

QUOTING CARAVAGGIO

Contemporary Art, Preposterous History

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INTRODUCTION

Whoever has approved this idea of order . . . will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past. T. S. ELIOT

Preposterous History

Quoting Caravaggio changes his work forever. Like any form of representation, art is inevitably engaged with what came before it, and that engagement is an active reworking. It specifies what and how our gaze sees. Hence, the work performed by later images obliterates the older images as they were before that intervention and creates new versions of old images instead. This process is exemplified by an engagement of contemporary culture with the past that has important implications for the ways we conceive of both history and culture in the present. This study probes the consequences of this thesis beyond T. S. Eliot's intuition as he articulated it in 1919.

One of the consequences is that throughout this book I will argue in close heuristic dialogue with works of art; so let me start by doing so right away. Two works of art, one by Cuban-born artist Ana Mendieta (fig. 1), from 1974, and the other by photographer Andres Serrano, a New York-based artist of African-Cuban descent, from 1983 (fig. 2), have a way of getting under my skin. They are both photographs of installations set in remote sites or the intimacy of the studio, places not accessible to the public. Through a deceptive play with surface, both suggest depth, sculpturality, violence, and sensuality: in both, the "Baroque" resurfaces. Both were made by non-European artists living in the present (the late twentieth century), members of a multicultural environment who themselves—to use the somewhat problematic terms of today's Western world—both



Figure 1. Ana Mendieta, *Untitled*, from the *Siluetas* series, 1974. Color photo documenting performance with cloth and animal blood. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Ana Mendieta and Galerie Lelong, New York.



Figure 2. Andres Serrano, *Ascent*, 1983. Cibachrome, silicone, Plexiglas, wood frame; 40 x 60 in. unframed, 45 1/8 x 65 x 3/4 in. framed. Edition of four. Photo courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

1. See Corrin's (1995) catalogue for photographs of the above-mentioned works.

have a hybrid identity. Both artists refuse to paint, yet evoke, in ways I will discuss, specifically baroque styles of painting. Both resist absorption into the canon of great Western art, yet relate to that canon and to the value system it embodies. Indeed, they have become canonical in their own right—so much so that they are (can be construed as) the “Caravaggisti” of our time. They are artists who, as a recent exhibition put it, are “going for Baroque” (Corrin 1995).

With many other artists doing similar things, we can thus speak of an important aspect of contemporary culture, referred to here not as neo-baroque, for that term evokes style and fashion, but simply as (contemporary) baroque. This became forcefully clear to me on two occasions, one artistic, the other academic: the first was when I visited the “Going for Baroque” exhibition at The Contemporary in Baltimore in 1995–96; the second was when I attended an international conference entitled “Baroque Re-Visions” in Vienna in October 1996.

The exhibition displayed very diverse baroque works of art. Among them were nonfigurative, highly sensuous, theatrical, and photographic paintings by New York-based abstract painter David Reed. His paintings highlight the Leibnizian fold and Caravaggio's surface sculpture through a conflation of fold and light. Light, in Reed's work, is an integration of cinematic, high-tech, and Caravaggesque chiaroscuro light. There were also the doubly figurative, fragmenting appropriations in image and superposed texts in several works by New York artist Ken Apteckar, such as *I watch him in the mirror*. Then there were installations like *The Library of Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz*, by Chicana artist Amalia Mesa-Bains, from 1994, which stood out as a fictional re-creation that could be seen as the equivalent, in art, of the self-conscious, ironic, yet epistemologically engaged postmodern historical novel or film. And there were the multiply historicizing and doubly feminizing returns to the Baroque, via *Madame de Pompadour*, by Cindy Sherman, and the environmental polemics in paint in *An Inland Sea* (1992) by Jean Lowe,¹ along with many other genres, artists, and works.

Clearly, the project to reenvision the Baroque doesn't come out of the blue; it has many precedents in art practice, as highlighted in exhibition practice. Perhaps we can learn something useful for our own re-visioning from looking at that practice,² something not only about baroque art and its relevance to contemporary culture, but also about cultural processes that integrate the past into the present. I will argue that we indeed must learn such things from art today if we are to understand not only the art of the Baroque but also the relationship between the present and the past. I will therefore present contemporary art here as a form of "cultural philosophy," and I will "read" it as such.

"Going for Baroque" was based on a wonderful concept and made an important statement about contemporary art. But I am evoking it here for a different reason. In mounting the exhibition, its curator, Lisa G. Corrin, convincingly presented a visual statement about an ambiguity in the division of roles between the ancient and the contemporary that entices us to rethink "history" and, specifically, our connection to the Baroque.

While viewing such exhibitions as "Going for Baroque," the key question about the relation between the present and the past, the one that underlies this study, becomes acute: Who illuminates—helps us understand—whom? This question was already present in baroque art—that is, if we accept Irving Lavin's statement that drapery, that icon of baroque art, was a device to create "the almost hallucinatory relationship between past and present that is a hallmark of the period" (1995, 5). The hallucinatory quality of that relationship—a quality which, like a drapery, deprives perception of its object—is in my view the compelling feature with which to challenge the predominance of history as the academic endeavor to which we are accustomed.

In practice, the question is this: Do we need Domenico Fetti to understand David Reed's supposedly abstract works, or to notice the sensuousness painted into their surfaces like a baroque *trompe-l'oeil*? In other words, does ancient art have to be seen as having a foundational influence on everything that follows in its wake, to be seen as *source*, as the traditional view would have it (fig. 3)? The problem with this view is that we can only see what we already know, or think we know. Or is Reed, whose work is of our time, a key, a seduction, to reappraise, reenvision the baroque works which he, literally as well as figuratively, illuminates (fig. 4)?

As soon as we acknowledge that Reed's art cannot be ahistorically appreciated, its historical *place* and *agency* can no longer be pinned down so easily. To use Corrin's words, Reed's art shows us

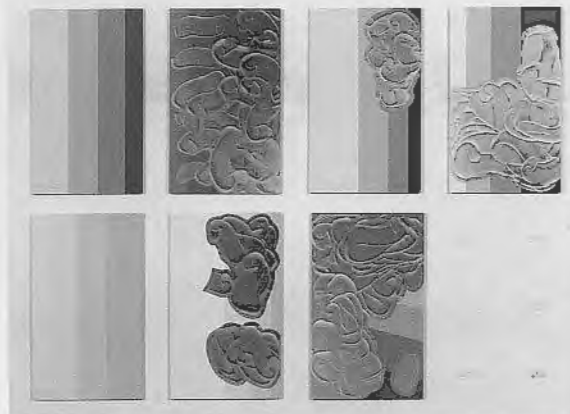
how the features of baroque art that resonate for him are translated into a series of distinct, fully developed "ideas" about color, light, time, space, and systems of illusion. . . . There is a

2. My decision to take such a fugitive artifact as an exhibition as my starting point in no way reflects an arbitrary anecdotalism. Rather it should be seen against the background of my book *Double Exposures* (1996a), which is devoted to issues of exhibition(ism).



Figure 3. *Going for Baroque, 1995–1996*, The Contemporary Museum and The Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore, Maryland. Installation view: Domenico Fetti's *Adoring Angels*, 1614, oil on canvas, with David Reed's *Studies after Domenico Fetti's "Adoring Angels," 1995*.

Figure 4. David Reed, *Studies after Domenico Fetti's "Adoring Angels," 1995*. Alkyd on polyvinyl polymer resin, eight studies, 22 x 13 1/8 in. each. Courtesy Max Protetch Gallery, New York. Photo by Dennis Cowley.



skepticism inherent in an unnostalgic art that embraces ambiguity, artifice, and a technological aesthetic. (1995, 19)

The first sentence of this passage identifies Reed's work as a "theoretical object"; the second identifies it as an embodiment of a historical attitude. Looking at Reed's postmodern pictorial illusionism and the technicolor light he uses to achieve it brings certain features of Caravaggio's radical painting back to us, as much as the other way around, something excessive that spills over from form into content and that turns narrative around by 90 degrees, something to do with surface and reality, with present and past times.

The question "Who illuminates whom?" is not easily answered, and Corrin's exhibition makes us aware of that, as well as of the important consequences that this undecidability has for our conceptions of history. Take Ken Aptekar, for example, who, like his colleague and fellow New Yorker Dotty Attie, outrageously and disrespectfully cuts up, appropriates, and then overwrites great baroque art. Whereas Attie dwarfs her predecessors in tiny panels, Aptekar makes the pieces he copies gigantic, in what can be seen as a baroque attitude to scale. He makes surface the only depth there is, and the endless folds and curls of lace the hallucinatory focus of appearance and accountability. Thus, he makes

us aware of the “depth,” the meaningful presence, and the exclusive site of interaction that “surface” constitutes. Then he adds another layer of surface: glass plates with words engraved on them, hampering vision in the very gesture that supposedly adds explanatory captions (fig. 5).

I wish to suggest that such works can be construed as theoretical objects that “theorize” cultural history. This theorizing makes them such instances of cultural philosophy that they deserve the name *theoretical objects*. Attie’s and Aptekar’s baroque attitude of appropriation is a critical engagement. Aptekar’s finely copied reworkings of fragments of the most superficial elements of seventeenth-century portraits raise questions about seventeenth-century portraiture in terms of preoccupations which are emphatically of the present: questions about status and appearance, substance and theatrical display, individualism and its exclusions.³ Both artists’ quoting of the Baroque is wilfully anachronistic. By sharpening the difference between past and present, they make the conditions and implications of the merging of the two more visible.

One of Aptekar’s and Attie’s tools is language. In overwriting their paintings, they make the point that in addition to visually “being there,” images also “speak”; at the same time, the discrepancies between the words and the images emphasize the irreducible gap between the two media. But this gap does not entail separation; rather, it compels us to process the complementarity and conflict between the two in an assessment of integrative cultural agency.

The text etched in the glass plate that overlays Aptekar’s painting *Later I would wonder* reads,

Later I would wonder if he liked those ruffled tuxedo shirts he had to wear so often, the ones packed in individual boxes from the laundry in his closet. Sometimes, when he was getting dressed, he gave me the cardboards they were folded around to draw on. This was not clothing real fathers put on; it was what stars wore on television. Often I would wait up until late at night when the ruffled shirt came home.



Figure 5. Ken Aptekar, *I watch him in the mirror*, 1995. Oil on wood, sandblasted glass, bolts, 30 x 60 in. (diptych). Collection of J. Cassese and S. Merenstein, New York.

3. On the implications of portraiture for relations of power and authority, see Alphen 1996.

This little snippet of autobiographical writing, intimate and fragmentary, unpompously poetic, raises issues that lie at the heart of contemporary culture. Fatherhood and family, emulation and longing, the superficiality and seductive decorativeness of identity as well as of art, all these themes are broached in this work and brought up for scrutiny, through the ruffles of the fabric that the words make ambiguous or whose ambiguity the words highlight. In a light tone, heavy stuff is brought to bear on these attractive decorative bits; and there, in Baltimore, it was reflected back on baroque painter Bloemaert's portraits of husband and wife, next to which Aptekar's work was displayed. Aptekar's work added a subversive footnote to the solemn confirmation of the authority of the burgher family in the "masterpiece." This use of a light tone to broach heavy subject matter sheds new light on baroque playfulness and deceptive superficiality.

The very fact that Aptekar's richly painterly, insistently visual work is literally overwritten with language constitutes a positioning of visibility and discourse in a multimedia cultural world. The iconic relationship between the layer of glossy glass mounted over the painting and the layer of ruffled clothing on the father's chest turns the significance of this multimedia culture into a highly specific reflection on the way cultural discourse, coming from the outside, shapes identity. Subtly, the child already shows signs of his own identity as a future painter, a feature that is somehow connected with the unreal masculinity of the father. In the painted panels, the ruffled lace collars quoted from the Baroque—in this case, from various portraits by Rembrandt—connect this unreality of the father with the authority of the great master painter. The yearning of the child for the father is countered by the rhetorical figure which personifies the shirt—or depersonifies the father. We will later see that this short story constitutes an episode in the artist's autobiographical oeuvre that is almost obsessively focused on the shaping of identity in culture through insidious interpenetrations of institutions and family. This keen sense of one of the major social issues of our time is elaborated through, or played out in, the baroque engagement with surface.

Aptekar's insistently multisemic texts critique and poke fun at historical painting. They simultaneously convey pleasure and sorrow, irony and emulation. We cannot read his work without a sense of the history into which the artist is inscribing himself. At the same time, the baroque works gain a new dimension through the juxtaposition, as much as through the overwriting and reworking in each of Aptekar's works. But the juxtaposition also makes the older works recede farther into the past. Such re-visions of baroque art neither collapse past and present, as in an ill-conceived presentism, nor objectify the past and bring it within our grasp, as in a problematic positivist historicism. They do, however, demonstrate a possible way of dealing with "the past today." This reversal,

which puts what came chronologically first (“pre-”) as an aftereffect behind (“post”) its later recycling, is what I would like to call a *preposterous history*.⁴ In other words, it is a way of “doing history” that carries productive uncertainties and illuminating highlights—a vision of how to re-vision the Baroque.

There is a historical reason for selecting baroque art for such a preposterous inquiry. I would like to put forward the idea that the current interest in the Baroque acts out what is itself a baroque vision, a vision that can be characterized as a vacillation between the subject and object of that vision and which changes the status of both. To the extent that this vacillation binds contemporary to baroque art, a certain coevalness between the two can be alleged. To understand this, I can best draw attention to the insistence, in anthropology, on *shared time* as an epistemological requirement. My pursuit in this book similarly aims at establishing a coevalness between the contemporary subject, exemplified by the artists I am discussing, and the historical subject, in this case Caravaggio’s paintings, through the notion of a shared time, defined by concerns that are both of today and of then.⁵ It is a vision that integrates an epistemological view, a concept of representation, and an aesthetic, all three of which are anchored in the inseparability of mind and body, form and matter, line and color, image and discourse. No baroque oeuvre makes a clearer case for the role of both precursor (or inventor) and product (or result) of this oscillation than that of Caravaggio.

This thesis is not new. Historians of art and literature have long been aware of the inevitable screen that later art puts between the historian’s gaze and the older works.⁶ But instead of considering this a problem, a liability of history, I have decided to explore this inevitability as an enrichment of our cultural habitat as a whole. Instead of considering it in terms of history-writing, I deploy it as a form of art analysis, exploring its consequences for both contemporary and older art as well as for contemporary conceptions of history. This study consists of chapters organized around theoretical issues representing aspects of quotation as a recasting of past images. Each chapter shows specific ways in which quotation is vital to the new art as well as to the source from which it is derived, and for which it thereby becomes, in turn, a source.

The chapters thus present theoretical issues as they are implied in the representational practice of the past yet can only be perceived through the detour of the present. Each issue is simultaneously a feature of the Baroque, a problem of knowing the Baroque, and a response of contemporary art that addresses itself to the art of the past. Such features as the fold, the oscillation between the macroscopic and the microscopic, the porous delimitation of the domains of vision and discourse, the spatial thickness between two- and three-dimensionality, the incongruous detail that spills over into the entire image,

4. The term is coined after Patricia Parker’s “Preposterous Events” (1992).

5. Naturally, Fabian (1994, 98) means the epistemological requirement of *shared time* much more literally than I can claim for a historical relationship. But heuristically, it makes sense to seek such a coevalness to understand how, precisely, the past is in the present.

6. For example, Alpers and Baxandall (1994) recall the well-known case of Cézanne, whose work we can only see “through” Cubism.

sensuality, and mirroring constitute not only baroque motifs but also visual “discourses.” The problems of knowing the Baroque characterize contemporary understandings in the cultural disciplines as well as in baroque philosophy: the problems, respectively, of being “enfolded” in what one is studying, of embodying it as a way of fully grasping, of deciding the relative importance of unassuming elements through a process of wavering in scale, of articulating engagement as a way of knowing, and, finally, of understanding the self/other dialectic of the mirror that threatens to conflate the subject and object of knowing. Each of these features and their correlated problems are explored through areas of response in contemporary art that address the art of the past through “quotation.”

“Quoting . . .”

The concept of quotation serves as the central theoretical focus, or “hub,” of this book, just as Caravaggio’s work is the visual hub that helps me articulate, in a roundabout way, the issues relevant to this exploration. This concept will lead us beyond the common understanding of quotation, which is aptly summarized by McEvilley (1993, 168–69), who rightly points out that quotation is not a unified practice with unified goals. Going beyond even McEvilley’s differentiation of the art practice called “quotationalism,” I will explore how this practice also redefines and complicates the notion of quotation itself.

Quotation stands at the intersection of iconography and intertextuality and, hence, of the two disciplines that have majority shares in this project. The term *intertextuality* was introduced by the Soviet philosopher of language Mikhail Bakhtin.⁷ It refers to the ready-made quality of (in his case, linguistic) signs, which a writer or image-maker finds available in the earlier texts that a culture has produced. Iconography seems to be the examination of precisely this re-use of earlier forms, patterns, and figures. Hence, this dual concept of iconography and/as intertextuality might be a good place to begin integrating visual and linguistic traditions of interpretation.

Three features, all of which are crucial, characterize iconography and intertextuality, even if in art-historical practice and literary source studies the consequences and possibilities offered by these features are not always followed through. In the first place, iconographic analyses and literary source studies tend to see the historical precedent as the source which more or less dictated to the later artist what forms could be used. By adopting forms from the work of an earlier artist, the later artist proves to be under the spell of his predecessor’s influence; he implicitly or explicitly declares his allegiance and debt to him. Michael Baxandall convincingly proposed reversing the passivity implied

7. See, for example, Bakhtin 1968, 1981. For an excellent presentation of the relevance of Bakhtin’s ideas for contemporary cultural analysis, see Hirschkop and Shepherd 1989.

in that perspective, considering the work of the later artist as an active intervention in the material handed down to him or her (1985, 58–62). This reversal, which also affects the relation between cause and effect, complicates the idea of precedent as origin, and thereby makes the claim of historical reconstruction problematic.

A second difference between the theory of intertextuality and the practice of source studies and iconography is the place of meaning. Iconographic analysis frequently avoids interpreting the meaning of the borrowed motifs in their new contexts. This is understandable; to borrow a motif is not a priori also to borrow a meaning. In contrast, the concept of intertextuality as deployed more recently implies precisely that: the sign borrowed, because it is a sign, inevitably comes with a meaning. Not that the later artist necessarily endorses that meaning, but he or she will have to deal with it: to reject or reverse it, ironize it, or simply, often unawares, insert it into the new text. This transfer of meaning is not alien to art-historical practice; for example, it is also how art historian Mary Garrard uses precedents in her basically iconographic analysis of Artemesia Gentileschi's *Susanna and the Elders* (1988). But interpretation is not the central goal here, at least not in the sense of classical hermeneutics, of constructing a unifying logos. The undecidability of the visual is understood to be paradigmatic of the production of meaning in general. Instead of classifying and closing meaning as if to solve an enigma, this study of what Freud would call *Nachträglichkeit* attempts to trace the process of meaning-production over time (in both directions: present/past and past/present) as an open, dynamic process, rather than to map the results of that process. Instead of establishing a one-to-one relationship between sign or motif and meaning, I emphasize the active participation of visual images in cultural dialogue, the discussion of ideas. It is in this sense that I claim art "thinks."

A third difference between theory and practice resides in the *textual* character of intertextual allusion. Iconography tends to refer visual motifs back to written texts, such as the classical texts of mythology. I would like to try to take the textual nature of precedents seriously as a *visual* textuality. By recycling forms taken from earlier works, an artist takes along the text from which the borrowed element has broken away, while at the same time constructing a new text with the debris. Re-using a pose taken from an earlier self-portrait, Rembrandt inserts the discourse of self-portraiture into his *Bellona* from 1633 (New York, Metropolitan Museum). The new image-as-"text" (say, a mythography) is "contaminated" by the discourse of the precedent and thereby fractured, so to speak, ready to fall apart again at any time. The fragility of the objectifying, distancing device of mythography is displayed by this taint of "first-person" subjectivity. In Benveniste's terms, historical narrative is changed into subjective discourse.⁸

8. For this distinction between *histoire* and *discours*, see Benveniste 1966.

Intertextuality—the specific quotation which is also the object of iconography—is, in this sense, a particular instance of the more general practice of interdiscursivity: the mixture of various visual and discursive modes that Mikhail Bakhtin called *heteroglossia*. Thus this “textualizing” iconography will consider visual principles of form, such as chiaroscuro, color, folds, surface texture, and different conceptions of perspective, as “discursive positions” that entertain interdiscursive relations with other works. To make this clear, I will discuss not only figurative but also abstract art.

Quotation, then, is a term that stands at the intersection of art history and literary analysis. In this study, quotation is seen in a number of distinct ways, each of which illuminates—through its theoretical consequences—one aspect of the art of the present and the art of the past. First, according to classical narrative theory, direct discourse, or the “literal” quotation of the words of characters, is a form that reinforces mimesis. As fragments of “real speech,” they authenticate the fiction. In narrative, the quotation of character speech is embedded in the primary discourse of the narrator. In visual art, such embedding structures are less conspicuous and rarely studied, despite the frequent use of the term *quotation*.⁹ Whenever such literal quotation is at stake, I will foreground these structures and their effects, mainly through the analyses of works by Dotty Attie and Ken Aptekar as they interact with Caravaggio’s *The Cardsharps*, *The Fortune-Teller*, and *Judith Beheading Holophernes*.

Second, these fragments of reality are the product of a manipulation. Rather than serving reality, they serve a reality *effect* (Barthes 1968), which is, in fact, the opposite—a fiction of realism. Thus they function as shifters, allowing the presence of multiple realities within a single image. This conception of quotation recurs throughout this study, perhaps most emphatically in the way the most deceptively illusionistic works, such as Caravaggio’s *Head of Medusa*, resurface in Belgian sculptor Ann Veronica Janssens’ *Le corps noir* or Ana Mendieta’s photographs of installations.

Third, in Bakhtinian dialogism, quotations stand for the utter fragmentation of language itself. They point in the directions from which the words have come, thus thickening, rather than undermining, the work of mimesis. This conception of quotation turns the precise quotation of utterances into the borrowing of discursive habits, and as a result, intertextuality merges into interdiscursivity. This interdiscursivity accounts for pluralized meanings—typically, ambiguities—and stipulates that meaning cannot be reduced to the artist’s intention. Examples of this are most challenging when the artist is not quoting Caravaggio in any specific, direct sense, as is the case in Amalia Mesa-Bains’s installations or Carrie Mae Weems’s photographs.

9. See *embedding in my Narratology* (1997c) for this specific, narratological sense of the term.

Finally, deconstructionism paradoxically harks back to what this same view might repress when it presents the polyphony of discursive mixtures a little too jubilantly. Stipulating the impossibility of reaching the alleged, underlying, earlier speech, this view emphasizes what the quoting subject does to its object. Whereas for Bakhtin the word never forgets where it has been before it was quoted, for Derrida it never returns there without the burden of the excursion through the quotation. This conception underlies the analysis in chapter 6 of Caravaggio's *Saint John the Baptist* and of an abstract painting by David Reed.¹⁰

The first two meanings of the concept of quotation engage the relation between image and reality beyond the question of reference. Their orientation leads from the image to the outside world in which it operates, from the close environment of the work's own frames in the first to the world outside those frames in the second. In contrast, the second two meanings of the concept focus on meaning coming from the outside in. Their simultaneous mobilization thus also entails a questioning of the very limit that separates outside from inside. This questioning in turn challenges the notion of intention that is so pervasively predominant in the cultural disciplines, especially in art history.

The predominance of intentionalism in art history has been discussed by others. David Carrier, for example, imputes it to a generalized humanism and counters this humanist intentionalism as follows: "The humanist will think that my account leaves out one further essential point—that narrative must be a truthful representation of the artist's intention. A central argument of this book is that this appeal to the artist's intentions adds nothing" (1991, 7).¹¹ To substantiate this claim, he alleges the example of Caravaggio. This example demonstrates for him the projection that goes on in biographical criticism, in which the available knowledge informs the kind of criticism and programs the discourse:

Something is known of Caravaggio's life, and there are a number of near-contemporary responses to his work. It is therefore possible, as is not really the case with Piero, to interpret his painting as an art of self-expression. Since the evolution of Caravaggio's art is unusually complex, it is tempting to narrate the history of his artistic evolution as a story of his personal development. (1991, 7–8)

Carrier's chapter "Caravaggio: The Construction of an Artistic Personality" (1991, 49–79) substantiates this contention that the more we know about an artist's life, the more seductive the trap of intentionalism becomes, even when the "intention" can only be, contradictorily, fantasized as unconscious.

10. For me, Derrida's claim is most clearly and persuasively phrased in *Limited Inc.* (1988, e.g., 155), where he points out that any sign may be cited. This principle of "citability" makes it impossible to determine "literal" meaning. On this more general claim, see also his *Speech and Phenomena* (1973, 130).

11. For this argument, see also Carrier 1982.

By opposing precisely the unrestrained projection that takes place in the kind of psychoanalytic criticism that turns effect into intention, others stay rigorously on the side of historical evidence. Logically, this evidence mostly concerns relations to patrons. Some of this work is admirably meticulous, and for that reason alone, convincing.¹² Convincing, that is, in the sense that those aspects of the paintings—their iconography—demonstrate a strict execution of patrons' orders, so that the word *genius*, from Treffers's provocative title "genius under orders" (1991), ends up meaning "lucid" (180), superior craftsmanship (186).

As historical knowledge, this is much more convincing than any speculation about the painter's (or his mother's) personality. But turning the painter's intention into blind obedience to that of his patrons is still intentionalism. Moreover, iconographic analyses such as, for example, Treffers's, whose precision I admire, and whose arguments I often find convincing in themselves, cannot ground the conclusion that Caravaggio's genius amounts to executing the patron's wishes in expert detail. For it is not the iconography that causes the paintings to be considered "works of genius."

To be sure, *genius*, and its romantic connotation, is a word I would like to avoid. But what gets lost in an overanxious attempt to dismiss genius is the paintings' continuous appeal, or their address—which, in this book, I shall call their "second-personhood." There is something disingenuous about such a dismissal. For it is the paintings' appeal that informs and warrants the effort, time, skill, and money that is involved in the scholarship concerning them, including even the debunking scholarship. The images' historical reconstruction does not answer Carrier's question about how such reconstruction helps to understand the paintings better. For this reconstruction leaves one aspect unaccounted for, the very aspect I feel compelled to attend to: What do these paintings mean to today's culture? This question, which may or may not include theoretical psychoanalytic aspects of vision but in any case is not interested in individual neurosis, stays more rigorously away from intention than even the most meticulous examination of theological ante-texts. To restate my case slightly differently, the historical iconographic approach that Treffers and others perform so expertly takes us away from the paintings in two ways: by reducing them to iconographical particularities only and by referring them back to textual sources.¹³

Unfortunately, the alternative Carrier offers is not very convincing, due to a vagueness not unlike the humanist caricature he opposes:

The test of these interpretations . . . is not, as the humanist thinks, whether they match some hypothetical reconstruction of the artist's intentions. That test is both useless in practice, as we

12. For example, some of the theological evidence dug up by Treffers (1991) appears unavoidably convincing. But I am frustrated, in inverse proportion to this persuasiveness, by what it explains, namely, only the figural details that bear no relationship to what makes the image an image, let alone a compelling one.

13. I don't wish to dismiss this approach, only to argue that it is profoundly incomplete as a way of understanding art.

can have only indirect knowledge of these intentions, and methodologically flawed. The right test is simply whether these interpretations help us understand the paintings. (1994, 197)

I would have liked the critic to be more specific about what “understanding” means. Is it understanding “what they have to say” or “what they do”? The reason for this vagueness, I submit, can be found in another of Carrier’s statements, which appears in the text “Derrida as Philosopher” and which explicitly and ambivalently discusses Derrida’s conception of quotation (1994, 149–64). Having quoted Derrida’s statement, “These differences . . . are neither inscribed in the heavens, nor in the brain, which does not mean that they are produced by the activity of some speaking subject” (1981, 9), Carrier admits to being “baffled” by it (1994, 160). But he need not be. In an irremediably binary mindset, he sees Derrida’s position as inconsistent because while welcoming “the death of the author,” he wrongly assumes that a simple “being-there, prior-to” construction is the only alternative: “I am puzzled by the notion that these contexts are somehow there prior to being constructed” (161).

To be sure, the contexts that scholars like Treffers bring to bear on the paintings are undeniably constructed; they are not alleged to be naturally true and transhistorically immutable, for example. Carrier’s interpretation of Derrida’s words is predicated on an implied binary opposition, according to which subjectivism is the only alternative to an untenable objectivism. But what Derrida denies is not the constructedness of context but its (intentional) construction by an original, autonomous, authentic, speaking subject. The displacement from painter to patrons, therefore, is no less based on a construction, *even if this construction is historically plausible*. If anything is constructed, it is theological finesse and counter-reformatory dogma as well as the decision to make these issues the relevant ones for an understanding of the painting—which is almost as dogmatic as the theology it considers as foundational.

Instead of adhering to Carrier’s alternative, I contend that the subject’s agency, which matters in a way that his or her intention or psychic makeup does not, consists not of *inventing* but of *intervening*, of a “supplementation” that does not replace the image it explains but adds to it.¹⁴ It is in this sense that I would like to propose the specific, verifiable, and, I submit, relevant, idea of quotation in contemporary art practice as a valid ground for an interpretation that accounts for a different sense of “understanding.” This interpretation neither contradicts historical evidence that it may accept but does not make central, nor projects present concerns upon it. It does not construct a fictitious intention or unconscious psychic makeup, nor is it a totally relativistic subjectivism in which anything goes but which is rigorously contemporary in its effect.¹⁵ Rather it makes the his-

14. The notion of supplementing is best explained in Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* (1976, e.g., 208).

15. Carrier convincingly shows how each modern critic projects present concerns on historical responses to Caravaggio’s work (1991, 49–79). For its contemporary and early reception, see Ludovici 1956.

torical art more important because it keeps it alive and does not isolate it in a remote past, buried under concerns we do not share.

In an illuminating argument on constructivism and performativity, philosopher Judith Butler astutely exploits Derrida's conception of quotation to rearticulate her theory of sexuality as a result, not a cause, of particular performative behavior (1993).¹⁶ She quotes Derrida's statement that performative utterances cannot succeed unless they repeat—hence, quote—an already coded, iterable utterance. As a consequence, Derrida argues, “the category of intention will not disappear; it will have its place, but from that place it will no longer be able to govern the entire scene and system of utterance” (1988, 18). The subject whose “intention” is involved in the making of the image, in other words in the uttering of the speech act, steps into a citational practice that is already whirling around; the speech act is larger than the subject of the utterance can possibly foresee or control.

Butler uses this argument to articulate an alternative to the misguided constructivism that only replaces the intentional subject with a personified “construction,” which, as she puts it, “belongs at the grammatical site of the subject.” Instead, she proposes a materialism which I find wonderfully suited to the materially engaged art that constitutes the subject matter of this book: “What I would propose in place of these conceptions of construction is a return to the notion of matter, not as site or surface, but as *a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter*” (1993, 9; Butler's emphasis).¹⁷ The materialism Butler articulates here in the context of her theory of sexuality resonates with the one I will discuss throughout this study as a crucial element in contemporary “Caravaggismo,” and, by extension, in Caravaggio.

In all four conceptions of quotation, the relation with what is quoted is established from the vantage point of the quoting text that is situated in the present. Whether the quoted artifact is enshrined or abducted, dispersed or unreflectively absorbed, the resulting (complex) text is both a material object and an *effect*. Quotation, then, is situated beyond individual intention, at the intersection of objecthood and semiotic weight.

Each of the different meanings attached to the idea of quotation carries with it an epistemological view, a concept of representation, and an aesthetic. I intend to demonstrate the intricate connections between these domains; indeed, their inseparability is perhaps the most important contribution of the Baroque and the reason for the latter's lasting relevance, so that its recent popularity is much more than just a passing fashion.¹⁸ The juxtaposition of these conceptions of quotation therefore enables us to grasp issues of past art and present vision pertaining to the understanding, the history, and the activity of looking. Translating the meanings of quotation as developed in language-centered

16. Butler is answering critics of her earlier book (1990), who took her notion of performance in a literalizing, theatrical sense. This misunderstanding could only occur within a voluntarist conception of intention, against which Butler's response argues emphatically.

17. Hereafter, emphasis in quotations will be noted only when added.

18. In my book on Proust, *The Mottled Screen: Reading Proust Visually* (1997b), I argued that this integration of the different domains of experience characterizes Proust's literary work. Although “officially” a modernist, he may perhaps be characterized as the first baroque writer of our time.

theories into a visual context further clarifies how contemporary quotation really changes older art.

Engaging the art of the past in its theoretical potential is a way of quoting it in all four meanings mentioned. First, the Old Master art is endorsed as the historical “real,” including the iconographic precedent, which determines the belatedness inherent in being situated in history, and hence, as a trigger of melancholy, site of suture, and source of support. Second—and, in a sense, as a revenge for the disempowerment of enforced authentication—contemporary artists, acting as narrators who quote and thus appropriate the cultural inheritance, embed their appropriated “Caravaggio” in their own work, thus endowing it with the glamor of historical reference, the historical “reality effect.” Third, such visual quotations fragment and pluralize visual representation into a polyphonic multitude whose aspects are neither arbitrarily collated nor “democratically” distributed. Instead, they demonstrate the difference between the illusion of wholeness and mastery pertaining to the artist of art history and the somewhat messy, yet much richer, visual culture of live images.¹⁹ Finally, neither the old nor the new art can be mastered by intention. The images of today present us with a “Caravaggio” who is entirely ours; one who could have had no knowledge of, or agency upon, what we see him to be now; an irreversible *new* Old Master, who changes the Caravaggio we thought we knew as well as the historical illusion that we knew him.

One can push this reflection on the implications of the production of meaning through quotation and intertextuality further, in the direction of self-reflection, because the art historian, like any viewer of images, cannot help but bring to the pictures her own legacy of discursive precedents. Reading images entails the inevitable mixing of these signs with those perceived in the work. This input from the present is—emphatically—not to be taken as a flaw in our historical awareness or as a failure to distance ourselves from our own time, as is the case in naive “presentism.” Rather it is to be taken as an absolutely inevitable proof of the presence of the cultural position of the analyst and his or her “visual community” within the analysis.²⁰ From a semiotic point of view, this is not surprising. In fact, to take that presence into account makes the analysis more, rather than less, historically responsible. It also makes the works, as well as their continuing presence, still matter. In this context it is important to keep in mind what Ernst van Alphen said about this:

It is thanks to this dependency [on discursive frameworks and acts of framing] that testimony as well as history writing are relevant beyond the production of knowledge of the past. It is because discursive frameworks belong to the present, and framing acts take place in the pre-

19. The term *visual culture* has been the subject of heated debate in which the academic politics of methodology and boundary policing got played out. See, for example, “Questionnaire on Visual Culture,” *October* 77 (summer 1996): 25–70.

20. *Visual community* is a clumsy term coined in analogy with *textual community* (Stock 1983) or *interpretive community* (Fish 1980).

sent that memory of the past—knowledge of history—can have consequences for our contemporary and future world.²¹

Re-visioning the Baroque

“Going for Baroque,” contemporary baroque, baroque re-visions: What is the meaning, the point, of using such phrases? “Re-visioning” the Baroque, I contend, must incorporate some answers to this question. It needs, in other words, to rethink the relationship between past and present. Only through such reflection can we assess whether, indeed, “something is lost in abandoning the Baroque as an integrated field of study,” to quote from the rationale (Burgard 1996) of the “Baroque Re-Visions” conference. This was the second event, following Corrin’s exhibition, which enticed me to rethink the question of the influence of the present on the meaning of the past.

In rethinking that relationship, it seemed to me that my own past engagement with the Baroque was an obvious place to begin. In my book *Reading “Rembrandt”* (1991), I discussed, through a number of in-depth readings of images by Rembrandt and texts by others (not necessarily related in ways their respective authors knew about), what “Rembrandt” as a cultural site or text can mean to our present culture. Yet, if the word *baroque* occurs at all in that book, any sustained reflection on “the Baroque” does not. Somehow, “Rembrandt” and the issues “he,” or rather I, through “it,” raised, were larger than the notion of the Baroque. This seems important to me. The question was left open at the time, and from this unanswered question the present study emerged.

The Baroque, then, is not seen here as a “style” but as a perspective, a way of thinking which first flourished during a specific period and which now functions as a meeting point whose traffic lights make us halt and stop to think about (the culture of) the present and (some elements of) the past. Style, then, cannot be an aesthetic concept. It refers to cultural attitudes and states of consciousness which encompass intellectual and aesthetic, political and scientific, assumptions and thoughts. Then as now—during the historical Baroque as well as today—this style coexists with others. The differences among such competing cultural styles are so great that they tend to condemn, bypass, ignore one another; each one considers the other as kitsch, heretic, or unscientific. This, together with the phenomenon of such monumental or paradigmatic differences, makes each style worth examining. In this study, I am not making the usual inductive argument which involves generalizing from “empirical observation” about how baroque art was intended to be and how it was received in its time. Rather, I am “abductively”—and very

21. Alphen (1997b, 64). In this respect my project is also connected to Michael Holly’s (1996).

tentatively—offering analyses which emerged as I looked at the notion of Baroque and the works it triggered, or which triggered *it* and changed *me* during the act of looking.²² For it is the notion of style itself, as it is usually deployed, that makes the inductive argument problematic and the abductive leap necessary.²³

What, then, was the “Baroque Re-Visions” conference about? Something in the explanation of the symposium’s goals struck me forcefully. What seemed significant to me in the initial rationale of the event was its juxtaposing of two ideas. One was the idea of integration, suggesting interdisciplinarity in the approach, the study of a moment that precedes both current binary opposition and current disciplinary turf-policing, the idea of the definition of an integrated field of study. The other was the idea of wanting to return to an earlier moment, indicated in statements of historical positioning such as “precursors of modernity” or “focusing our gaze on an historical moment that precedes . . .” and in expressions of positive evaluation such as “worthy precursors”: in other words, the utopian desire, in “an age that has begun to recognize the debilitating and dangerous consequences” of “wanting to return” (Burgard 1996), even a clearly nostalgic longing to do so as expressed in the sentence I quoted earlier: “Something is lost in abandoning the Baroque as an integrated field of study.” This juxtaposition seemed to me more than just a coincidence. It seemed as though the very interdisciplinarity of the approach underlying this event was also what constituted the object of nostalgic longing, at least its theoretical object.

I saw myself in sym-*pathy*, in the literal sense, with that double desire—of method and of historical recuperation, reappraisal, re-vision. It seemed imperative to come out of the closet as a lover of the Baroque. The seductiveness of this art cannot be separated from what I think is its importance to contemporary culture, in spite of the obvious fact that, like our time, the historical culture of the Baroque was far from an ideal place to be, with its violence and wars, autocracies and persecutions.²⁴ And yet I was also in agreement with many participants at the conference who felt we ought to challenge the ideas that might not be entirely absent from the very project of reenvisioning the Baroque, of which the primary one—that the Baroque has existed—seemed the most thought-provoking.

In questioning that existence, I am interested in the corollary of this assumption, which becomes clear in the way the assumption of historical existence was expressed in the rationale of the statement of purpose for the Vienna event: “We propose to conduct a critical reappraisal of the Baroque, mainly as an historical, but also as a transhistorical, phenomenon.” This statement suggests the possibility of reconstructing something that has existed in the past—the historical phenomenon. Yet the noun *phenomenon* also covers the fundamental ambiguity of all historical projects, since it indicates what we see, what

22. The term *abduction* is best understood as “that type of inference which leads to hypothetical explanations for observed facts” (Lubbe and Zoest 1997b, 805). They continue: “Abduction goes from consequence to possible cause” (806), and then proceed to define three subcategories of abductive inference. Most important is their definition of the qualifier *abductive*: “*Abductive* holds, if the starting point is a singular surprising observation or fact that asks for interpretation” (806).

23. On the notion of style, see Derrida 1979; its use in art history has been analyzed by Sauerländer (1983); see also Shapiro 1953.

24. For the intellectual situation, see Maravall 1986; Benzoni 1978; and Perniola 1996; for an illuminating, concise discussion, see also Steinberg 1998.

appears to us, rather than what *is*. It seems fair to suggest that this part of the statement aims at a historical appraisal of what the Baroque *was*: to quote from the beginning of the rationale, “an historical epoch, a concept, and a style” (Burgard 1996).

What I found most interesting in this statement, however, was the distinction it assumed between historical and transhistorical “existence.” I read this distinction as a symptom of the aporia of a historical endeavor that disavows its own position in the *present* as historically specific. I will illustrate what I mean by this and, in doing so, state my own purpose in this study by quoting an even more tantalizingly symptomatic sentence, from Omar Calabrese’s book *Neo-Baroque: A Sign of the Times*, a book which, at least in its program, must be acknowledged as a precedent to mine.

Calabrese studies what he calls neo-baroque artifacts as texts with specific underlying morphologies, which he then distinguishes from the value judgments attached to them. Both the morphologies and the value judgments are subsequently examined for their duration and dynamics, in order to define a “taste” or “style” as the tendency to attach value to certain morphologies and their dynamics (1992, 21). Within this logic, he then writes about specific baroque motifs: “But the knot and the labyrinth are destined to emerge from a specific historical period, because they can be interpreted as signs of a more universal, metahistorical baroque” (132). Although Calabrese’s book aims to describe a Baroque of the late twentieth century—hence, a historically specific return of forms, motifs, and structures of thought that emerged at another historical period—his postmodern times, as opposed to the “other” Baroque, are simply *universal*.²⁵ This casual slippage indicates a common illusion which I have elsewhere termed *paranthocentrism*, a “natural” centering on the present as the outcome of a development (1988). It is so common, especially in practices of interpretation, that one hardly notices it. Yet by this assumption, one deprives the present of its position in history and thus the interpreter of contemporary culture of a measure by which to gauge meaning.

This slippage may seem innocuous enough. In chapter 1, however, I argue that by endorsing the present as a historical moment in the act of interpretation itself, one can make much more of the object under scrutiny. One can learn from it, enable it to speak and to speak back, as a full interlocutor in debates about knowledge, meaning, aesthetics, and what matters about these in today’s world.

Interestingly, Calabrese uses the prefix *meta-* to express his ahistorical universalism. *Metahistorical*, as he uses it, means encompassing, transhistorical, universal, as opposed to the historical other, the Baroque of the seventeenth century. That’s not what *meta-* means to me, or, I think, to most scholars of historical objects.

25. This tendency to consider recurrence as equivalent to transhistorical is fairly common, although not often theoretically posited. See, for example, Benoist 1983 and Buci-Glucksmann 1996.

To me, *metahistorical* would be the perfect term for a critical examination of what historicity means—and can mean—both for a reappraisal of the “old” Baroque and for a critical examination of our own position in reconstructing it. The prefix is bound up with Hayden White’s groundbreaking analysis of historical discourse in *Metahistory*. Artist David Reed, on the other hand, provides a clue for a different metahistorical relation between past and present: “We, too [like Caravaggio], are looking for something that is real but find it difficult because we know now that reality is very complex and is literally virtual.”²⁶ Reed is not turning Caravaggio into “us,” but is comparing him, an early-seventeenth-century artist engaged with an art that explores the nature of reality, with *his* historical other, the late-twentieth-century artist equally engaged in that exploration, albeit at a different moment in time, and hence, on the basis of a different kind of “reality.”

Reed is trying to say that Caravaggio is so popular today because he can now be seen, or read, as an explorer of the complexities of “reality,” as something not fixed or permanent but changing and elusive. This may not be a big discovery in itself, but it certainly is one that frames *our* turn to the Baroque as historically specific: the late twentieth century looks back to the late sixteenth.

Reed’s view casts a new light on Caravaggio’s relation to reality in a way that this most typical of baroque artists could never have been aware of and which requires a wilful anachronism to acknowledge. Terms like *transhistorical* or *universal* obliterate that position in the present, through the typical gesture of paranthocentrism—the historical equivalent of ethnocentrism and phallogentrism—which assumes that one’s own position is normal, the standard, beyond questioning, hence, universal and transparent. Paranthocentrism is a fundamentally ahistorical position. As we know from the other “centrisms” that have been so productively scrutinized in that humanistic scholarship which leans toward cultural studies, these biases undermine the possibility of understanding the other of the universal: people of color, non-Western cultures, women, gays, the sick, the poor, Earth itself. Consequently, we can expect that paranthocentrism undermines the possibility of understanding the present’s historical other: the past. This is why I not only claim that my study is historically responsible, but that it offers an indispensable supplement to historical work that fails to position the interpreter’s work in its presentness.

Calabrese’s idiosyncratic use of the prefix *meta-* inadvertently suggests a direction in which to go. Instead of using it to indicate universal ubiquity, we can adhere to the more common sense of *meta-* as the “analytical examination of . . .,” and thus recuperate *metahistorical* to suggest an assessment of the historical Baroque in, for, and from the

26. Quoted in Corrin 1995, 19, from a videotaped conversation.

present, as a construction we somehow have a stake in making and putting forward now; as a self-aware movement from the present to the past in order to be able to make the movement from the past to the present, knowingly; as an academic version of “Going for Baroque”; an epistemology of the Baroque, by way of a baroque epistemology.

“. . . Caravaggio” (and Those Who Quote Him)

In striving to be as specific as I think the issue requires, I focus on a number of works by Caravaggio. This choice was not simply informed by that painter’s commonplace status as the most baroque of artists, the one around whose work many of the early debates on the nature of “the Baroque” have revolved. Nor was it made simply because many baroque re-visionists explicitly respond to, or “quote,” his work. Rather it was made for reasons of methodology—as a point of comparison. This relatively stable *tertium comparationis* is all the more indispensable since my attempt to understand art as a cultural intervention and philosophical discussion requires substantial diversity in the works of contemporary art. Much of what I have to say here requires minute specifics within great diversity, and jumping from one late-twentieth-century artist to another can only be done if a somewhat fixed point in the past serves as a provisional center, much in the same way as “Rembrandt” functioned to stabilize the great variety of discursive utterances I engaged with in *Reading “Rembrandt.”*

Last but not least, for me, Caravaggio, more than any other baroque artist, raises the issue of pleasure in representation, a visual version of the Barthesian *plaisir du texte* that cannot be disavowed. This pleasure, I argue, is an important focus of contemporary responses to Caravaggio. More so than any of Barthes’s textual examples, Caravaggio’s paintings transgress the limits between aesthetic, illusionistic, and erotic pleasures. What is perhaps more important, they also transgress the boundary between pleasure and nonpleasure, particularly when his images draw us into scenes of suffering that are staged in an emphatically theatrical manner. The *Crucifixion of Saint Peter* or the *Martyrdom of Saint Matthew* are troubling pictures because they draw us into a disturbing scene which is utterly, bodily real in its depiction, confining in its spatial organization, and yet artificial. This transgression is meaningfully—if you wish, wilfully—negotiated, and cannot be seen as equivalent to the confusion of erotic and aesthetic beauty that is so often noticeable in the discourse of connoisseurship; on the contrary, it is the latter’s opposite.²⁷

Such an inquiry necessitates a bracketing of earlier interventions and conventions, such as periodization, contextualism, or biography, if it is to develop into a complex

27. I have analyzed this confusion in chapter 8 of *Double Exposures* (1996a). More often than not, it remains unreflected and leads as much to an objectification of the sexual other as to a neglect of the work of art as such. See also Lynda Nead’s (1992) persuasive argument for the fundamental obscenity of art appreciation’s very prudishness.

account of past art as it is folded into the present that constructs it. As a specification of the simpler idea of self-reflection, I contend that this “wavering” view is in touch with baroque culture, so much so that its very “presentism” makes it eminently suitable to serve as the historical paradigm through which to study Caravaggio and his times: it is plural—then and now.

This theoretical argument will be built up in dialogue with works by contemporary artists who “quote” Caravaggio: Andres Serrano, Ana Mendieta, Dotty Attie, Ken Aptekar, David Reed, Ann Veronica Janssens, Amalia Mesa-Bains, George Deem, Jackie Brookner, Edwin Janssen, Jeannette Christensen, Lili Dujourie, Stijn Peeters, Mona Hatoum, and Carrie Mae Weems. These artists, all Western or living in the West, have not been chosen because they represent a canon in any received sense or because they cohere as a group, an aesthetic movement, or style. Indeed, only a handful of them have identified their allegiance to the Baroque, none of them focus specifically or emphatically on Caravaggio, and only a few quote Caravaggio “literally.” Moreover, I have purposefully excluded important artists like Derek Jarman, whose film *Caravaggio* has rightly become a classic, to avoid a conception of quotation that might be misconstrued as too literal; Arnulf Rainer and Anselm Kiefer, whose art of the palimpsest would make an excellent case but seemed to emphasize canonical status more than my argument requires; and Julian Schnabel, whose Caravaggesque youths recall the gender aspect without the way its effect is produced.²⁸

I chose these artists primarily because the images they produce appear to “quote Caravaggio” in culturally, aesthetically, and intellectually relevant—and sometimes unintentional—ways that will be spelled out in this analysis. Second, they were chosen as examples of a variety of mediums: not only painting, but also photography, land art, word-and-image art, sculpture, installation art, process art. With the exception of painting, these are all mediums that can be said to be “impure”—neither purely visual nor two-dimensional, neither totally artificial nor bound to an individual “hand.” This variety of mediums is also meant to underscore the point that painting, as the long-time favorite art form and therefore not limited in reach and scope to itself alone, can be absorbed and addressed outside of the narrow domain of easel painting.

All of these quotations relate to Caravaggio’s aesthetic and representational particularities as well as to their epistemological and erotic implications, to the aspects of his work that make it emphatically different from what visual art was before him. Rather than making an aesthetic case for particular artists, then, I present a case which advocates taking contemporary art seriously, as art, and as a form of art history and cultural philosophy, as studies in ways of looking that go beyond the theory/practice opposition.

28. For an extended analysis of Rainer and Kiefer’s “baroque-ness,” see Buci-Glucksmann 1986, 216–29; 231–32.

The body of images brought to bear in this way on Caravaggio—and by extension, on the Baroque, or even the Old Masters in general—thus constitutes the core of the corpus to be analyzed in greater detail in the following chapters.

Theoretical Objects and the Life of Ideas

This book, then, is about art now and about the life of ideas it encompasses; it is about how art thinks. According to disciplinary tradition, ideas are the domain of philosophy. But philosophy is not inclined to consider painting and sculpture, photography and installations, on a par with the texts of the great philosophical tradition. Rather, it tends to make painting the object of philosophical reflection, perhaps an example of its theses. Eclecticism is incompatible with philosophy. Bound to textuality and logical consistency, to language and rational thought, philosophy in general does not deal with ideas that persist in spite of their untenability. As a consequence, it is useless to turn to philosophy to understand the lively presence, in contemporary culture, of ideas whose context or frame, or basic presuppositions and premises, have long been obsolete.

The presence of such ideas in contemporary culture is not simply a fact of eclecticism *per se*, the free choice from fragmented realities often imputed to postmodern sensibility. Their presence is an active and combative take on what many would (wrongly) call “tradition.” Tradition presupposes continuity, repetition over time, and is often invoked with nostalgic longing and polemically opposed to innovation. Thus, Lubomír Doležel hardly conceals his discontent when he introduces his study of the tradition of “occidental poetics”:

A new theoretical paradigm is necessitated by the accumulation of knowledge achieved by “ordinary science.” No such labor precedes the loudly heralded “revolutions” in literary thought; they are not replacements of theoretical paradigms but proclamations of power shifts in the cultural establishment. (1990, 2)

Acknowledging both the indispensable value of the permanence and continuity that is called “tradition” and the limitations of the oppositional logic that rejects tradition outright, I propose, by way of this book, to explore another line of thinking. I have seen too much defensiveness and exclusion in the discourses of such quixotic defenders of tradition as the one quoted above to stop at and be disempowered by such clamorings.

In contrast to the notion of tradition based on continuity, I propose to look at contemporary “Caravaggio” as a kind of recycling that implies a break. Derived from a set of

visually embodied ideas, it involves response, dialogue, appropriating gestures, and reframings so as to generate ramifications of the past—without continuity—in the present. Therefore, instead of committing such ideas to the frame of philosophy and the test of universal validity, I would like to argue that some long-forgotten ideas surface, along with forms and colors, motifs and hues, surfaces and substances, in the “thought” of contemporary visual artifacts.

In order to demonstrate the way art thinks, I also draw on ideas from baroque philosophy, including some of the more idiosyncratic ones. The baroque philosopher par excellence, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716), who wrote several generations after Caravaggio and in a totally different cultural context, is taken here not as a source but as a specimen of baroque thought. Leibniz’s ideas have resurfaced extensively in the contemporary Western world. It was on the basis of his writings that, in the 1980s, semantics, literary theory, and logic developed what became known as the “possible world” theory.²⁹ This concept surfaced, and was subsequently examined, brought to bear on the problem of fictionality, and fruitfully deployed for the analysis of fiction; then it faded away again.

The deployment of the Leibnizian concept of “possible worlds” offers a good example of a standard way in which historical ideas are conceived: as fragments of a heritage that earnestly deserves to be taken seriously, that requires consistency in being transferred to domains other than the original one, and whose value for the present depends on the continuity from its origins to today—on unbroken tradition. Ruth Ronen, for example, wrote:

First, literary theory gives insufficient account of the philosophical *sources* of thinking about possible worlds, and, second, in the process of transferring possible worlds to the literary domain, the concept *loses* its *original* meaning and becomes a diffuse metaphor. . . . The result is a naive adaptation or an inadvertent metaphORIZATION of a concept whose original (philosophical and literary) *non-figurative* significance is far from self-evident. (1994, 7; emphasis added)

The discourse of source, origin, and loss deplores metaphoric transfer and links the “nonfigurative” with positive knowledge. This conception of history and continuity is fairly standard. I evoke it here not to dismiss it—Ronen’s study is, in my view, an important one for the study of narrative fiction—but to highlight a different relation to past ideas using it as a background. The concept of “possible worlds” has a totally different “life.”³⁰

29. See Doležel 1990, 33–52, for a general view; Ronen 1994, for an extensive study of the Leibnizian concept of “possible worlds” in relation to fictionality; and Pavel 1986, especially in relation to plot.

30. For example, Ryan (1991, 175–200) devotes a chapter to “narrative as computer language.”

Indeed, it doesn't take much imagination to realize that this theory has emerged in the late twentieth century for a good reason: it is a time of virtual reality, hypertext, and artificial intelligence. Yet, whereas the idea of "possible worlds" has been used to explain the concept of fictionality, it has not been brought to bear on the incompatible worlds created by the kinds of works of art that hark back to baroque images. Nor has it been liberated from its logical framework and allowed to resonate with the more idiosyncratic Leibnizian concepts that this framework suppresses, and that scientists or logicians would rather leave buried under a metaphysical tradition that was later superseded by other developments. Among these concepts are, most notoriously, the monad, the unit of matter that has a soul and mirrors the entire universe; the labyrinth, an image for the continuum of space as well as time that encompasses both a macroscopic and a microscopic scale; conceptual atomism, an attempt to construct a fundamental schema for an alphabet of human thought, a desperate attempt based on the quite sensible idea that complex concepts can be derived from simple ones; and the fold, that most baroque of Leibnizian ideas, and the most obviously visual in tone. These concepts, I argue in this book, are part and parcel of baroque thought, and deserve a closer look that is not so much philosophical as imaginative by nature. For these are precisely the concepts absorbed in visual artifacts that create a plurality of "possible worlds" on the basis of the questions these concepts tenaciously continue to pose, even if they are no longer taken seriously in and of themselves.

To frame Leibnizian ideas differently, I propose to use the concept of "possible worlds" to mean its distinctness from the fictionality that normalizes it. Ronen offers a clear formulation of that difference:

Possible worlds are based on a logic of ramification determining the range of possibilities that emerge from an actual state of affairs; fictional worlds are based on a logic of parallelism that guarantees their autonomy in relation to the actual world. . . . Possible worlds, however, despite being distinguishable worlds, do not share this logical autonomy. (1994, 8)

The distinction is illuminating. This logic of ramification recurs in the work of the artists I study here. The artifacts in which fragments or scraps of baroque aesthetic and thought are adopted in a fourfold practice of quotation, which adopts from the outside in and ramifies from the inside out, are arguably "fictional," yet they are neither parallel to nor, consequently, autonomous from, the actual world. In fact, they militate against such autonomy, precisely by quoting the way baroque art militated for an enfolded, entrapped relationship with the real world.

Following closely what these artists do when they use light as a pencil, brush, or chisel, I summarize and integrate the elements of baroque vision that can be conceived of as a contemporary philosophy of knowledge in which it is no longer physics that is the paradigm of how to pursue knowledge but a form of knowledge of “other people.”³¹ Far from being an idealized universalizing humanism, such a paradigm entails engagement, changeability, and mutuality, and, as my project suggests, includes the acceptance of a subject position which is congenial to baroque point of view as Deleuze (1993) described it on the basis of Leibniz’s writing. What is specifically baroque about this construction of the Baroque is this point of view that involves two mobile positions.³² It neither entails something that is simply relativism nor allows universalism or absolutism to assert itself. The term, rather, is *entanglement*. This entanglement moves along, whether we are looking at the historical Baroque or at later manifestations of a “baroque style,” or at ourselves in the tones that the Baroque has set for us so that we can have baroque (re-)visions. But in each case, the outcome—us, our view—is different because differently entangled.

AS AN EPIGRAPH TO THIS BOOK, then, let me end this introduction by quoting, in turn, from Christine Buci-Glucksmann’s quotation from Quevedo, which opens her study *Baroque Reason*:

Imagine a city with several entrances, a labyrinthine proliferation of squares, crossroads, thoroughfares, and side streets, a kind of multibody of the past and memory. (1994, 39)

That multibody exists today, as a possibility. *J’ai plus de souvenirs que si j’avais mille ans* (Baudelaire).

31. See Code 1991 for a philosophical elaboration of this idea.

32. This account is in itself an oversimplification of Leibniz’s thoughts or “system” (Serres 1968), which rather posits a *multicentered* universe. However, the clearest way to envision this multicenteredness in pictorial practice without simplifying it, is first to consider how relations between *two* centers already produce a mobility of point of view. For a fuller account of Leibniz’s attempt to account for complexity and multiplicity, see Serres 1968, esp. vol. 1, *La communication*, and the editors’ introduction to Serres 1982. For Serres, Leibniz is, in the words of commentators, “the great classical rationalist who supposes that the passage from local to global is always possible” (Prirogine and Stengers 1982, 138). For me, it is the failure of that attempt, the moments where it becomes awkward, that are most relevant to a revisioning of Caravaggio’s “baroqueness” (Prirogine and Stengers 1982).