

A NON-VIOLENT EXPLOSION IN THE TAXONOMIC SCHLOSS

(TOWARDS A NEO-BAROQUE)¹

by Paul O’Kane

All is explosion, every ‘thing’ an event. Even this writing, appearing to take place in lines of ordered words, resonates in ways that spread in many directions at various speeds. Writing is an explosion, a diaspora, spraying out, emitting from the event of its starting point. How do we shape and control this energy, this writing, while also ‘giving it its head’ – as drivers of harnessed horses sometimes say. The solution is not to impose a known form out of a fear of chaos, but to allow an unanticipated form and content to arise from the material, from the event, from the energy of the writing. Another solution might be to simply become more comfortable with chaos and more familiar with formlessness (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986), (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004).²

The apparent formlessness of an explosion is something that can nevertheless be valued, interpreted, analysed. The enduring popularity of firework displays might remind us that a certain affective thrill or *jouissance* can derive from the making and witnessing of explosions made to contrive complex patterns. And the most powerful explosions of all, like those produced by 20th century atomic warfare, have left their form, image and shape imprinted on our cultural retina.

Meanwhile, a 21st century, already shaped by terrorism, with its suicide bombers monstrously extending the legacy of 1970s airplane hijackers, amplifies the explosion to a newly grim status, wherein it comes to challenge representation – of both the political and artistic kind. Something like this was implied by the *avant garde* composer Stockhausen when he referred to the event we call ‘9/11’ as: “The Devil’s Masterpiece” – elsewhere described as ‘the mother of all images’, and also well illustrated by Johan Grimonprez postmodern classic video essay ‘Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y’ (1997).

Dissident Surrealist, Georges Bataille, listed ‘spit’ among a series of examples he gave of what he called ‘the formless’ (Bois and Krauss, 1997). Spit too is an explosion, as are those everyday parts of speech known as ‘plosives’. Here I briefly digress into an anecdote wherein I recall meeting the artist Alex Schady in London in the 1990s, when his practice was, like that of many of us at that time, influenced by Bataille. Schady made a work in which he spat on to sheets of paper or handkerchiefs, then sewed around the resulting stain to give the marks a

¹ My title arises from the first draft of writing. I see repeated allusions to explosion in Sascha’s projects, but also a kind of meticulous subtlety and consideration that I associate with Fine Art thinking. For this reason, I invented the category of a non-violent explosion.

‘Neo-baroque’ is a Deleuzian concept (Deleuze, 1990, p.16; 2001, pp.27-38, pp.86-94)

The ‘taxonomic Schloss’ takes the context, venue and host institution (2019-24) for Transpositional Geologies and associates it with the whole ‘institution’ (or perhaps castle, palace, museum) of taxonomy in general, meanwhile, taking some pleasure, as a non-German speaker and writer, in the onomatopoeic pleasures to be found in the word ‘Schloss’, which might suggest something excessive and decadent.

² Here the figure of James Joyce, and his adoption by Deleuze & Guattari (2004; 1988; 1986) comes to mind.

form and permanence that might proffer meaning in something like the way the ancients once deciphered entrails or ‘read’ residual tea leaves.

For Bataille, and perhaps for Schady too, the apparent formlessness of explosive spit might have both profane and sacred implications.³ Spit invokes dirt, ill health, abjection, and yet its multiple and complex trajectories might equally remind us of infinity, eternity, or transcendent escape, like a baroque religious ceiling painting that seems to spiral up and away into the forever. Spit might even invoke the so-called ‘Big Bang’ theorised by scientists to have initiated the universe.

That which reminds us, of all that is beyond human scale and control, has elsewhere been aesthetically accommodated within Romantic theories of ‘the sublime’. But Romantic art might also share unexpected affinities with the Catholic baroque art referred to above, though only as much as it shares with spit, sneezes, fireworks and bombs, as well perhaps as thunderstorms and other forms of horror-inducing or vertigo-inducing experience.

A CONTROLLED EXPLOSION IN LONDON – SCANNERS & VITRINES

I first encountered the artist Sascha Mikloweit and his practices in London circa 2009. At that time, he had acquired the remains of a briefcase which, left unattended and suspected of being a terrorist device, had been subjected to a ‘controlled explosion’ at a major London railway station by an anti-terror unit of the British Transport Police. Without going into detail about its contents and the subsequent narratives that the artist derived from the same, what was initially most striking about Sascha’s use and analysis of his ‘unattended object’ was his specific use of high-quality, large-scale scans and digital printing, deployed to amplify and transmit an appropriate image, and used as a way of capturing, recording, and sharing this energetic event and its residual material. Sascha has recently reflected on this choice of technological representation and explored the idea that scanning is a particularly relevant vehicle for representing a thing once regarded as an object (an object left unattended) now transformed by explosive forces into an event.

Unlike previous generations of photographic processes utilising cameras, lenses, shutters and distance, the flatbed scanning pursued by Sascha requires objects to be placed directly upon or pressed up against a glass sheet. The image is then created not by briefly clicking open a shutter and aperture, but by calmly gliding over or under it, like a hawk, glider, or drone, while reading (or, as Sascha prefers, ‘inventing’) what it ‘sees’ as line after line of data.⁴ The results tend to engage the audience with the special qualities of the digitally scanned image while celebrating what we might call its ‘super superficiality’, i.e., a superficiality spectacularly redoubled and affirmed.⁵ But while the resulting, seductive and dramatic scan imagery might be valued as ‘merely’ aesthetic (or comparable with that ‘flatness’ and shallowness embraced and affirmed by Andy Warhol or described by Douglas Crimp with regard to Robert Rauschenberg), there may yet be hidden depths and complexities to be gleaned here.

Anyone who has made ‘analog’ photographic negatives, and subsequently scanned them, will know the pleasure of having thus seemed to bring the past into the present while translating one kind and quality of image into another. As a result, the past is made newly malleable,

³ See also the art of Gustav Metzger, Cornelia Parker, and others.

⁴ See also Benjamin’s *Chinese curios* (2000, pp.49–50).

⁵ Here, ‘affirmation’ and ‘nay-saying’ are references to Nietzsche, who seemed to have strived in his thought to affirm as much as he possibly could, if not, everything; meanwhile disparaging and satirising a tendency and tradition that he called ‘nay-saying’.

preserved and ordered by the scanning process, but is also potentially freed of its actuality by means of its virtualisation. The scanned, digital image is no longer subjected to the carceral conditions of the physical vitrine and of the paper-based photographic print. In fact, the vast realm of digital, screen-based images might today be justifiably regarded as one great image and one great vitrine, any part of which can be accessed by almost anybody, anywhere, simultaneously, countlessly, via any hand-held, digital, screen-based device. And here, amid the massive murmurings of virtual clouds and belligerent ‘barrages’ of Big Data, the neo-Catholic imagery of the neo-baroque once again calls out for comparison.

Through his use of scanners, Sascha draws our attention to a historical procession of taxonomic technologies, enhancing their visibility while rendering them relativised, questionable, peculiar, and particular – ready for comparison with other, prior and future technologies. The various processes involved in the realisation of his work, while sensual, spectacular and initially transmitted in striking aesthetic terms, is also a form of epistemology, a particular way of knowing, of making sense of the world, of an object, of an event.

Perhaps we can think of other examples of objects, events, or ideas that we come to know and understand first by ‘exploding’ them, then scanning and presenting the remainder (see our reference to ‘entrails’ above), by first destroying their integrity, shattering their identity, their ‘thing-hood’, in order to read and know them anew?

It is hard to resist here aligning Sascha’s process with the (anti-) philosophical process known as deconstruction, which, we might say, destroys in a non-violent manner, and only to construct. Or perhaps we could say that deconstruction ‘constructs violently’ (and deconstruction’s founding [albeit anti-foundational] guru Jacques Derrida has spoken of ‘doing violence to one’s thought’). While explosions appear destructive, painful, harmful, if we regard everything as explosion and all as diasporic, we might be able to shrug-off the ‘violence’ that is seemingly inherent to the explosion – a *moral* association that we automatically award it.⁶

Today, any post-enlightenment, post-human, and post-modern project that can deconstruct and read history ‘against the grain’ provides a form of explosion that reaches out and ripples through the given and inherited order of things. It nevertheless appears to treat the *status quo* non-confrontationally, we might say peacefully, with infinite delicacy, even while reducing it to tiny components – even to dust (Benjamin, 1968, aphorism VII, p.257).⁷ In this way we emulate F.W. Nietzsche’s proto-deconstructive notion of ‘philosophising with a hammer’, albeit now interpreting this hammer not necessarily as a large, crude, weighty device, deployed with malice and maximum force, but as the kind of hammer deployed by a jeweller, watchmaker or a doctor seeking responses from a patient’s knee.⁸

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Sascha Mikloweit extended his London-based enquiries by later working with the European Space Agency (ESA), again using his scanning process, but this time to engage with debris

⁶ Invoking Nietzsche’s essay *On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense* (Kaufman, 1976, pp.42-47).

⁷ Hence my ‘non-violent explosion’ of the title.

See also David Company’s curation *A Handful of Dust* (2017) at London’s Whitechapel Gallery.

⁸ Nietzsche who, along with Heidegger, influenced the ‘deconstruction’ of Jacques Derrida. Elsewhere Nietzsche writes ‘It is the stillest words which bring the storm. Thoughts that come on doves’ feet guide the world’, perhaps emphasising a certain gentleness he deemed crucial for thought, despite his reputation for iconoclasm (Nietzsche, 1969, p.168). We might also consider *Twilight of the idols* (1915), another of Nietzsche’s concepts and titles, by means of which we are reminded that any conflation of art and destruction is bound to conjure-up consideration of the history of iconoclasms that have always attended the history of art and ideas.

resulting from the destroyed payload of an Ariane 5 rocket which exploded shortly after take-off on 4th June 1996.⁹ Here, a scanning process that once again tends to isolate an object against the cosmic-looking black void of its background, produced images of buckled, fried and dented objects, again ‘seen’ by the relatively new archival apparatus of the scanner, and absorbed into its particular taxonomic realm that renders all things not only digital and virtual, but eventual.

The debris of the so-called ‘space age’ has here come to signify failure, a lost future, and a disappointed adventure that is yet to find an appropriate way to write its history. If we call our current epoch the ‘digital age’ we might also claim that, for us ‘screen becomes vitrine’, as three-dimensional objects are scanned in increasingly sophisticated ways, ultimately to be viewed by means of a glass or plastic screen, rather than displayed in glass cases and lofty museum halls (O’Kane, 2019).¹⁰

POPPELSDORFER SCHLOSS – RADICAL HISTORY AND PREHISTORY

Given the above, it is perhaps appropriate that now, as I write in 2023, I find Sascha entrusted to work with a precious mineralogical collection in what we might call a ‘traditional’ European museum, there engaging with equally traditional vitrines and archives. Sascha is once again working with objects that are (like the exploded briefcase that set these themes in motion) perhaps ‘left unattended’, but not yet suspected of any potential threat. Rather it is the artist himself perhaps who appears threatening to the established order and to a taxonomic regime that holds certain power structures together and in place.

Today, when we look at the monumental systems of classification that determined what came to be known as enlightenment and empire we do so critically, sceptically, as well as with a certain shame, hostility and resentment. These systems set-up a violent and imposing relationship between man and man and between man and the world, first by claiming to ‘discover’ and presuming to collect, then by taking pains to order and measure (according to its own measure of course) everything as other than and other to itself – and also other to the human. As Walter Benjamin (1968) suggests in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, all such apparently caring curatorial control is also potentially criminal:

There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another.

As above, a toxic taxonomic regime does not only restrict itself to the relationship between the human and the supposedly non-human realm, but between men and other men, most notably between those (on one hand) who by means of a certain convenient ignorance have elevated themselves to a position of supremacy, and (on another) others thereby condemned to a less than, non-, or barely human condition (Arendt, 1958; Levi, 1987; Agamben, 2007). This

⁹ Ariane flight V88 was the failed maiden flight of the Arianespace Ariane 5 rocket, vehicle no. 501, on 4 June 1996. It carried the *Cluster* spacecraft, a constellation of four European Space Agency research satellites. The launch was in *The Guiana Space Centre*, also called Europe’s Spaceport. It is a European spaceport to the northwest of Kourou in French Guiana, an overseas territory of France in South America.

The artist clarifies that the material he had access to was *Cluster* mission satellite debris, residue of four satellites that were the payload of Flight 501 / V88 of the Ariane 5 rocket type, which are archived at the *European Space Operations Centre (ESOC)*, Darmstadt, Germany.

¹⁰ For the origin of this phrase and concept see O’Kane (2019).

regime, closely allied with and motivated by commerce, enabled the unprecedentedly profitable practice of the Atlantic slave trade to fund what came to address itself as the ‘first world’s’ (or ‘leading nations’) consequent excesses and cultural ‘achievements’ – including seats of learning, majestic architecture, palatial homes, mighty museums and triumphant tomes, all of which become flagships and signifiers of enlightenment, while concealing their dependence on the iniquitous operations of empire, and on what Paul Gilroy (1993, pp.1-16) has called ‘capitalism with its clothes off’.

To the thoughts, thinkers and theorists referred to here, some of whom might be implicated in various affirmations of explosivity, we could add the practices of Robert Smithson (1996), whose land-art, in manoeuvring minerals *en mass*, entered or emerged from a dialogue with George Kubler, another unique thinker who seems to have pursued the aim of writing an art history in geological time (Kubler, 1962). Such a prehistory might begin to allow us to free ourselves from the kind of Euro-centric, phal-logo-centric, modern-centric, empire-centric, anthropo-centric history of art that is, admittedly, still informing lines of thought in this writing, even as they attempt to explode themselves in an act of auto-deconstruction.

Kubler’s implications suggest a history of art that is no longer concisely and conveniently contained by our currently established museology and historicisation, its particular concrete forms and constructions. A more ‘geological’ history could release us into a wider, wilder, more formless field of art history or prehistory involving base materials, energetics, and events of which the Earth, and by implication, the universe, is constantly being formed.

The word ‘radical’ is perhaps overused in common cultural discourse, but its original meaning, with regard to ‘roots’ (see e.g. the humble *radish*) is appropriate here as, via Smithson and Kubler, we come upon a kind of ‘dig’, signalling a geological and radical history of art that is conscious of its innate, immanent and original explosivity, its constant velocity, its latent, vibrating potential to escape containment and order. This radicalism can be exerted even as and when we are asked to look at its products and ‘discoveries’ ordered in conservative rows on gallery walls, in museum cases, or in purpose-built hyper-illuminated white-cube galleries where it seems that nothing can be hidden. This radicalism can be exerted in palatial, panelled museums, the cultural castles (*Schlösser*) of curating that tend to impress us even before we climb their vertiginous entrance steps and pass between their lofty columns.

TOWARDS A NEO-BAROQUE

As we have mentioned above, ‘the sublime’ theorises an aesthetic thrill, emerging from a brush with fear or a glimpse of the immeasurable, an encounter with the formless void where human perspectives no longer protect and assure the human. The baroque meanwhile provides a certain and particular form to non-human scale and formlessness. Its imagery involves a tumbling, fluid expression once claimed by the philosopher Gilles Deleuze to be encapsulated in the endless complex potential and dynamism of the apparently simple fold. The universe *qua* fold is not an assembly of discrete, separated objects, or things with fixed forms, but a folding and unfolding continuum (17th century baroque philosophers and theologians also refer to a *plenum*). The fold, as paradigm, enables a non-exclusive and holistic vision, allowing for what the Christian bible (1 Corinthians, 15: 28) calls the ‘all in all’ (and for what Deleuze sometimes calls ‘one in the other’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, p.477; Deleuze, 1997, pp.57,165,236,250)).¹¹

¹¹ Regarding ‘all in all’ see: “And when all things shall be subdued unto him, then shall the Son also himself be subject unto him that put all things under him, that God may be all in all.” (James, 1769)

Today, as modern societies and ‘leading nations’ begin to confront and contemplate the divisive, destructive, and short-sighted approaches that have been taken to explore and exploit the earth and its surroundings, the neo-baroque’s non-exclusive and holistic vision, in which all is enfolded in all else, can encourage a greater, perhaps more holistic consideration for the whole within the particular. A contemporary artist, informed by this model, finds themselves not only unprecedentedly free to explore any process, period, style, and agenda (the legacy of liberative modernism) but able to approach current issues in the context of the greatest expanses of time and space, in a postmodern reclamation of the premodern; of the ancient; the prehistoric; the traditional; the cosmic; and the religious.

A traditional and conservative form of taxonomy might tend towards the production of a still image of our mobile universe (a means by which questions are halted by knowledge) and thus lead us, through still-image making, to mistakenly believe that we have contained and controlled the universe as known and knowable objects and ‘things’. For too long it seems, photographic technologies have beguiled us with an illusory stillness that is misleading and unrepresentative of experience. But for Sascha Mikloweit, what he calls his “Image-Objects”, obtained through scanning the outcomes of explosions, are always tools to “mobilise, to re-animate history”.

Even if we take up Andre Malraux’s enthusiasm for the infinite and permissive sounding idea of still photography (in its entirety) as a *Museum Without Walls*, we nevertheless suspect that still photography (despite the influence of the ‘moving image’) has tended to consolidate and confirm erroneous perspectives on otherness by falsely capturing it as immobile and thereby pacified (Malraux, 1967). See e.g., the tradesmen and tribesmen photographed by Irving Penn (1974) within the consistent context of his portable portrait studio, or consider Edward Steichen’s (1986) idealistic post-WW2, *Family of Man* project.

To taxonomically freeze and represent the great formless explosion that all ultimately is and that we also are, is not only a great conceit of still photography but also that of a would-be encyclopaedic enlightenment. It is something that anti-philosopher and radical historian Gilles Deleuze sought to disrupt in his own way by digging behind, before and beyond enlightenment, perhaps most notably in the direction of his advocacy of a ‘neo-baroque’ paradigm. Deleuze wrote about the way in which cinema creates new possibilities for thought and philosophy, but he also sees – in a pre-enlightenment, less rational 17th century baroque paradigm – a way of encompassing, acknowledging, working with and relinquishing control over the truer and greater complexity with which an enquiring 21st century mind is now confronted when considering a universe where chaos is affirmed as a more complex form of order (Deleuze, 2001; 1990; Voltaire, 2001).

Deleuze’s neo-baroque paradigm is event-based as opposed to object-based or thing-based; it is *intensive* rather than *extensive*; it is malleable, pliable (see the French *pli* for ‘fold’), even fluid and pale in its most rococo manifestations (Deleuze, 1990, p.16; 2001, pp.27-38, pp.86-94). And this might account for the constant energetic motion, of the rhythms and vibrations, speeds and hesitations entertained by molecular physics, that gives an impression of distinct events manifested by relative speeds and rhythms.

Meanwhile, Deleuze encourages us to see ourselves as events, even suggesting that we regard ourselves as akin to: ‘a wind, a season, or 5 o’clock’ (Deleuze, 1991, pp.94–95). If we investigate the infinitely and eternally folded and enfolded realm of Deleuze’s model of the

neo-baroque, we might perceive therein the possibility and capability of encompassing a greater complexity than that which enlightenment presumed and promised to master, and which it ultimately reduced and restricted.

Before, after, beyond and notwithstanding enlightenment, all is explosion and diaspora, of which we are each and all a part, as events within events within events (*sic*); events that will not be corralled and contained for long, and certainly not forever, but which territorialise only on their way to a subsequent deterritorialisation, a further fold; events that exist (or should we say *persist*) one-in-the-other, all in all, without exclusion or exclusivity.¹²

As diasporic and explosive, we are all and we are one, all in one, the whole in one, fused and united by our mutual becoming, our common difference and constant differentiation. There is no separation of self-and-object, human-and-nature, living and lifeless matter, only one great energetic and explosive enfolding and unfolding within which apparent individuations are merely hesitations, flights, manifestations of relative speeds and varying trajectories resulting in temporary formations, all rippled through by a dynamic force.

The neo-baroque may offer a model by means of which relatively crude, simplistic and repetitive forms of order, while reducing fear and inducing a sense of safety, give way to a brave and radical taxonomic expansion, a fluid liberty according to which we no longer shy from un-control or the potential loss implied by relinquishment. Loss and gain no longer relate to a *plenum* in which all is in all and where one is enfolded in other.

The neo-baroque is *not* the sublime, but like the sublime it acknowledges and affirms a kind of vertigo, induced by adventure, curiosity, and enquiry; a kind of dizziness brought on by keeping all in question and by associating the least of events with the greatest of questions. The neo-baroque might just lie within the dynamic and energetic force that drives the multiple explosive projects of Sascha Mikloweit, and that equally drives this writing – itself an explosion.

To conclude with a question (and all questions, we seem to have shown here, are themselves explosive and diasporic, opening-up ever-widening paths): what might be the duty, the task, the responsibility of an artist today when strangely charged to respond, when confronted by a prestigious mineralogical collection in the impressive context of a grand taxonomic *Schloss*? Perhaps that duty is a responsibility to explode all that can be exploded, to repatriate safely ordered objects, not to their pre-historic origins but to their most explosive *ur* condition, showing that the museum never completely captures things, as ‘things’ but merely induces a still and silent coma, a hesitation or delay of things (O’Kane, 2009).

The artist’s duty, as a *counter*-curator or *anti*-curator, might then be to awaken and free things from their ‘thing-hood’, releasing them from any temporarily tamed stasis and known form, liberating things from their status as evidence, and from their organisation as objects of knowledge, allowing them to move, fragment, dissolve, to lose their apparently fixed forms while returning them to questionability, reinstating their trajectories and becomings so that they can be renewed, revisited, and perhaps re-read – like the detritus of an explosion, like entrails, tea leaves, koans, runes and riddles, providing a form of 21st century augury that is as futural as it is ancient.

¹² Here Michel Foucault’s *Preface* to his book *The Order of Things* comes to mind as a withering, and laughter-inducing critique of order *per se*, and in which the laughter perhaps arises from a kind of vertiginous fear (Foucault, 1974).

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