Particularly in the Sciences this method would lead astray as often as not: for example, the monarch and viceroy butterflies share similar shape, colour and wing pattern, but to claim they are the same species would upset conventional taxonomies. Similarly, although some Art Historians have found the baroque in many times and places because the artworks in question look baroque, others have doubted such attribution, preferring the baroque as a period¹.

This latter position is problematic, particularly for me as an artist working outside Europe or America. It is an often-stated over-simplification, but one worth remembering: by constructing a linear history of art, conventional Art History marginalizes cultures elsewhere from its single story. Henri Focillon acknowledged the ideological nature of periodization in Art History and the pejorative connotation that still clings to the

¹ Panofsky, Erwin. *Three Essays on Style*.

baroque. The adjective was, after all, first applied by critics of the mid-eighteenth century to artists who pursued extremes of the ridiculous and bizarre in their work. Martin Jay picks up on this, using the baroque as a third term to destabilize the conventional binary opposition between Cartesian perspectivalism and Baconian empiricism². In doing so he posits that there have been a number of scopic regimes operating simultaneously in the modern era, and therefore many ways of seeing and constructing the nature of the world. As the history of the history of the baroque is written and re-written, its territory re-mapped, the baroque is becoming non-linear history, bifurcating into a collection of many baroques, *various* baroques, such as the Hispanic and the Neo. And I would suggest these multitudes are more useful to artists and architects, for they reflect the local and the now.

But why would artists and architects be interested working with the baroque, particularly outside Europe or the Americas? Of what use is the baroque to peoples with no baroque history?

That the baroque was a social and political phenomenon, transported to the Americas to establish and maintain Spanish colonial domination of the indigenous population is well recognized³. However, as observers and theorists of the New World Baroque⁴ have argued, "the colonial subject took advantage of baroque elements in the dominant discourse to create sites and terms for cultural resistance and survival"⁵. The evidence of these contradictory functions is in the architecture, revealed through Gilles Deleuze's figure of the baroque fold⁶. Churches such as Santa María

² Martin Jay "Scopic Regimes of Modernity."

³ José Antonio Maravall and Leonardo Acosta, as cited by Suárez

⁴ Jose Lezama Lima, Alejo Carpentier and Severo Sarduy, as cited by Salgado

⁵ César Augusto Salgado, p. 317

⁶ Deleuze, Gilles. *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

de Tonantzintla and San Francisco Acatepec, Mexico, are formed as monads, with interiors almost uncontained and un-sustained by exteriors. Their ornate frontal facades, particularly that of the church of San Francisco, reveal one intent as signposts calling the people to worship, almost billboards advertising the imposing power and the glory of the Church and the Spanish colonial project. Yet the interior space still comes as a surprise: such an experience of excess, a wealth of ornamentation that this place cannot be grasped in its entirety, it dissolves into light, gold and silver. A kind of indeterminate no-space is created, for where do walls end and ceilings start, and how does one relate in a bodily sense to this place, except to feel as nothing, lost in desire? One is lost to the Catholic God, but look closely, clear away blurred vision, and there, hidden in the folds, are the faces of the indigenous artisans who built these churches, and their cultural and spiritual beliefs. The local continues.

The local didn't remain hidden. If, as Juan Luis Suárez contends, the Hispanic Baroque is a complex dynamic system, the trans-Atlantic interaction occurring over time between the colonised and the colonising generated a new and persisting baroque culture. Suárez writes a description of the baroque as "as a mechanism of adaptation, and as a set of technologies that allows for the visualization of the complexity that human life keeps creating"⁷. This is so beguiling, for by aligning the theoretical basis on which the baroque rests with contemporary information theory, the operational mechanism that generates it is revealed. This way of seeing can then be applied elsewhere, used to look for the baroque in unusual places.

Aotearoa New Zealand is a culture described by two cultures: Maori, the Tangata Te Whenua, and those often described using the Maori word Pakeha, the various peoples that came as a result of 19th century colonisation. However, unlike in the Americas, neither of these cultures individually has a baroque history: the one because amongst the British

⁷ Suárez p.35

colonisers the baroque had by the mid-eighteenth century been marginalized and replaced by Classical styles such as neo-Palladianism⁸, the other because its visual culture has a pre-colonial history entirely outside European reference⁹. So, whereas in the Americas the baroque is a mechanism of colonisation, in Aotearoa New Zealand this could not be the case. If there are baroque characteristics to be found in the visual culture of New Zealand's early colonial period, then they would be manifest consequent to and as a result of colonisation.

Deirdre Brown in her survey *Maori Architecture: From fale to whareniui and beyond* writes of a short-lived period in colonial New Zealand, the first four decades of the nineteenth century, during which Maori artisans worked under the supervision of missionaries and rangatira to produce churches with Gothic exteriors and interiors rich in Maori adornment¹⁰. Rangiatea Church in Otaki is an example of this hybridism: a simple New-World timber neo-Gothic structure filled with kowhaiwhai decoration. Similarly, Roger Neich in *Painted Histories* outlines the brief flourishing of Maori figurative painting in the 1870s that appropriated European imagery and styles. Neither Brown nor Neich describe these as baroque, and there is too little visual evidence for such a claim to be made. But, that these hybrid styles came into existence points to the baroque as a possibility, a latent operation waiting for sufficiently refined interaction to occur. And by refined I mean the point at which European culture could recognize itself in relation to Maori, to become Pakeha, and for Maori to return (return as in tennis) the vision of New Zealand culture to Pakeha. So, has Aotearoa New Zealand now achieved this, is it a becoming post-colonial place? If the two cultures have rubbed together and, amongst other things, such a complex baroque (bi)culture has emerged this should be evidenced in the work of its contemporary artists.

⁸ Timothy Mowl and Brian Earnshaw

⁹ Sydney Moko Mead, p.30

¹⁰ Deirdre Brown, p. 44

And it is, I look and I see symptoms of the baroque: the excess demonstrated by Reuben Patterson, Peter Robinson, and Catherine Bagnall, ideas of space and structure in the installations of Jeena Shin and Joanna Langford, the complexity in Grant Takle and Reweti Arapere's painting and the wandering conversations in Terry Urbahn's videos.

Urbahn's *The Sacred Hart* is an odd beast: a collection of local characters from his home town, New Plymouth, sit eating, drinking and talking at a long table while the camera pans slowly back and forth. If this provincial pastiche of da Vinci's *The Last Supper*, mixed with Derek Jarman's *Caravaggio* and Peter Greenaway's *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*, isn't baroque enough, then its almost pointless meandering structure certainly is. Conversations happen as they do; stories follow one path then another, circling round and about, going everywhere and nowhere. The existence of this kind of non-linear structure in the time-based arts is well recognised, and Angela Ndalianis identifies its baroque quality in *Neo-Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment*. However, similar non-linearity can be achieved in static plastic media, as Joanna Langford's sculptural installations demonstrate. *The Flower People* is assembled without set plan, its miniature landscapes of cities, clouds, flours and people teeter precariously in space, only just there, but still seriously defying gravity, scale and the reality of building. In Langford's pink biscuity plastic bag places, one is truly transported to heaven, going where the congregations visiting baroque churches have always gone before.

Catherine Bagnall's *Tramping in Frocks* is a performed work that resulted in sets of photographs and video of the artist in the landscape wearing ball gowns. The work reflects a delicious tension between the codes that govern the two activities of tramping (or hiking) in nature and the very cultured experience of wearing dresses of heavy brocades, light chiffons, silks and lace. This frisson generates an acuity of sensation, especially touch and smell, a very a baroque sense of one's own body as lived experience, the site of physical desire in the world.

If in Bagnall's work clothes make the woman, then in Rewiti Arapere's altar shaped paintings the man is made desire, engorged to beyond sufficiency. Alike in both form and visual excess to the altars found in Latin American colonial churches, his painting layers imagery that references, and exceeds, traditional Maori carving to create powerful statements of visual cacophony. Yet in this work Arapere also makes continual reference to street art and hip hop culture, creating a seamless interplay between the contemporary and the traditional, the local and the global.

Again, the baroque expresses a social politic, and it is perhaps this kind interaction, between the local and the global that points to why the baroque is interesting in Aotearoa New Zealand, a culture without an obvious baroque history, and suggests what Europe might find interesting in the example of the New Zealand baroque.

So I introduce *Big Dog* as both an analogy and not. Unlike the animations in George Lucas's *Star Wars* or the dressed-up actor androids in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* or *Alien*, *Big Dog* is an actual walking robot with a character that is both disconcertingly real and strangely disturbing. It is a product of the American technology company Boston Dynamics, and like so much new technology coming out of the United States, it has a "defense" capacity. The euphemism conceals its potential neo-colonial function as an agent of the new global order. It is a modern conquistador's donkey, a very baroque machine. Conversely the baroque is *Big Dog*, for it too is an agent of globalization, one of the many forms of culture that originate in Europe or America but emerge worldwide.

Big Dog's ability to respond to its changing environment, its complexity, provides it with a "dynamically balanced trot gait" that has "go anywhere" stability and a rugged emergent character remarkably like the donkey it mimics. This is a baroque machine; it has a dogged keeping-goingness strangely similar to the artists working in my biculture. They too keep going. And I feel I need to write this, "They keep going", because none of the artists whose work I have described is a significant international

practitioner, that being next to impossible for any artist working from a small country on the margin of the world. Despite this they all continue, making strong, dynamic work that transcends the pejorative "marginal" connotes, using baroque strategies to make relevant their art. In this way the baroque contradiction is revealed as not so bad, for it realises an expression that is often used but rarely made intelligible: it is a way to think globally and for artists and architects to act locally.

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