

## Expression (the materialization of form and the transhistorical baroque)

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Donald Wellman

*... the essence of substance has no existence outside the attributes that express it.*

Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in the Philosophy of Spinoza* (42).

After Deleuze, the modernist passion for form seems counterintuitive. Does the prisoner desire a lock-down? or a riot? For much modernism, "expression" is a challenged category, a bleating of transitory or nonessential resonance. Kandinsky distinguished expression from construction or composition. Matisse believed that subjectivity must needs be erased in order for the beauty of form to emerge. Postmodernism, on the other hand, has been associated with the return of subjectivity, as though the attributes of a substance were matters of perspective, not intrinsic qualities. This is how Gilles Deleuze reads Leibniz's *Monadology*. It is also how one must read a novel like Henry James's *The Sacred Fount*. In such reading, a subject occupies a point of view relative to a complex whole that is best thought of as a cluster of all possible predicates.

*... perspectivism amounts to a relativism, but not the relativism we take for granted. It is not a variation of truth according to the subject, but the condition in which the truth of a variation appears to the subject. This is the very idea of Baroque perspective. (Deleuze, *The Fold* 20)*

Baroque perspective seems ever to see something through something, as through a scrim or through water, an experience of which John Ruskin wrote, "we might well doubt, as we watched her faint reflection in the mirage of the lagoon, which was the City, and which the Shadow" (90). The paradigmatic depiction of the moment of apprehending a subject through a translucent surface is Caravaggio's *Narcissus* (1597-99). Earlier than Caravaggio's Baroque masterpiece,

Leon Baptista Alberti, in a work fundamental to the Renaissance conception of perspective, evoked the myth of Narcissus. He asks, in Book 2 of his *On Painting* (1435), “What else can you call painting but a similar embracing with art of what is presented on the surface of the water in the fountain?” But a watery surface is never completely translucent. The image reflected in a mirror is never completely opaque; it will shimmer or gleam; it will seem even to emit light. The face of [Venus](#) does not resolve in her mirror with the same degree of clarity as the flesh of her buttocks or the folds of the bedding. Picasso depicts a different but related form of interiorized seeing in his *Girl before a Mirror* of 1932. In a triptych known as the *Three studies for a self-*



*Three studies for a self-portrait*. Oil on linen, 37.5 x 31.8 cm. 1979-1980. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Collection Jacques y Natasha Gelman, 1998. © The Estate of Francis Bacon. All rights reserved. DACS, London 2009

*portrait* by Francis Bacon (1979-80), the image of the face, folded and projected through the depth of an unsilvered mirror, presents a disturbing form of interiorized seeing. The tones owe something to the palette used in *The Girl before the Mirror*. The debt to Velasquez is also large. As is the case with [Las Meninas](#), dynamics that implicate the observer, positioned in the gallery and before the painting at a specific time-space nexus, activate the play of perspectives within the painting, as it were, causing the painting to come into being and locate itself within a phenomenological interstitial space, a space that is not quite on the surface of the painting and

not solely a projection of the observer. This interplay of perspectives is the hallmark of the baroque style; it is integral to the way in which painting renders its nominal subject.

In *Las Meninas* multiple processes that impinge upon the visualization of the Infanta and her attendants are imbricated with how Velasquez presents himself and with the reflection in the mirror on the rear wall where the images of the royal couple, Phillip IV and Mariana of Austria, seem especially opaque as if drawing the available light into the mirror. At the historical moment depicted in the painting, the royal pair must have stood precisely where the viewer might best stand today, at a point in the gallery which is the reflex of the disappearing point in the mirror on the rear wall. The painting happens in a space midway between these positions. The nominal subject at which Velasquez is at work as he gazed at us must have stood where we stand as we look at him. Or else he was looking into a mirror as he worked, a not unknown practice and one recommended by Alberti. Registering additional points of view within the painting, like that of the figure in the doorway who has a vantage point on the painting that engages Velasquez at the easel, the painting comes to exist as a sum of perspectives much like the monad described by Leibniz. Painting now inscribes subjectivities in addition to that of the author / artist identified by the signature. It inscribes the subjectivity of the viewer, even as it multiplies the possible perspectives. Here is the full dynamic of the entry of individual talent into history, as proposed Foucault in his famous analysis of *Las Meninas* in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*.

Now consider the *Venus*, the face that the onlooker beholds in the mirror is not the face that the subject sees. Given the incidence of light, it must be that she gazes elsewhere, sees differently than the observer stationed in the gallery; even though most viewers are likely to presume

impossibly that she looks at her own face. The division between body and face uncritically mirrors male desire (Bal 222). Without intending to do so, the *Venus* of Velasquez makes visible the role of the gendered gaze in the founding of early modern oil painting, with its shimmering surfaces and its depictions of fabric and flesh. Similar complexities of point of view led John Ashbery to elaborate on the presences and absences within Parmigianino's [\*Self-Portrait\*](#) (1524). Ashbery asserts that Parmigianino's painting is no more than surface but yet that surface is "a metaphor made to include us" (76); "love" similarly is "sandwiched / Between two adjacent moments" (77). Parmigianino's "reflection, of which the portrait / Is the reflection once removed" (68) establishes itself between two souls swimming towards each other, through their eyes over distances that are the effect of the distortions caused by foreshortening in the convex mirror. The peering eyes and outsized hand of the Mannerist painter set a precedent for Bacon's treatment of form.

In Bacon's *Three studies for a self-portrait*, on the other hand, the face looms through a surface like a watery mirror, presenting the viewer with an expressionistic projection of subjectivity. For that reason, Deleuze used this triptych for the cover of his book, *Francis Bacon: Logique de la sensation*. Antonio Munoz Molina, in his review of the Bacon retrospective in the Prado, compares the background of the *Study* to the most deeply confessional self-portraits of Goya and Rembrandt.<sup>1</sup> That observation traces one arc from baroque to postmodern baroque, a transhistorical arc. In the *Three studies for a self-portrait*, unlike the *Self-portrait* of the same

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<sup>1</sup> Miguel de Unamuno in his poem on Velasquez's *Christo* had earlier commented on the luminescent semi-opaque quality of the background of the painting: "ese cielo tan negro como el velo / de tu abundosa cabellera negra."

year, the pink and fuchsia colors of flesh mime the movement of feelings under the skin. Bacon's liquid solidities drain themselves of substance even as they are contained within the oval of a bed or the bars of a cage. I am thinking of the many studies of the wrestler and Bacon's lover George Dyer and the equally numerous versions, from earlier in Bacon's career of *Innocent X*. One of these works, from 1953, is seen through a scrim that seems to be composed of the same laces as those that form the falda (an underskirt, worn beneath the alb and chasuble), a confining wash, that resembles the walls of glass cylinder. The surface is stippled with spots of blood.

Perspectivism includes multiple formularies for its calculus. The poet Antonio Gamoneda invokes this complexity of interiorized perspectives in this way: "Ves el espejo sin mercurio. Es solo vidrio sumergido en sombra y dentro de él está tu rostro. / Así // estás tú dentro de ti mismo [You see the mirror without mercury. It is only glass submerged in shadow and within it is your / face. So //are you within yourself.]" *Libro del frío* (in *Esta Luz* 392). The face has dematerialized and yet the shadows materialize, spirits taking form. Subjectivity does not exclude abstraction, and known forms of expressionism can only sensitize the viewers ability to comprehend formlessness. The adjustment of perception to formlessness is the distinctive source of visual excitation in baroque expressionism.

The aesthetic problem of "expression" affects bodily proprioception. It goes well beyond psychologisms that seek to comprehend, even sanitize, "feeling" or "sentiment." Francis [Bacon](#) works with figural elements in order to dodge the narrative bullet that reduces the physical reception of expression to mere representation (see David Sylvester on Bacon's antipathy to illustration, 22). Deleuze describes Bacon's forms, with their smeared impasto, as draining

themselves into contorted folds as though matter could pass into the canvas through a hypo. “Figural” then opposes, or mitigates, the “figurative,” shunting aside the allegorical tendency made available by a figurative identification, the figural enables feelings that respond to the materialization of the touch, that of the brush, a haptic sensation in the viewer.



Mira Schendel. Untitled from the series *Objetos gráficos*, 1967. Graphite, transfer type, and oil on paper between transparent acrylic sheets with transfer type (998 x 998 x 1 cm). Collection Patricia Phelps de Cisneros

Pictures are events occurring within the phenomenological spaces of perception. In works by

Mira Schendel, thin sheets of rice paper are marked with letters and other instruments that score the surface, so that, as Luis Pérez Oramas (following Rodrigo Naves), comments, “In the *Monotipias*, the drawing in fact shines through. Its body precisely inhabits the paper’s transparency; its traits lie in the trace” (27). In Schendel’s *Objetos gráficos*, the sheet is held between two acrylic plates, allowing light to filter through the paper. In one of these images, fragments of alphabets are pressed or stamped into both sides of a sheet, the letters “P,” “A,” and “X,” among others. Each face of the sheet of Japanese rice-paper bears multiple scorings or pen pricks, resembling a primitive accounting system or a stippling to indicate small scars. Some letter forms are reversed, others project as shadows of themselves from the verso of the sheet. Transfer type letters are also affixed to the enveloping acrylic panels. The effect is a textured wash, vaguely undulating in the light that passes through the layers of the composition.

Under a postmodern regime of perspectivism, two propensities exist: one toward the solidification of form, perhaps as interlocking cubes of light, a lattice of empty signifiers (to parody Roland Barthes description of the Eifel Tower, gazing upward within the girders); the other toward the erosion of form, as would seem to be the case with Schendel’s *Monotipias* and *Objetos gráficos*. In her compositions, Schendel does away with back and front and works with “residual opacity” in order to make “transparency visible,” unleashing a “cosmic word dust,” so argues Pérez-Oramas (35). This drama of visibility and formlessness constitutes the hinge point where an impossible modernism tips into an always incoherent postmodernism.

Stephen Tyler has sought to develop a postmodern ethnography that is evocative rather than representational. For him form is a “familiar perversion” associated with modernism in the arts "

(206). Form itself is not the clue to expressivity nor its antidote and the “representational” encodes without evoking distinctions that would allow an ethnography. In turning to my own practice, I have sought, but have not found objects that exist with a clarity of their own. Instead of the desired unmediated apprehension, apparently objects prefer to come to exist as representations in language or in that cousin of language, media. Sometimes they imprint the bodily sensorium and the eye can be blinded by radiance. I sought the Virgin of Gósol in the Pre-Pyrenees and found her in a museum in Barcelona. She was not Picasso’s *Woman with Loaves* (1906). From physical exercise in the mountains, I gained a feeling for rose and gray and muted ochre and olive. The landscape expressed the forms of early cubism. Instead of an experience of first forms, higher level entelechies, my pilgrimage led to a feeling for how forms express themselves.

Consonant with this intuition are the reasons for transgressive art practices and the desire of an artist like Robert Rauschenberg to explore formlessness. Stella and Bacon violate margins and surfaces. Objects (as subjects of study) disappear. The “ray” paintings of Stella resemble classical experiments in perception, Muller-Lyer figures, made to trick the eye. His purpose seems decorative, trompe l’oeil. Moving beyond these efforts at ocular disorientation, Stella’s tangled ribbons of metal refuse to allow the viewer to stand in one place transfixed. The body begins to move within baroque trceries. Do objects even exist outside of the play and interplay of perspectives? outside of expression? I find my approximation to an answer in the thought of the American objectivist poet William Bronk. Reflecting on the ruins at Coppan for *Origin*, he writes, “There is something which is and we are not separable from it. Then, if we want something, it is something wanted through us; we are the instrumentality of a desire which it

would not be quite accurate to call external, because we are part of the wanting, but neither is it right to think it personal” (357). “Feeling” (as I used the word above), “desire” (as Bronk uses it), and “expression” (where I began), I welcome these words back to my lexicon.

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I detect an uncanny overlay between the poetics of poets in the American objectivist tradition and that of Deleuze. Lay Louis Zuloofsky’s Spinoza over Deleuze’s:

We find ourselves naturally in a situation in which the ideas we have are necessarily inadequate, because they cannot express their cause nor be explained by our power of knowing. On all points, the knowledge of external bodies, the knowledge of our soul or mind, the knowledge of our duration, and that of things, we have only inadequate ideas. (148)

Deleuze offers a precise of Spinoza’s geometric exposition of the processes of intellectual inquiry. It is a process that infuses ideation with expression, admitting an inadequacy with respect to the basis of knowledge. It does not posit some first entelechy that resolves itself as a result of a process of sifting through perceptions.

Marjorie Perloff, in *The Dance of the Intellect*, insists on the crucial distinction between expression and form, arguing that in the 1960s construction emerged triumphant in the struggle with the romantically conceived ego (an argument concerning the undesirability of "lyric interference" staged in Charles Olson’s "Projective Verse," for instance). I agree and disagree. For Perloff and many others, postmodernism becomes the triumph of abstraction over the ego. Mimesis at the level of process might indicate a synergy among complex systems that poetry,

like fractal geometry, can be said to model. One response to this modeling of process is to examine the material facts of surfaces; another is to say that the usual postmodern position is not abstract enough. The value of Deleuze is to allow expression its scope so that even Olson's work can be understood as the expression of subjective impulses (see my "[Olson and Subjectivity](#)"). In painting, decorative and figural elements (not in themselves mimetic or representational) may express an explosive or transgressive range of emotions. [David Reed](#)'s work, for instance, attains an optical quality derived from tactile experience. In haptic feeling for texture and material, expression and form merge as palpable perceptions. The imprinting is eidetic. A substantive phenomenology. A materialization of spirit. The periods of the classical sentence inoperable.

In the transhistorical baroque, transgressive substance does not respect boundaries. It "relishes ... the different skin of things. Sensation now penetrates beyond the solid object into the realm of the immaterial" (Wölfflin 27). The baroque impulse that is central to my thought has been said to "deprive perception of its object" (Bal 3). It is a flight from representation that engages expression on a material level. Did this impulse lead Matisse to turn the human figure into a decorative element. His obsession embodies the gendered gaze more cruelly and more passionately than does *Venus*.

For Mieke Bal (and Stella's *Working Space* is an important, if not adequately acknowledged precursor to her studies), the baroque allows a transhistorical dialog between paintings of different generations, specifically affecting the conception of postmodern subjectivity for, so she argues, a variety of contemporary artists, some of whom explicitly quote Caravaggio, like [David Reed](#), as they explore folded (ornamental or decorative space). Henri Focillon may have said as

much when he wrote, "The baroque state likewise reveals identical traits existing as constants within the most diverse environments and periods of time" (58). He identifies the baroque "as the freest and most emancipated" in "the life of forms." Baroque forms violate frames with their ornamental exuberance. "They proliferate like some vegetable monstrosity. They break apart even as they grow; they tend to invade space in every direction, to perforate it, to become as one with all of its possibilities. .... They are obsessed with the object of representation" (58).

Focillon is one source of Deleuze's understanding of the expressive qualities of the fold.

Matisse sought a progressive depersonalization of expression. His modernism, like many others, enshrines the materialization of form. "Expression to my way of thinking does not consist of the passion mirrored upon a human face or betrayed by a violent gesture. The whole arrangement of my picture is expressive. The place occupied by figures or objects, the empty spaces around them, the proportions, everything plays a part. ... Composition the aim of which is expression alters itself according to the surface to be covered" (Chipp 132). His studies for *The Dance* (Barnes Foundation) become increasingly "decorative" less personally expressive as color harmony is established." (Bois 80). Expression in his [Decorative Figure](#) of 1925 seems to frame a universe of repeated elements very much like that described by Leibniz. "Every portion of matter may be conceived as like a garden full of plants, and like a pond full of fish. But every branch of a plant, every member of an animal. and every drop of the fluids within it, is also such a garden or such a pond." (*Monadology* 67) Baroque space is illusionistic; but mirrors are never entirely transparent. The mirror in [Decorative Figure](#), unlike that in Velasquez' *Venus*, is entirely opaque. But, Matisse's paintings, the painting itself, like Leibniz's monad, emits light. "Matisse wants to lose us in an impossibly dazzling fusion between the distant space we see and the

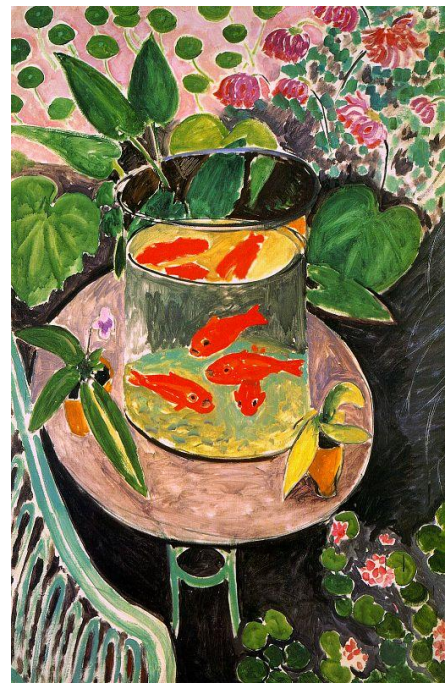
phenomenological space we inhabit” (Blois 129). The phenomenological spaces of the canvas transform the spaces we inhabit. This understanding is also that of John Elderfield, "Throughout his work, that which separates and connects does not receive light but gives light. His paintings are not windows onto an external nature. They are not windows through which light passes, but mirrors that return light, and with it a transformed nature. Leibniz is, of course famous for maintaining that the monad has no windows, famous for that and for the invention of the calculus, a measure of contours that fade and turn in the light through multiple gradations. Painting changes the world, but then the brush is an extension of the hand in a way that words seldom are, except, possibly in performative situations. Of course there is a performative body language, a joining of hands? There are oaths.

Matisse thought of his paintings as emitting a beneficent radiation."(Elderfield 66). He himself writes, "Thus there is an inherent truth that must be disengaged from the outward appearance of the object to be represented. This is the only truth that matters" (137). The “truth” evoked here is not the Platonist’s “higher truth.” And yet I ask is there “a truth in painting” that distinguishes fig leaves from other leaves? These are different arguments than that of Derrida where truth is located at the margins of composition, in the parergon. Matisse is speaking to some form of inner truth that emits light. The inner truth of which he speaks is consonant with form, with what Deleuze has called perspectivism. Prior to Deleuze, many argued that modernism began with the historical Baroque in the seventeenth century: "... the inner images of things are near to reality, less opaque to the light, than are the things themselves in the outer world" (228). So Frances Yates describes the philosophy of Giordano Bruno, placing him midway between medieval mysticism and Leibniz, a theme developed in the last chapter of *The Art of Memory*.

A point in case regarding my understanding of the transhistorical baroque is a photograph in which Robert Rauschenberg poses before his [Inside-Out](#) (1962). The 'combine' or 'composite painting,' like other examples of the baroque (understood transhistorically), "creates a visual situation that implicates the viewer in the object itself" writes Frank H. Goodyear III in *ARTnews* Oct. 2002 (140). Rauschenberg's photograph (a self-portrait) has the baroque resonance of the artist's self-presence as in Velasquez, *Las Meninas*. Of this transhistorical baroque, we can say that the surface of the painting folds virtual and material worlds. "... Baroque vision vacillates between the subject and object of that vision," changing the status of both" (Bal 7). Different viewers will occupy the virtual spaces of the mirror, but that space will always be haunted by the presence of the artist.

Other compelling gestures toward the baroque in Rauschenberg's photograph include the wheel of a baby carriage (an homage in the direction of *Merz*), operating cosmologically with reference to both the lens of the camera illuminated by the flash of the instant (emission of light) and the boss of a tile from a tin ceiling, almost planetary in appearance, decorated with specifically baroque motifs, scalloped and folded vegetation. In several ways the image uses collage and a decorative impulse to evoke a transhistorical play of references that is also nonrepresentational.

*Conclusion:*



I have tried to come to terms with the ways in which transgressive contemporary art, in its questioning of pictorial space, associates itself with the baroque and the ways in which this questioning contests the assumptions about aesthetic form that are fundamental to modernism. Transgression at the borders of stable categories flips or folds or rolls subjective and objective positions into a series of undetermined and undermined states. The interplay of so many virtual images receding into one another, resonating like Leibniz's goldfish is profoundly baroque—but so is the disruption that alters the flatness of surface in evocative ways, challenging the ontological status of both object and form, for that is what the postmodern baroque does.

Leibniz's goldfish, those of Matisse? So much reflection within its translucent glass. Speaking to the materialization of form within my own body, a multi-layered presence functions at both haptic and virtual levels.

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