**Attachment  
Essay Éric Suchère**

The Baroque. The term simultaneously points to a simple and a complex concept. Complex when we think of its use in art history. Simple when we think of the way we use the term in everyday language without reference to art, just like we use the word surreal as an adjective in other situations. In colloquial terms, baroque can refer to something that is irregular, bizarre, unexpected, but also more general to something that is eccentric, abnormal. For example, a situation or perhaps a character can be baroque. In art, the term baroque refers to a style that can be applied to architecture, painting, music or literature in very different ways. In the visual arts the term stands for the expression of vitality and movement, through dynamic compositions and a varied palette, and this with great artistic freedom and ornamental excess.[[1]](#footnote-1) Peter Paul Rubens, then, functions as the paradigm of the Baroque, halfway between Mannerism and the Rococo, culminating in the 17th century. After long theoretical discussions, however -– based both on Jacob Burckhardt and Heinrich Wölfflin (Renaissance und Barock in 1888) or Benedetto Croce (Storia dell'età barocca in Italia in 1929) – the term is applied to artists as diverse as Caravaggio, Rembrandt or Diego Vélasquez whose work is contrasted with the classicist clarity. There would be a rather austere, naturalistic Baroque - Caravaggio -, a lyrical and decentred Baroque - Rubens -, an elliptical Baroque - Vélasquez -, a meditative Baroque - Georges de La Tour -, or a Baroque of light effects and pictorial *matière* such as with Rembrandt. These divergent visions are important because they influence the way in which Luc Tuymans, curator of Sanguine, sees the Baroque and the way in which this aesthetic movement of a specific period can be related to the art of the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century.

This all plays a role since the exhibition, apart from some works from the 17th and 18th centuries (Caravaggio, Adriaen Brouwers, Cornelis De Vos, Jacob Jordaens, Johann Georg Pinsel, Rubens, Anthony Van Dyck and Francisco de Zurbarán), mainly presents works of living artists who can hardly be called Baroque in the strict sense of the word. Their aesthetics are also very diverse - what do John Armleder, Isa Genzken and Pierre Huyghe have in common? – or at first glance even antithetical to this concept – think of Lili Dujourie or Jan Vercruysse. I think this is why we have to start from a work that was planned for the exhibition, but that for reasons that do not matter here, will not be presented, the David of Caravaggio, which dates from 1609-1610 – so one of the last works of the artist.[[2]](#footnote-2)

David emerges from the dark, and undoubtedly enters the tent of Saul. With his stretched-out left arm he shows the bloody head of Goliath with open mouth and eyes. In his right hand he holds a sword that reaches just below his groin. He looks at the head or seems lost in thought.

It is not clear whether his face expresses sternness or sympathy. The iconographic interpretation of this painting is well known: the head of Goliath would be a self-portrait of the painter, thus confirming that he is a rogue who was been executed by David, who embodies divine justice. With this painting Caravaggio would have asked for forgiveness for his mistakes - the murder he had committed. Once we have taken note of this explanation of the work, our attention goes to several striking elements in this painting: the theatricality of the black, as in most of the works of Caravaggio; the violence and the realism of the severed head, which is evident; the limited and sparse colour palette – which will certainly appeal to Tuymans when we think of his work –; the efficiency and a certain coolness in the pictorial execution – also a characteristic of the aesthetics of Tuymans –; the lack of pathos and expressive distance with an emphasis on the draping that contrasts with the violence of the image; and finally, the permanent defocalisation – one of the essential elements in Tuymans' work. The gaze constantly hesitates between the central point of the canvas, the head of David at the point of the triangle of the composition, and that of Goliath, eccentric but more prominent; and between the brilliance of the folds of the triangle of David's shirt and the bright shine of the sword. The painting consists of three blocks: the torso and the head of David, his shirt and trousers and the head of Goliath, separated from the compact block that is formed by the first two. Everything is simultaneously bound together and released in a painting that is a visual montage almost in the contemporary sense of the term.

Starting from this painting, we can distinguish several themes: the theatricality of violence, realism in the depiction, efficiency, coolness and economy in the execution, distancing of pathos and permanent defocalisation. These may not be the themes Tuymans based the composition of his exhibition on, but they offer opportunities to make connections between the art of the 17th century and that of our time, without there being any anachronism or exaggerated projection of old art onto that of today. [[3]](#footnote-3)

Of course we can define still other themes based on the other old works that are shown in the exhibition. In this way, the almost morbid and disturbing verism of the portraits of Adriaen Brouwers, Cornelis De Vos, Jacob Jordaens or Anthony Van Dyck could form another starting point. Or the subtle colour differences and the spatial density of Rubens, or the permanent torsions and fractures in the figure and landscape elements of Zurbarán's Martyrdom of St. Sebastian. All these elements enable the reading and consideration of contemporary works. We could also point to visual analogies between works that do not quote each other, but that are each other's echoes. Sleeper by Michaël Borremans, for example, is reminiscent of Caravaggio, the Thanatophanies of On Kawara evoke Studies for the portrait of Abraham Grapheus by Jordaens and the two Pinsel sculptures find an almost natural continuation in Nadia Naveau's Deaf Ted, Danoota & Me.

We can also abandon those analogies between old and contemporary works and simply notice how the broken planes and diffractions in Circa Tabac by Carla Arocha and Stéphane Schraenen, as well as the permanent decentring of the visible axes, literally fit in with Baroque aesthetics. We could also talk about the negative connotation that this term had until the beginning of the 20th century.

That it was used for a long time to denote a certain bad taste, which we find in the sticky irony of Lanterna Magica by Sigmar Polke or in the biting (and decadent) humour of L'Adoration de François pour Judith by Jan Van Imschoot.

Perhaps it is not the intention to find a connection between the Baroque of the 17th century and the possible references to it in the work of the 21st century, but rather to create a baroque feeling about the art of our time, or to point out that much contemporary art can be called baroque in the general sense of the word (irregular, bizarre, unexpected, eccentric).

That is the case with the paintings of Joris Ghekiere, the sculptures of Yutaka Sone, the paintings of Jack Whitten or the drawings of David Gheron Tretiakof. It is also evident that both readings – the scientific and the popular – are simultaneously and alternately possible, and that they can be mixed and crossed or be present in different degrees. The question posed by the exhibition concerns both the shift and the friction.

The works enter into a dialogue with each other and at the same time allow a permanent division with regard to the meaning of the exhibition, with regard to the meaning of the term baroque or the meaning of the works.

Finally, we can also talk about the title of the exhibition, to shed more light on the proposal and the selection of Luc Tuymans: Sanguine. Blood red. Of course this immediately reminds of the violent theatricality of Caravaggio's paintings, but blood red is not blood, only an evocation of it. Therefore, there will be both violence and its simulation, both cruelty as the staging thereof, a bit of falsehood and, let us be clear, something that largely characterizes the Baroque: a somewhat contrived exaggeration of the facts, that is, both the urge to create a lively impression, as well as affectation or a technical process used to that purpose. Both violence and a distancing from it, both horror and the (sour) smile that follows, both shock and distance, both lyricism and its opposite – as can be seen in the work of Ed Kienholz, Five Car Stud, or that of Berlinde De Bruyckere, in which the grotesque is a nightmare, containing both realism and lies, in which illusion is at once created and cancelled, in which we fail to distinguish the real from the artificial, in which sharpness can become pathos, in which ecstasy can be discomfort, in which the work constantly oscillates between two irreconcilable poles.

1. Alain Mérot (red.), *Histoire de l’art, 1000-2000*, Véronique Gerard Powell, ‘Le XVIIe siècle’, Paris, Hazan, 1995, p. 234. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. During a telephone conversation the artist pointed out the importance of this painting in the concept of the exhibition. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It is the choice of the artist and the idiosyncratic gaze of the professional that play a role in the way he makes connections. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)