



New Baroques – Notes

By Lilia Moritz Schwarcz

About the Title “New Baroques”

This exhibition draws on an inspiration that is at once playful and theoretical.

Playful because it evokes the band Os Novos Baianos, which emerged in 1969 in Salvador, in the context of Brazil’s military dictatorship and shortly after the rise of Tropicalism. The group’s original lineup included Moraes Moreira, Paulinho Boca de Cantor, Luiz Galvão, Baby Consuelo, and Pepeu Gomes. At the time, the country was experiencing intense political repression and censorship, while ideas associated with counterculture were gaining ground: sexual freedom, communal living, a rejection of traditional mores, an appreciation of nature, psychedelic experiences, and an alternative to the way of life considered “normal.”

Os Novos Baianos absorbed much of this atmosphere and brought together different genres, combining samba and samba de roda; rock and electric guitar; bossa nova; choro; frevo; baião and Northeastern rhythms; elements of psychedelia; and the tradition of MPB. The mixture was essential, and the rebelliousness lay much more in aesthetic and behavioral attitudes than in conventional political protest. It is interesting to think of this as a new movement that called for other forms of contestation.

But the fundamental question is theoretical. The exhibition’s title is also a tribute to Severo Sarduy who, particularly in his books *Barroco* (1974) and *Ensayos generales sobre el barroco* (1987), developed the concept of a “Latin American neobaroque” to account for the many adaptations and redefinitions within this highly plural and structurally diverse context, distinct from Europe. For the critic, the style developed here had nothing to do with the survival of colonial baroque; rather, it was a re-signified aesthetic operation. Thus, while the baroque continues to be an art of excess, curves, and theatricality, it destabilizes the idea of a stable and predictable center. It is also, in its own way, an eroticized genre, most clearly exemplified by saints whose bodies, anatomies, and expressions are charged with emotion.

New Baroques therefore refers to the different forms of rereading (in the plural, indeed) of the baroque in Brazil – bringing different times, geographies, spaces, and media into tension and intersection.

Some inspirations for thinking about the Baroque (in the plural)

The first inspiration, in formal terms, comes from reading **Heinrich Wölfflin**’s classic book *Renaissance and Baroque*. Published in 1888, it is still considered a foundational text in this debate.



Wölfflin seeks to understand the transition from Renaissance stability to baroque movement, tension, depth, and theatricality.

It is worth considering this book alongside his other major work, *Principles of Art History*, in which he develops his well-known formal pairs – linear/painterly, plane/depth, closed form/open form, synthesis/excess [AF1], etc. – as a way of thinking through the opposition between Renaissance and baroque.

The second major reference for this exhibition is **Severo Sarduy**, a fundamental thinker for considering the baroque not simply as an artistic style belonging to a particular period, but as a logic governing the production of language, representation, and subjectivity. His contribution is particularly relevant to rethinking the baroque from a Latin American perspective.

Sarduy takes the seventeenth century European baroque as his starting point, but does not seek simply to define it as a historical period associated with the Counter-Reformation, the monarchy, or religious art. In texts such as *Barroco* (1974) and *Escrito sobre un cuerpo* (1969), he develops the concept of the neobaroque, that is, an updating and re-signification of the workings of the baroque in modern and Latin American contexts.

Thus, the baroque ceases to be merely a chronological category and becomes a way of organizing language and reality. Almost a cosmology.

For Sarduy, a fundamental feature of the baroque is excess. Baroque language produces deviations, ornamentation, repetition, ambiguity, and proliferation, rather than conveying an idea of transparency and rationality.

For this reason, the baroque calls into question the idea that there is a stable relationship between word and thing, or between representation and reality. This question is important because Sarduy understands the baroque as engaging precisely with a reality that can no longer be represented in an orderly and univocal manner.

Sarduy also brings the baroque into dialogue with psychoanalysis, particularly Jacques Lacan. Language ceases to be conceived as a transparent instrument used by a sovereign subject. The subject, on the contrary, is produced and traversed by language itself. Hence the importance, in Sarduy, of procedures such as metaphor, substitution, signifier proliferation, and duplication. The baroque is therefore an aesthetic in which meaning never becomes completely stabilized. This idea is grounded in the concept of *retombée*. Broadly speaking, this refers to the idea that different discourses and practices (literature, painting, science, cosmology) may present similar structures without one necessarily being the direct cause of another.

This allows us to think about the baroque beyond art history: it becomes a way of understanding how a particular culture organizes its relationship with the world. And this is perhaps one of Sarduy's most important contributions to our understanding of the baroque.

The baroque introduces multiplicity where unity is expected; deviation where linearity is sought; ambiguity instead of clarity; artificiality where naturalness is pursued; instability where



identity is crystallized.

It is worth emphasizing that, as a Cuban writer, Sarduy situates his neobaroque within a Latin American tradition that includes authors such as José Lezama Lima, Alejo Carpentier and, later, writers such as Néstor Perlongher.

Sarduy therefore rejects the idea that the Latin American baroque is simply a belated and unauthorized copy of the European baroque. For him, Latin America produced its own baroque precisely because its historical experience involves mixture, displacement, and cultural and linguistic heterogeneity.

The neobaroque thus also becomes a way of questioning models of identity based on purity, unity, and origin.

The baroque cannot be reduced to a list of formal characteristics – excess, curves, ornamentation, contrast, etc. Its logic is deeply bound up with proliferation and decentering, present across different periods and forms of language.

The third major inspiration is Lezama Lima, particularly his essays in *La expresión americana* (1971). [AF2] For the author, the American baroque can be understood above all through the concepts of appropriation and transformation, rather than through the idea of passive reception. In this sense, the chapter on “la curiosidad barroca” is particularly important.

In José Lezama Lima’s work, the baroque becomes even broader than an aesthetic category: it is a form of knowledge, imagination, and the constitution of American culture.

One of the central ideas of *La expresión americana* is the image – an imagination capable of establishing connections that historical or causal reason fails to perceive.

For this reason, Lezama Lima’s baroque is deeply metaphorical. Metaphor does not merely substitute one word for another; it creates a new relationship between very different realities.

Lezama Lima seeks to break with the idea that the American baroque was a kind of copy or secondary version of the European baroque. For him, the Americas have their own capacity to appropriate European forms and transform them into something else. The American baroque emerges precisely from this process of assimilation, mixture, and transformation.

This means that, upon coming into contact with the reality of the Americas (its Indigenous, African, and European cultures, its different temporalities and forms of life), the baroque is transformed into a distinct phenomenon. This is what the author calls “American expression.”

Here, the baroque becomes an art of “counter-conquest.” What might originally have functioned as a cultural instrument of conquest is used to produce a distinct expression of the Americas. An inversion takes place whereby, rather than remaining an expression of the conqueror’s culture, the baroque is constructed as resistance.

It is not, therefore, simply a matter of rejecting European culture. It is a matter of devouring it, transforming it, and producing something new from it.



His conception of history is therefore much closer to an imaginative history, in which events, figures, works, and images from different periods can be brought into relation. This is because literature and imagination become instruments for reorganizing the past.

It is in this sense that the baroque also possesses a historical dimension: it makes it possible to establish unexpected relationships between different moments in the American experience.

To think specifically about Brazil, I draw extensively on **João Adolfo Hansen's** *A sátira e o engenho: Gregório de Matos e a Bahia do século XVII*. Although his primary focus is the Brazilian poet Gregório de Matos, Hansen challenges many anachronistic readings of the Brazilian baroque.

Hansen reconstructs the rhetorical, political, and theological conventions of the seventeenth century and questions the projection of modern categories – such as authorship, subjectivity, and originality – onto that world.

Finally, I cite **Laura de Mello e Souza's** book *O diabo e a Terra de Santa Cruz*, a fundamental work for understanding colonial religiosity, magical practices, orthodoxy, and heterodoxy – the mental universe in which that[AF3] [AF4] religious visual culture made sense.

Closing and opening this story

The central point of this exhibition is to highlight how the baroque is an art of excess that destabilizes the idea of a stable center through multiplication. Like the baroque itself, this exhibition is also opposed to economy and synthesis.

The baroque operates through:

1. Substitution: something appears in the place of something else, with the baroque working through metaphor, mask, disguise, and displacement.
2. Condensation: different meanings, images, or registers are included and accumulate within a single form.
3. Artifice: working against the idea of transparency or naturalness. The baroque shows that representation is constructed.
4. Decentering: perhaps the strongest aspect. There is no single organizing point capable of definitively stabilizing the world being represented.

I would also like to highlight a particularly beautiful notion drawn from Severo Sarduy: the relationship between the baroque and cosmology. The author connects changes in the representation of the universe – particularly the loss of a perfectly centered cosmos – with the baroque form. In this sense, the baroque belongs to a world in which the center itself has become problematic.

This is also why the baroque interests us so much. It is not a matter, as we have seen, of characterizing it as an imperfect copy of the European baroque. Rather, it is a space of appropriation, deformation, mixture, and the production of difference.



The periphery does not merely receive a language: it exaggerates, displaces, and transforms it.

There is also another important political dimension. The baroque can be associated with expenditure: ornamentation, excess, waste. The baroque form does not entirely obey a utilitarian logic. It spends, exceeds.

In this sense, it enters into dialogue with Bataille: excess can be a way of challenging an order founded on economy, functionality, rationality, and equivalence.

This is why we speak of baroques – from Minas Gerais, Bahia, Rio – in which language is displaced and transformed within a colonial, slaveholding, racially mixed, and deeply hierarchical society.

Imperfect Pearl

The metaphor of the imperfect pearl makes it possible to shift the definition of the baroque from a question of form to one of process, transformation, and difference.

In fact, the word baroque itself has a contested etymological history. One of the traditional associations is with the idea of an irregular or imperfect pearl. The image is important because it calls into question the idea that a work must conform to a model of beauty based on regularity, symmetry, and proportion.

The baroque pearl is valuable precisely because it is not perfectly regular, despite appearing formally so.

This conception allows the baroque to be understood as a genre, a culture, a cosmology that moves away from the ideal form; produces irregularity; incorporates chance and difference; resists symmetry; and transforms “imperfection” into aesthetic power.

Landscape, Ex-votos, Oratories

The exhibition therefore seeks to explore three main strands, and from them travels through time, space, and media.

The baroque **landscape** displaces “nature” and incorporates the colors of the tropics. While nature refers to physical characteristics, landscape is always historical and moral.

Ex-votos reveal the religious and worldly essence of baroque practices. Personal in origin, they carry desires for healing, affective subjectivities, and forms of theatricality.

The same is true of **oratories**, which always include objects of a personal nature. Saints mingle with cachaça; candles with beads.