

*BRAVE NEW WORLD:
ADRIANA VAREJÃO'S BAROQUE TERRITORIES*

Louise Neri

Venturing into the complex folds of Adriana Varejão's painting, I attempt to imagine what it must be like to be this precocious artist, standing in her studio before an empty canvas at the beginning of the twenty-first century. From her declared position as a Brazilian, as an artist, as a painter, how is she to counter the *aporia* that is the condition and effect of painting's worldly discourse?

By considering that the canvas in front of which she stands is *full* rather than empty.

PAINTING AND EXPLORATION:

In a reversal of the familiar historical plot, I cast Varejão as a New World explorer on the eve of an expedition to the Old World, confronting the perceived "fullness" of endlessly charted and recharted territories with the elaborate tools and signs of History at her command. To be an explorer is to inhabit a world of potential objects with which one carries on an imaginary dialogue. The explorer's space and time is of an active nature in which the processes of exploration, rather than the fruits of travel, become history. In the explorer's journal, what matters then is less the discoveries it contains than the quality of traveling it reveals.¹

Given the highly determined terrain of the Old World, Varejão the explorer understands that a strategy of naïve or hubristic adventurousness would probably end in catastrophe; rather she will negotiate the given routes with the perverse intelligence of the hybrid, skeptical of empirical histories and master narratives. With no frontier left to conquer, she must play a strong hand in the double game of travesty, between the pretending surfaces of painting and the pretense of history. Her inventiveness will derive not so much from her compulsion to conquer new ground as from her desire to examine and invaginate the existing thicknesses of history, to “recollect” an open-ended mesh of eidetic references to painting and history, past and present.² In doing so, she creates a novelistic world in which the relations between things are no longer obdurately naturalist/“scientific” but rather speculatively artificial/“psychoanalytical,” where the rational and the irrational, the abstract and the visceral, the empty and the full, are brought together in a vigorous state of play.

EXPLORATION AND THE BAROQUE:

“Painting is my root, just as Brazil is”:³ Root is another word for *rhizome*, a biological term relating to tenacious, low-lying vegetal growth which has, in recent years, become synonymous with patterns of cultural movement. In this brief symbolic statement, Varejão synthesizes her artistic economy, which equates the culture of painting with the culture of civilization in its constant references to the popular iconography of the seventeenth century that built the image of America in Europe.

The Baroque was a vehicle for the new expansionist capitalism of the European bourgeois economy, with its abstract love of money and power.

As a form of ecumenical persuasion, the American natives were invited to interpret the Baroque; this resulted in the sacred iconography of Christianity being transformed, "denatured" and secularized in a carnival of pagan imagery. Each "episode" in Varejão's oeuvre recasts an anthropophagic encounter between the ecumenism of the European Baroque and the innate hybridism of Brazilian culture, spinning into ever new and provocative configurations the vital role played by Desire in Culture's progress, with all its attendant perversities and contradictions.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, philosopher Eugenio d'Ors linked the exuberant irrationality of the Baroque impulse with nature's *élan vital*.⁴ In the sixties, Giulio Carlo Argan attempted a more complex definition by situating this "natural" irrationality within a conscious cultural framework. By introducing the concept of "artificial" or "social" reason as the basis for cultural development, Argan perceived man to be in control of his own destiny rather than subject to natural or divine forces. Thus a convincing case was made for the Baroque period as the presage of modern society, with man at the center of a network of dynamic relations, and in which the image, as the product of the complexities of the human mind, assumed an autonomous and intrinsic value.⁵

Occurring chronologically between these opposed historicizing ideas was Henri Focillon's discourse on artistic transmutation, *The Life of Forms in Art* (1934) in which he described the persistence of the

Baroque not only in terms of form but, more importantly, *behavior*. Focillon's liberating idea, that a paradigm could "perform" autonomously and fluidly rather than being fixed in the distended space of history, prepared the ground for the radical theories of poststructuralist philosopher Gilles Deleuze, whose metaphors of rhizome and fold as the animating forces of culture reshaped the landscapes of contemporary thought.

*The Baroque state reveals identical traits existing as constants within the most diverse environments and periods of time. Baroque was not reserved exclusively for the Europe of the last three centuries any more than classicism was the unique privilege of Mediterranean culture.... Baroque forms live with passionate intensity a life that is entirely their own... They break apart even as they grow; they tend to invade space in every direction, to perforate it, to become as one with all its possibilities.*⁶

THE BAROQUE AND THE CYBORG:

Varejão's oeuvre is an anomalous, at times monstrous, presence in contemporary art, a complex investigation that eschews current dominant paradigms in favor of anachronistic sources that are figurative, allegorical, theatrical, excessive, and popular. So why, we might ask, does Varejão inhabit this "full" space of the Baroque? Out of some desire for obscurity, or a decadent taste for the exquisite? For what else could a "baroque practice" signify today?

Like the gnarled, irregular pearl, the *barocco* from which the term baroque derives, or the equally characteristic geometry of the ellipse,

the “supplement” of value innate to the Baroque subverted or deformed the supposed “natural” order of things, the moral, idealizing austerity on which the bourgeois ideology of consumption and accumulation was founded.

But, given how complexity has been so thoroughly assimilated into contemporary culture, in order for Varejão to work effectively with the Baroque’s convoluted rhetoric of pleasure, she must now work as a double-agent, a “hacker,” judging, threatening, corrupting its very center and its foundation: the space of signs and language, society’s symbolic support and its guarantee of effective communication. She does this by restating its language, then depicting anomalous outbreaks and breakdowns through original pictorial strategies; she first infiltrates, then jams the switchboards, sending out a plethora of contradictory signals to both seduce and repel.

In the sixties, the Cuban literary critic, novelist and artist, Severo Sarduy, wrote a remarkable *bricolage* on the Baroque entitled *Escrito sobre un Cuerpo/Written on a Body*, ranging freely across heterogeneous and apparently unconnected spaces, from animal mimicry to tattooing, human transvestism, makeup, anamorphosis and *trompe l’oeil*. In a later work entitled *La simulación*, he propelled his discourse into a new extraterrestrial zone, identifying simulation as the “biological” force at the core of the Baroque sensibility. With these two works, Sarduy forged a deft equivalence between simulation as the project of lived hybridism – the vertiginous experience of the Baroque “miracle” common to many colonized cultures – and the preternatural ambivalence of the cyborg.⁷

As I was reading Sarduy, Ridley Scott's heterotopic thriller *Bladerunner* (1982) came to mind. The film was adapted from Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*(1968) which revisited the existential dilemma of Shelley's Frankenstein in the character of the "replicant" or cyborg, a manufactured creature superior to humans in all ways except for its programmed memory and lifespan. Scott's film was a triumph of artistic ingenuity true to Dick's vision of "complicated modernity," an excess of conflicting styles and systems that proposed an antidote to the unilaterally streamlined visions of the future that had come to dominate the public imagination. The plot peaks in a string of pyrotechnic fights to the death between Deckard, a human cop, and a series of highly advanced replicants, who have mutinied in a bid to resist their scheduled demise. Finally, Deckard comes face to face with Roy, the remaining survivor of the series – the ultimate, exquisite "combat model" – painfully aware of his inbuilt limitations. In several cat-and-mouse sequences, Roy brings Deckard to the brink of death then spares him, as if to better observe his human fear just as his own life, superbly engineered but emotionally ambivalent and arbitrarily determined, is running out, minute by minute. At one point, he wrenches a rusty nail out of the wall and plunges it right through the flesh of his own hand, as if the pain will stave off his impending expiration. (Just minutes later, his life stops softly, transcendently, and with it his vivid memories disperse "like tears in rain.")⁸

The cyborg is the ultimate Baroque creation, a postulation of a hybrid of machine and organism. In her *Manifesto for Cyborgs* (1985), Donna Haraway proposed this hybrid entity as the ultimate challenge to the traditional trajectories and boundaries of Western culture which she identified as "the tradition of racist, male-dominant capitalism; the

tradition of progress; the tradition of appropriation of nature as a resource for the production of culture; the tradition of the reproduction of the self from the reflections of the other... the territories of production, reproduction and the imagination.”⁹ Echoing her predecessors, Haraway thus identified an oppositional culture in the making that was “by nature” hypothetical and synthetic. The border war between nature and technology of which she spoke so eloquently would also pertain to other, equally fraught boundaries: those existing between genders, races, and cultures, fiction and nonfiction.

The pathology of Varejão’s oeuvre corresponds strongly to this oppositional culture of the cyborg, comprising information and memories innate, received, and newly imagined. Her paintings are the hybrid “biological” bodies fictionalized by Dick and theorized by Sarduy and Haraway, manifesting as grossly artificial *stroma* and dense, prosthetic layers of canvas simulating paper, tile, skin and flesh. Hers is not an ironic use of craft and material; rather she consciously inhabits its historical syntax in order to be able to expand and subvert its meaning and broader cultural application from within.

For Varejão, painting is an intellectual activity, *una cosa mentale*, because perception and imagination are intellectual activities based on the existence, the creation and the re-creation of visible forms. So in presenting the rhetorical depth and complexity of painting as the very embodiment of the essential artificiality of culture and society, she seeks to uncover new meaning for the genre and with it a new place for its corporeality in the spatial and temporal world. To accord this process the greatest possible level of eloquence, she draws on a rather astonishing vocabulary of cultural artifacts and phenomena –

monochrome, crackled surfaces of Song dynasty porcelain, fantastic "scientific" imaginings of the New World by European illustrators, tattooing and other forms of physical and mental cartography, *trompe l'oeil*, elaborate tiled decorative schemes and so on – and immerses it in the atmosphere and life of the painted body. And like Roy, the cyborg war machine, her forceful attempts to revive the body of painting by literally incising, assaulting or invaginating her ingeniously devised bodies of "live," viscous material and densely layered images, can thus be interpreted as a more general endeavor to evince vitality from the culture itself.

THE CYBORG AND THE DIALOGIC IMAGINATION:

According to Focillon, the artist stores inherited forms and elaborates his or her own forms in a dialogue with forms from the past. As a result, these new forms bear the trace, the multiple traces, of the old forms among which they take their place. Thus forms are held in a state of perpetual metamorphosis, motionless only in appearance, caught up in the movement that carries them from change to change, constituting their autonomous histories.

A decade earlier (although his groundbreaking studies did not become available until decades later), Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin used the terms "dialogic imagination" and "chronotope" (borrowed from biology) to describe the active nature of the relation between the novelist and the history of writing, a relation in space and time which runs counter to the homological tendencies of history. Drawing on his vast knowledge of both high classical and popular folkloric literature, Bakhtin perceived the novel as a kind of super-genre, a consciously

structured hybrid of languages, whose power consists in its ability to engulf and ingest, to “carnivalize” all other genres together with other stylized but nonliterary forms of language.¹⁰

Like the cyborg of the previous chapter, the novel simulates, synthesizes, seeking to shape its form to languages from other genres rather than assimilating language into its own predetermined form. It experiments constantly in order to display the variety and color and immediacy of linguistic diversity existing within speech. Sarduy describes dialogism as “an interaction of voices, of ‘languages’ as a translation of all the ‘translations’ found in a single language; an ‘organ’ in which different literary functions, in the form of reminiscences, paradoxes, equations, expressions of reverence or derision institute, ‘intone and proclaim’ the Carnival” – the vibrant, pagan pageant that formed the core of the cultural imaginary in Brazil’s cultural history.¹¹

Varejão’s active, ahistorical relation with the history of painting and the history of Brazilian culture similarly contorts our received models. Inventing across differently structured but intermingling phases, she “carnivalizes” the normal periods and figures used to define the relay of culture. Such a perverse undertaking requires both enormous erudition and a theory capable of sustaining a balance between her aberrant history and more conventional historical models. Drawing as she does from a vast inventory of elements and models, her visual sophistication is proof of a knowledge detailed enough to permit her to use traditional accounts of painting and culture as a dialogizing background in order to sustain the counter-model she proposes. And that counter-model is motivated by a theory that can rationalize not

only its own subversions, but the effects of mainstream traditions as well. Varejão's distinctive language thus contains an innate opposition and struggle at the heart of its existence, between the forces that keep things apart and the forces that strive to make them cohere, between systems that are full and visceral and those that are empty and abstract.

Varejão equates the growth of painting with the growth of Brazilian culture as a deeper metaphor for the modern world. In the carnivalesque dialects of her baroque, several dominant and contrastive styles often inflect each other. They crisscross, sometimes folding vastly different sensibilities into each other: bleeding extrusions disrupt mirages of distant lands; gross flesh bursts from monochrome. The viewer is obliged to investigate how they work through each other at different speeds and, in turn, how they chart various trajectories on the surface of painting and culture. Forms move back and forth, disappear, recur, or bring out new shapes when they are superimposed or interconnected. In the process of deciphering certain works such as those comprising the series *Terra Incógnita* (1992), one gradually becomes aware of the extraordinary spatial and temporal expanses emanating from the canvas. In other series, such as the series of tongues (1995-98), of *irezumis* (the name given to the traditional Japanese form of comprehensive body tattooing) (1994-99), and of *tile works* (1995-2001), this chronotopical density is more literally evident in the dramatic and visceral epigeneses of matter erupting from smooth, illusionistically "tiled" surfaces.

Chronotope refers to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature.... It

*expresses the inseparability of time and space, the passion for spatial and temporal equivalence as a polemical opposition to the "vertical world" of hierarchical and symbolic interpretation... In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indications are fused into one carefully thought out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history.*¹²

THE DIALOGIC IMAGINATION AND SURFACE:

The azulejo is part of Portugal's physiognomy.

- Count Anathasius Raczyński, Letter to the Berlin Scientific and Artistic Society, 1845

The *azulejo*, a square terracotta tile, is the most widely used form of decoration in Portuguese national art, used continuously throughout Portugal's history over a period stretching back to the Middle Ages. It constantly renewed its vigor, reflecting the organic eclecticism of a culture that was both expansive and open to dialogue. It embraced the lessons of the Moorish artisans, inspired by the ceramics of Seville and Valencia; it later adapted the ornamental formulae of the Italian Renaissance while acknowledging the exoticism of Oriental china; following an ephemeral period of Dutch inspiration, it created fantasy story panels in blue and white that set the tone for a perfect assimilation of such varied elements. It was used in such far distant places of Portugal's empire as Brazil.

The *azulejo* became the inner skin of religious and secular buildings, homogenizing the architecture into a seamless and illusionistic pictorial whole. The opulence of the eighteenth century, fuelled by resources flowing into Portugal from Brazil and India, was expressed in large-

scale tile schemes of luxurious theatricality. Mythological and allegorical stories, landscape and arch fantasies were typical, but purely decorative panels of flowers and swirling rococo ornament in polychrome also appeared mid-century. Portugal's tile industry – like those of other European countries – declined and ceased to exist in the early nineteenth century. It was carried on in Brazil with great vigor, however, and it was mainly through the efforts of the Brazilians who resettled in Portugal in the 1860s and 70s that the Portuguese tile industry underwent a renaissance similar to that of northern Europe.

Throughout her oeuvre, Varejão has invoked the rich and susceptible history of the *azulejo*, beginning with the series *Proposal for a Catechesis* (1993) in which she conjoined the Christian miracle of transubstantiation with cannibal fantasies adapted from the engravings of Theodor de Bry in his famous seventeenth-century anthology *America*. In her most recent work, the dense and livid inscriptions of history, culture, landscape, geography and the human body that populated her earlier series become transcendent, schematized and subsumed into a vast delirium of blue-and-white patterns and fragmentary images, rendered in a grid of paint and canvas to simulate a tiled wall of giant proportions. This breathtaking *trompe l'oeil* environment is simply entitled *Azulejões* [Big Blue Tiles], perhaps as acknowledgement of the medium's essential nature in which opposing systems of representation are depicted in a permanent state of imaginative and fertile contradiction.

SURFACE AND RUPTURE:

Entering the space of *Azulejões*, I am engulfed in a semantic ocean of space and time. Gradually, the breaks and anomalies in the patterns and images become evident, impelling the rhythms of rupture and discontinuity at the heart of the painter's project to her ultimate destination – which would appear to be the place from which her explorations began: the *terra nullius*, the void, of the unexplored canvas. But on closer scrutiny, the white emptiness of the canvas is itself a cunningly painted illusion – and it is filled with desire lines.¹³

...in those disciplines which... evade very largely the work and methods of the historian, attention has been turned away from the vast unities... to the phenomena of rupture, of discontinuity. Beneath the great continuities of thought, beneath the solid homogeneous manifestations of a single mind or of a collective mentality, beneath the stubborn development of a science striving to exist and reach completion at the very outset, beneath the persistence of a particular genre, form, discipline, or theoretical activity, one is trying now to detect the incidence of interruptions.... Recurrent distributions reveal several pasts, several forms of connexions, several hierarchies of importance, several networks of determination, several teleologies, for one and the same science, as its present undergoes change: thus historical descriptions are necessarily ordered by the present state of knowledge, they increase with every transformation and never cease, in turn, to break with themselves... There are architectonic unities of systems... which are concerned not with the description of cultural influences, traditions, and continuities, but with internal coherences, axioms, deductive connexions, compatibilities. Lastly the most radical discontinuities are the breaks effected by a work of theoretical

*transformation "which establishes a science by detaching it from the ideology of its past and by revealing this past as ideological."*¹⁴

In *Written on a Body*, Sarduy's reflection on and homage to the artificial galaxy of painting and literature, the author challenges us to "write without limits," to abandon "boring, diachronic sequence" and return to the original meaning of the word "text" – "textile, tissue – considering everything written and everything yet to be written as a single, unique, simultaneous text in which the discourse we initiate at birth is inserted. A text that repeats itself, quotes itself without limits, plagiarizes itself; a tapestry that unravels so as to spin other signs, a *stroma* that varies its motifs infinitely and whose only meaning is that intersection, that plot to be contrived by language. Literature without historical or linguistic borders: a system of communicating vessels."¹⁵

Varejão dismantles the existing pictorial history of the world, and with it the established hierarchical links between objects and ideas, in order to construct a theory of equivalences that will allow these objects and ideas to be embodied and materialized in spatial and temporal series. She liberates them and permits them to enter into the few unions that are organic to them, no matter how aberrant these unions might seem from the view of ordinary, traditional associations. She allows them to touch each other in all their simulated "corporeality" and in the manifold diversity of values that they bear. And thus, on the very space where the destroyed picture of the world had been, a new picture of the world opens up, permeated by that internal artistic necessity we shall call "the life of forms in art."

The baroque refers not to an essence but rather to an operative function, to a trait. It endlessly produces folds.

- Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*.

NOTES:

1. Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay: An Exploration of Landscape and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 25.
2. I use this term here in the sense that Edmund Husserl describes in his discussion of phenomenological history and eidetic function in *The Origin of Geometry* (1936): "To the passivity of what is first obscurely awakened and what perhaps emerges with greater and greater clarity, there belongs the possible activity of a recollection in which the past experiencing is lived through in a quasi-new and quasi-active way."
3. Adriana Varejão in conversation with the author, January 2001.
4. Eugenio d'Ors, *Lo Barroco* (Madrid: Aguilar, 1964)
5. Giulio Carlo Argan, *The Europe of the Capitals 1600–1700* (Geneva: Skira, 1964).
6. Henri Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art* (New York: Zone Books, 1989), 15. Originally published as *La Vie des Formes* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1934).
7. Severo Sarduy, *Written on a Body* (New York: Lumen Books, 1982).
8. From Roy Batty's death scene in *Bladerunner* (1982).
9. Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s," *Socialist Review* 80.
10. Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas, 1981).
11. Severo Sarduy, *Written on a Body*.

I am attempting to make an equivalence here between Bakhtin's use of the term "carnavalesque" to describe Rabelais's particularly visceral and robust novelistic form and Sarduy's invocation of the Carnival, which was proclaimed by Oswald de Andrade in his historic

"Anthropophagite Manifesto" of 1928 as the redemptive basis of indigenous Brazilian culture.

12. Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes toward a Historical Poetics," 84.

13. "Desire lines" is a term architects use to describe the erratic routes often taken by pedestrians subconsciously avoiding official, designated paths.

14. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 4.

15. Severo Sarduy, *Written on a Body*, 54.