The exhibition entitled *New Baroque* deals with all the aspects associated associated with it such as excess, mannerism, theatricality, exaggeration, intense but controlled emotions
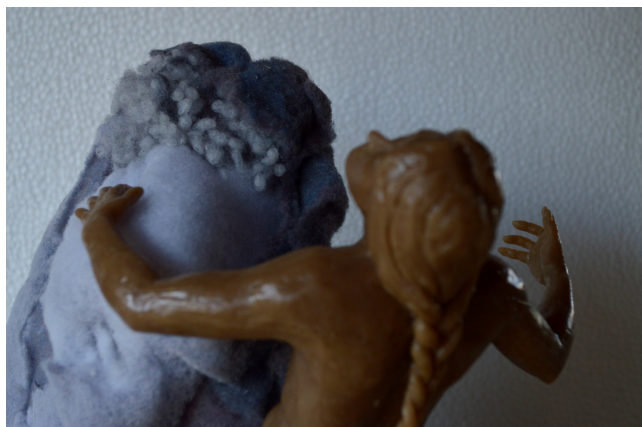

Neo-Baroque

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Neo-Baroque aesthetics in contemporary visual culture
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Researchers such as Omar Calabrese (1987:xiv) from the University of Bologna and Angela Ndalinanis (2004:5), Head of Cinema Studies at Melbourne University, have acknowledged Neo-Baroque as a new aesthetic trend. There are clear links between certain contemporary cultural trends and the dynamism of the 17th century Baroque historical media systems, especially regarding the engagement of spectators. Despite this, the contemporary Neo-Baroque logic is not merely a mirror of the 17th century Baroque era, due in part to the significant differences in economic and social conditions between the two periods. But there are many similarities, especially in the manifestation of function and formal features, including such elements as the stagecraft devices of Baroque theatre and Opera. Calabrese (1987:4) and Ndalianis (2004:6) both agree that this aesthetic notion has qualities in excess of the norm, is interdisciplinary, cross-media and cross-temporal in its approach. Ndalianis (2004:5) points out that "Neo-Baroque [and Baroque] shares a delight in spectacle, and sensory experiences. … Neo-Baroque is often reliant on computer technology, but combines the visual, the auditory, and the textual in ways that parallel the dynamism of seventeenth century Baroque form, but the dynamism is expressed in the late 20th and early 21st centuries in technologically and culturally different ways".

The Roman Catholic Church made a decision at the council of Trent (1545-63) to establish the Counter-Reformation in response to the austerity of the religious Reformation initiated by Martin Luther and John Calvin. This resulted in the Catholic Church encouraging the representational, theatrical and visceral Baroque style of art, architecture and music. Their aim was to renew the emotional involvement of illiterate worshippers. This convention of 'populist ecclesiastical art' started in Rome and soon spread to the rest of Europe. It became fully developed by the 17th century. The form and content of the Baroque *spirit* are in contrast to the Classical ideal (Calabrese 1987:15). The Classical is usually associated with stability, order and perfection as opposed to the Baroque, which is regarded as containing irregular turbulent forms and fluctuation, provoking a state of excitement, suggesting both the suspension of values, and phenomena in a process of transformation. In most cases, the idea of the Baroque relates to a formal quality that embodies spectacle, exuberant motion and free flowing form; example are seen in the sculptures of Bernini, such as *Saint Theresa in Ecstasy* in the Cornaro chapel, Saint Maria della Vitorrio, Rome (Taruskin 2005:12-15, 18). Baroque implies an architecture, art or music of extravagance, impetuousness and virtuosity, all of which are concerned with stirring the affections and senses of the individual. Our attention is repeatedly drawn to the skilful execution and complexity of meaning in Baroque artworks. But Ndalianis (2004:7) explains that in the 18th and even into the 19th century, Baroque aesthetics were regarded as "possessing traits that were unusual, vulgar, exuberant and beyond the norm" and that era has been regarded as "a decline of the classical and harmonious ideal".

Repetition is a variation on a unique element; rhythm indicates frequency of a periodic wave with peaks at regular intervals, but as an aesthetic variation it might peak at invariable intervals (Calabrese1987:30). In Baroque discourse this is referred to as *the aesthetic of the fold*, and relates to the excessive draperies that were popular in the 17th century Baroque architecture, sculpture and interior decor. The resurgence of the aesthetic of the fold - and its notion of multiplicity - is often analysed in relation to contemporary art and especially Neo Baroque art. Now the concept of art as unique and totally original has become out-dated. In 1962, Andy Warhol's multiple Campbell's soup-can series echoed the aesthetic notion of rhythm and repetition, but also challenged the status quo. This innovative body of work, consisting of 32 screen-prints - at the time, a medium associated with the commercial world - had a far-reaching effect on the approach to future art making practices. This discourse has extended into other cultural disciplines. A more recent example is the *Replicant* character in the 1982 cult film the *Blade Runner* by Ridley Scott, where these beings have ambiguous, mirrored identities. The aesthetic significance here is that this particular film contains aspects

of the Neo-Baroque spirit which favours the idea of the "copy that seeks to multiply and allude to the original" (Ndalianis 2004:37). Likewise, multiple originals - as theorised by Ndalianis (2004:80) - are seen in the persona of Madonna as Dame Edna, Evita or Marlene Dietrich; Matthew Barney as Pan, a satyr or a magician; and Steven Cohen as a princess, a flying fairy, or a chandelier. These examples typify the spirit – and intention - of the Neo-Baroque in their flamboyant, unruly, excessive and 'clownish' violation of the image of the Classical body.

Included in the theory of postmodern conceptual art, pastiche and reification are considered valid methodologies. The South African artist Wayne Barker made use of these devices for his exhibition titled *Super Boring* (2011), where there is a sense of Baroque allegory, intertextual references and allusions, interlacing of histories, dispersed narrative and implosion of meaning. His wry political quotes and playfulness can be 'read' in relation to the Neo-Baroque category of rhythm and repetition. The iconography of repetitive, stereotyped and carefully selected brand labels, placed over a copy of a Jacob Pierneef painting, relies on social interrelatedness and emphasises South Africa's Apartheid history. In this way, Barker's work links to theorist Walter Benjamin's (1998:178) reference to the Baroque fascination with seriality and the piling up of fragments: "repetition of stereotypes is a process of intensification." His work confirms postmodern intertextuality, an important characteristic of Neo-Baroque art. Ndalianis (2004:60) explains "like ruins this type of artwork contains memories and emblems of a past existence which re-invents itself as a unique whole that belongs to its own time." As a result, there is a re-formulation and a progressive evolution which resonates with the viewer/consumer.

Although 17th century Baroque opera drew together all the arts as a unified whole, the spatial arrangement and visual devices of the Baroque theatrical stage in particular were characterized by large vertical hierarchical sets, containing 'flying' machinery and trapeze. The typical Baroque stage set had access to the stage through trapdoors in the floor. The proscenium formed part of Baroque stage architecture, extending the confined space of the stage into the audience; and actors sometimes entered the opera or play through the auditorium (Taruskin 2005:12-18). The invasive articulation of space and the *rupture of boundaries* in the interdisciplinary attitude of contemporary artists towards their creative endeavors are comparable to the invasion of physical space in Baroque aesthetics and so can be regarded as Neo-Baroque. Contemporary digital art, Installation art, Performance art and interventionist artists serve as examples here. In Neo-Baroque aesthetics, time and movement thresholds are challenged due to current communication technologies where speed and rapidity has become an expectation. Time frames happen in smaller units: the sensory dexterity required to engage in video games is almost beyond the physical capacity of perception and demands accelerated responses. Currently there is a search for poetic sensorial aesthetics in brief or instant moments as the experience of success/failure, life/death, ecstasy/emotion; and in the verbal exuberance seen in popular entertainment media.

Neo-Baroque is poly-dimensional, transcending conventional spatial configurations and cultural as well as chronological frameworks. It encompasses divergent cultural phenomena such as chaos theory, television series and hybrid alien characters. This increasingly wide-spread influence challenges stability, borders and frameworks akin to the traditional Baroque devices mentioned here. The work of artists Daniel Lee known for his manimals, the performance artist Stelarc and the contemporary artists Patricia Picanni and Eduardo Kac, Eva Sutton, Vesna Jovanovic and Oron Catts constantly challenges the conventional functions of the body and are all involved in the interface between art and science. Strong contrasts, spectacular spatial illusionism, *trompe l' oeil* lighting effects link to the 17th century Baroque churches and opera; while lush, hyperbolic, theatrical and playful moments that go beyond our normal framework of reference are exploited by contemporary artists like Olafur Eliasson, Daniela Rosell and Diana Thater as well as the film editor, Tim Burton in *Charlie and the chocolate factory* and *Alice in Wonderland*. In the oeuvres of the performance artists Matthew Barney, Marina Abramović, Levi van Veluw, Steven Cohen and Nicholas Hlobo evidence the use of dramatic lighting and richly layered stage sets and props. The margins have been extended concerning reality. There is questioning of reality and a prevalent disbelief in the repetitive replaying of sporting highlights, world news such as 9/11, and the British royal wedding of Prince William and Kate. As a result, these replays seem more authentic than the actual event or moment of filming. Similarly, in contemporary film and video art, slow motion has become an aesthetic device rather than its original function of verifying a mistake in sport.

This type of social dialogue and cross referencing is also performed by Matthew Barney who superimposes images of fragments of prominent personalities onto mythical 'politically powerful' figures, who the play bizarre and amusing operatic roles in his films. In the typical Neo-Baroque mode, there are pliable interactions and intricate connections between characters from different narrative worlds, and a convergence of media and intertextual references. For example, in *Cremaster 5*, Paloma Picasso appears as a Baroque countess and Ursula Andress as an "underwater Piéta" (Siegrist 1998:26). Barney also mirrors the infernal, dramatically lit hellish landscapes, witches, strange fairies and demons that were popular in the 17th century Baroque era, as painted by Dutch artists Jacob Swanenburgh and Jan Brueghel the Elder.

In entertainment, music, video, TV and theatre there are expectations concerning the extraordinary, which place pressure on the margins or *traditional framework*. The use of an eccentric style provides the amplified dramatic devices and theatrical spectacles necessary to question ethics, codes, traditional and emotional sentiments. Creating an eccentric persona has become a work of art in itself (Lady Gagga, Michael Jackson, Madonna, Marilyn Manson and Prince). The Neo-Baroque phenomena of simultaneous aversion and attraction, parody, and the ironic deconstruction of social issues, are dramatic strategies calling for a re-consideration of current socio-political myths, hegemonic prohibitions and sexual binaries in society. Although Calabrese (1987:57) is of the opinion that Neo-Baroque tendencies are not provocative enough, merely shift the margins and remain socially acceptable, this is debatable in light of more contemporary trends in Neo-Baroque art practice. Contemporary culture

operates as a centrifugal force to push beyond boundaries, and doubts about the existing order have become manifest. There is presently an atmosphere of endogenous excess in art, politics, social behaviour and ethics. Excess is presented as content, for example: Since the early 1990s, body suspension has become commonplace, alongside the rapid increase in fetish-inspired clubs such as *Torture Garden* in London (Randall 2002:7-14; Fernbach 2002:15) which represent going beyond limits or the conventional framework.

Turbulence and irregularity govern the contemporary production of numerous aesthetic objects (Calabrese 1987: 118). Both the Baroque and Neo-Baroque are recognised for their attention to visual effects and manipulation of the surface. Easy digital access to fractals reveals a high level of turbulence, figurative fragmentation and jagged edges. They surprise because they contain a structured scalar system, despite having irregular shapes and appearing to be random. The evaluation of fractals can be unfavourable or beautiful depending on one's stance.

Due to contemporary behaviour patterns, an increase in perceptual dexterity, eclecticism and *hyperconsciousness* has developed. This is determined on three levels: the source of such *texts*, their destination, and the message comprehended. There is a complex web of intertextual references and layering inherent in Neo-Baroque media. These can be compared to a labyrinth or a richly layered palimpsest. As with fractals, labyrinths, knots, folds and maps also have a concealed, poetic complexity. "Labyrinths are planned Chaos" (Doob1990:52). Our fascination with these phenomena is, in essence, with complexity and dissipation. There is a constant recurrence of the theme of the labyrinth in contemporary culture and video games. There are also numerous artists working in this arena.Boundaries between film, computer games, art and other media intersect continuously. There is a constant recurrence of the theme of the labyrinth in contemporary culture and video games.

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