In recent years, numerous scholarly texts have appeared in print attesting to a current fascination with the relationship between baroque and contemporary forms of cultural production, bearing titles such as Neo-Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment, Digital Baroque: New Media Art and Cinematic Folds, Baroque Tendencies in Contemporary Art, and On the New Baroque, to name just a few. Now curators are beginning to seize upon this fascination as well, programming exhibitions of contemporary artworks using the idea of the baroque as a central organizing concept. The texts under review here are catalogues documenting two such recent exhibitions: Deftig Barock (Riotous Baroque), which appeared in Zürich in 2012, and Misled by Nature, which toured Ottawa, Edmonton, and Toronto in 2012–13. Together they demonstrate the persistent power the idea of the baroque exercises over contemporary artists and curators.

With Deftig Barock, curator Bice Curiger has focused on the period’s anarchic, Dionysian energies and its unruly, fleshy bodies. The German modifier Deftig designates something as “strong, coarse, crude,” and his catalogue essay explains that the word is frequently “used in conjunction with hearty meals and an erotically explicit use of language.” Curiger’s vision of baroque is mostly Northern: it favors ribald genre paintings, still lives of butchered livestock and hanging sausages, and fantastic landscapes inspired by Breughel and Bosch. The exhibition’s conceit is to juxtapose a wealth of early modern works, mostly from the Dutch seventeenth century, against works from today spanning a wide range of mediums and national backgrounds. The tactic seems shrewd, in terms of its potential to draw in large numbers of museumgoers of wide-ranging backgrounds and tastes. Here, Ryan Trecartin and Paul McCarthy brush up against Rubens and Jan Steen: over sixty artists from the seventeenth century and today are included, in total. Although Curiger disclaims that “[t]hese juxtapositions are . . . not intended to proclaim a neo- Baroque stylistic tendency in contemporary art,” they nevertheless effectively pose a number of similarities between the two periods’ historical conditions and prevailing aesthetic concerns.

The questions and connections raised by this curatorial montage are provocative: How should one read Cindy Sherman’s photographs of herself made up as various New York high society women when they are strategically surrounded by a host of Vanitas skulls from the seicento? And how are the skulls seen differently in light of Sherman’s work? Elsewhere, several paintings by Monsù Desiderio, whom Breton hailed as a baroque precursor to Surrealism, depict palaces and cathedrals imploding on themselves into heaps of picturesque ruins; in close proximity to these, one
finds Diana Thater’s video installation *Chernobyl* documenting ruins of a more recent and politically urgent vintage. The catalogue mostly lets readers draw connections and conclusions on their own, but provides a rich discursive context through a number of textual counterparts, including a scholarly roundtable, poetic essays by Elfriede Jelinek and Eileen Myles, and a glossary of key terms relevant to baroque aesthetics. The concept of “precarity” does not make an appearance in this glossary, but it resonates throughout the catalogue’s pages and in the exhibition’s subtitle as one of the most evocative points of similarity between the crises of the seventeenth century and those of our own times.

*Misled by Nature*, whose title alludes to Winckelmann’s rejection of Bernini, takes an altogether different approach. Restricting itself to six installation artists, it focuses on a number of recurring themes: “material excess, ornamentation, theatricality . . . hybridity, natural processes, the viewer’s experience . . . feelings of awe, aversion, and ecstasy.” (The curators might have added “immersivity” to this list.) With fewer works on display, it allows for a closer, more sustained look at each. Much more than in Curiger’s exhibition, *Misled by Nature* elaborates the baroque’s global reach. Yinka Shonibare, MBE’s sculptural installation *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews without their Heads* ironically refashions the aristocratic portraiture of Thomas Gainsborough through Shonibare’s characteristic use of “African” batik fabrics (note the scare quotes). Considered together, Sarah Sze’s *360 (Portable Planetarium)*, Lee Bul’s *After Bruno Taut (Negative Capability)*, and Bharti Kher’s *nothing marks the perimeter, just a hollow sound echoes* all develop a common use of star imagery or constellation patterns to comment upon Western modernity’s scientific rationalism and colonial imaginary. David Altmejd and Tricia Middleton, the two Canadians represented, suggest a more melancholic perspective. Altmejd’s *The Holes* depicts a landscape of dead mythological giants, their corpses merging into their setting, undergoing fantastical transformations into crystals, organic forms, and built environments, while Middleton’s evocatively titled *Embracing oblivion and ruin is the only way to live now* evokes a post-apocalyptic igloo of sorts, something from an ice age of the distant past or future.

From these exhibitions, the exchanges between baroque and contemporary art could be developed further in a number of exciting directions, and could usefully be extended to include representatives from the fields of theatre and performance. One can imagine a performance curator or producer developing a festival of contemporary work with the concept of the baroque as its major structuring device: it might include My Barbarian performing excerpts from their ongoing project *Broke People’s Baroque Peoples’ Theater*, performances from the Wooster Group’s recent engagements with baroque dramaturgy (which Branislav Jakovljevic has chronicled in *TDR*), reenactments of Marina Abramovic’s *Balkan Baroque*, and a new project by Robert Wilson, hailed by the Surrealist Louis Aragon in 1970 in *PAJ’s* first issue as the “baroque of the future.”

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