



## Myriam Thyes' artworks referring to the Baroque

By Rahel Beyerle, Zurich, 2023-2024

### A love-hate relationship

"I have a love-hate relationship with the Baroque," says Myriam Thyes, "because I love the powerful expression, the virtuoso use of colour, the inventiveness of motifs and forms, the energy of this style – in painting, sculpture, architecture – while I hate the obvious propaganda for the ruling elites and the overpowering strategies of this art."

With **After Tiepolo** (2013), the artist, who lives in Düsseldorf and Zurich, created one of her first works that is fundamentally based on a reference to the Baroque. As its title suggests, the almost ten-minute animated video collage is composed "based on" a fresco by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo (1696-1770). The Venetian baroque painter created this in 1752/53 for the vaulted ceiling above the representative, secular staircase of the prince-bishop's residence in Würzburg. At the same time, however, Thyes' work is about the "after". Video sequences reproduce Tiepolo's illusionistic depiction: the four continents of America, Africa, Asia and Europe – embodied by allegorical figures, animals and buildings, as well as the cloudy sky in between – populated by putti, birds, zodiac signs and deities, above all Apollo. Thyes' camera slowly moves across the ceiling painting, circling around itself. This is reminiscent of the fact that Tiepolo conceived the painting in close connection with the architecture and orientated it towards the experience of gradually discovering it while climbing the three flights of stairs, i.e. in motion. Thyes also turns the globe for a viewer now resting in front of the video projection, setting a time-lapse in motion. The art-protecting sun god is joined by one planet and star after another, each in turn orbiting itself, together forming entire galaxies. While Tiepolo's baroque figures have always remained visible in this transcendent realm, they are suddenly overwhelmed by skyscrapers that shoot into the centre of the picture, or rather the supposed height, from all sides. Architectural icons from all over the world, including power stations: they block the view of the heavens, of the universe. In the end, smoke escaping from the nuclear power plant obscures all perspective. Thyes comments: "The Christian and Eurocentric view of the world is expanded, enriched and updated. But our knowledge of the infinite vastness of the universe does not lead to spiritual expansion and clarity as long as we only have ourselves in mind with our complicated lives in modern civilisation." Thyes stretches Tiepolo's ingenious illusionism to ultimately contrast it with disillusionment. Together with the related work **Can't See The Universe (After Tiepolo)** (2013), a triptych of digital photomontages, **After Tiepolo** has already been exhibited several times. In 2023, the work was integrated into a

sacred context for the first time at Eutin Castle in the castle chapel, opening up a further area of tension - the heliocentric view of the world, for example, was still met with resistance from the church until the mid-18th century.

## Three palaces and a growing complex of works

After Caputh Palace and Pillnitz Palace, Eutin Castle is the third princely palace to be magnificently extended during the heyday of the Baroque period and is an inspiring setting for Myriam Thyes (exhibitions: *B.A.R.O.C.K.*, Schwielowsee, 2019, in cooperation with Wunderkammer Olbricht, Berlin; *Artists' Conquest*, Dresden, 2021; *Symptom: Baroque*, Eutin, 2023; all initiated by Margret Eicher, with works by Margret Eicher, Simone Demandt, Luzia Simons, Rebecca Stevenson, Myriam Thyes). Thyes' affinity for the Baroque was already apparent before 2013, for example in the moving images **Ascension** (2004) and **Cloudy Empire** (2004 / 2006), the Flash animation **Armament at Lake Constance** (2008) or during her stays in Malta and the resulting video works, photographs and photomontages **Stranded in Malta**, **Malta as Metaphor** (both 2008) and **Magnify Malta** (2010). In the last ten years, however, she has produced a body of work that refers more explicitly and on various levels to the Baroque (for a catalogue raisonné with descriptions of her works, see [www.thyes.com/kategorie/bezug-zu-barock](http://www.thyes.com/kategorie/bezug-zu-barock)). This also includes works that have been nominated for and awarded prizes at international short film festivals.

"Baroque" stands for opulence, deception and beguiling the senses. It evokes associations with beauty and transience, ecstasy, dynamism, ostentation, extravagant pleasures in contrast to war and epidemics. The term baroque originally had almost entirely negative connotations: It was interpreted as bizarre, dissonant, norm-breaking, transgressive and overloaded with effects. It has had a much-discussed history and remains the subject of updates and divergences to this day. Undisputedly, it describes an epoch that emerged from Europe between the end of the 16th century and the end of the 18th century. It was characterised by a reorientation of the world view, global exchange and disintegrating orders. In the secular and sacred visual arts, literature and music, architecture, horticulture and arts and crafts, the Baroque manifested itself as a style characterised by theatrical staging, monumentality and sensual intoxication. This design was a means to an end, to impress and overwhelm the audience, to satisfy the need for ever stronger stimuli.

Myriam Thyes answers the question of what she finds important about today's examination of this particular era and style: "Illusionistic, opulent and authority-worshipping religious Baroque painting reflects an attitude to the world that is still as present today in a different form – from Hollywood cinema to the cult of pop stars and autocrats - as it was centuries ago. In the same way, the attitudes of the avant-gardes, modernism, the first democracies and republics of the early 20th century have been preserved – in art and society. Conflicts, dialogues and compromises between the two ways of life seem to me to be intertwined, never completely resolvable (perhaps that would not be desirable)." Not least as a counterpoint to the (de)constructive and non-narrative – which are essential design principles for her – Thyes is drawn to the opulence of the Baroque. She deals with it artistically by typically drawing on well-known cinematic, literary and artistic works. But this does not result in superficial analogies of motifs and forms. Thyes constantly envisions complex layers of meaning and interconnected associations. In doing so, she adopts different concepts and visual languages. Technically, she consistently works digitally with video, film stills, animation, photomontage and photography. This corresponds to the development in her overall work, as she has been creating predominantly digitally since 1999. She created her first digital animation in 1998 from photos processed in Photoshop. From the end of the 1990s, she also contributed to an artists' association with the aim of producing video, animation and sound art. Thyes looking back: "I realised my own digital works there on a fat Mac until the end of 2004 and helped other artists technically."

In 2017, she created her first stereoscopic 3D animation in response to the trend of 3D movies, VR glasses and ultra-realistic computer games: "I wanted to show the history of the 3D illusion using Jesuit illusionist painting, which spatially connected 'heaven and earth' and thus - in response to the Reformation - was intended to seduce people into the Catholic faith." The result is **Cross and Plane to Space**, which is also available as a four-part 3D lenticular print of the same name (2019). Both works bring together Andrea Pozzo's (1642-1709) famous illusionist ceiling fresco *Triumph of St Ignazius* from the church of Sant'Ignazio in Rome (until 1694) and Sophie Taeuber-Arp's (1889-1943) non-representational spatial images with crosses, surfaces, lines and circles (1932). Thyes places different perspectives within one and the same space. In a visually multilingual way she breaks and plays with pedantic and self-satisfied art. The 3D animation draws us into the dynamic deconstruction, antithesis and synthesis of spiritual baroque and

spiritually concrete compositions, acoustically accompanied by the organ sounds of Eva-Maria Houben. If we put on the 3D shutter glasses, a door opens right into the centre of what is being presented. "... you step out of the isolation, immerse yourself in this being, become active in it and experience the pulsation [...]. The movements also wrap themselves around the person - a play of horizontal, vertical strokes and lines that tend to different directions through the movement, of piling up and scattering patches of colour that sometimes sound high, sometimes low." How fitting! The quote comes from Wassily Kandinsky's (1866-1944) introduction to his theoretical work *Point and Line to Plane: A Contribution to the Analysis of the Pictorial Elements*. First published in 1926, Thyes' title refers to it today. Kandinsky described the inner way in which every phenomenon – including the work of art – could be experienced in contrast to the outer way, namely by observing it through a flat disc. At the cutting edge of the avant-garde at the beginning of the 20th century, he defended his analytical approach: "The assertion that it would be disastrous to 'dissect' art, as this dissection would inevitably lead to the death of art, stems from the ignorant underestimation of the exposed elements and their primary forces."

Thyes makes art about art, which breathes new – and intermodular – life into such forces. Image details and forms, be they figures such as saints, insignia and animals, architectural segments or outlines and surfaces, float through the virtual space, rotating and tilting, shifting each other, rising up, descending towards us within our grasp. The artist literally 'puts us on the cross' and is all but certain to leave us in delighted wonder by the time she paints the cross on the ceiling, making Taeuber-Arp's reduced lines glow in Pozzo's lush sky. Finally, we return to the surface, everything harmonised in flickers and pixels. Back down to earth in this brilliant digital art – glasses off.

## Historical baroque painting as a core element

In Myriam Thyes' oeuvre, we can identify an entire group of works that incorporate historical Baroque pieces as core visual elements, as described above, in order to examine and reshape them through fresh perspectives. This can provoke misappropriations or lead to interweavings with the living environments and fantasies of our present and future. For **Trisolaris Chinoiserie** (2021), Thyes has selected partial views of the chinoiserie frescoes that were applied to the outer façades of the Bergpalais at Pillnitz Palace between 1720 and 1724. In the animation, three spheres appear lined up horizontally next to each other, rotating around themselves like planets. This constellation of three refers to the science fiction trilogy *Remembrance of Earth's Past* (*Trisolaris / The Three Body Problem* and two sequels, original editions: 2006-2010) by the Chinese author Cixin Liu. Image scenes from the mostly two-colour chinoiseries surround the three spheres. Staggered in time, they are zoomed in and paused individually. Chinoiserie motifs are highlighted from each of the still images, then deconstructed into formal elements and reassembled into new, multi-coloured motifs. The motifs transformed in this way present us with images that represent contemporary China. A small house mutates into three of China's tallest skyscrapers; a grape tree becomes the Chinese president Xi, who toasts us with a glass of wine; a bird-hunting cannon fuse morphs into fireworks. Thyes has never been to China herself – just as the residents and visitors to the palace in the Baroque era are unlikely to have done. She chose Chinoiserie excerpts that she found more specific and expressive than, for example, a hill with a tree or a bird. In particular, she filtered out figures that could be linked to contemporary situations. When researching online for motifs from China, she was initially guided by a general knowledge of the media. She also discovered new things, such as the virologist and Major General Chen Wei, who was decorated because she and her team developed the first Chinese vaccine against Covid-19, or the method of spraying pesticides by drone.

The works are never based on a mere reference or a static comparison of the past era with the present. They lead us towards historical events and cultural developments, while living from combination and movement. The result: communication and relationships inherent in the work. What modes of reception occur? Which identities of human and art are constructed? These are key themes throughout Thyes' entire body of work. Thus, her oeuvre addresses and examines symbols from culture, politics, and society – their meanings and transformations. In **Graceful Allegories** (2018), again mastered via video collage, an allegorical baroque painting of the state of Prussia and its colonial trade relations embraces scenes from James Cameron's science fiction fantasy film *Avatar* (2009). The relationship between the native self and the foreign other, our (better) alter ego, is scrutinised through this linking and montage. A kindred work is **Graceful Other** (2020), though it dispenses with the Baroque framework.

## Strong on the rebound

A second group of works with references to the Baroque is entirely contemporary in terms of the visual design material. A system of historical references is built up all the more conspicuously via the aesthetics, the sound or subtly via the title of the work and the choice of image carrier formats. There are the pinball machines, whose brightly coloured playing fields were filmed, with the camera moving along with the bodies of the players. The balls shooting around threaten to put an end to the clinking, spinning and flashing at any time, but the editing of the video prevents them from disappearing completely. Is this primarily about "baroque" as an artistic attitude? Thyes holds up the ball. The titles of the two video works **All Joy Wants Eternity** (2018) – a Nietzsche quote – and **Pinball Altar** (2020) speak for themselves. The artist also focuses on the major theme of women's roles by creating a **Gallery of Heroic Women** (2018-2019) from a 19-part series of portraits of prominent film and TV series heroines. The title refers to a book title of the same name and the discourse of female virtues and possibilities from the Baroque period. The portraits are printed on aluminium panels. The oval support shape appears to be borrowed from painted protective shields of earlier times, which were intended to impress the opponent in battle and keep demons at bay.

That Myriam Thyes also incorporates the audience's sense of hearing is illustrated by **The 99th Letter** (2022): a video collage with an evocative soundtrack. It was first presented at Eutin Castle. It is no coincidence that Thyes has chosen the stucco ceiling of a room with a parade bed for its projection. The bed is clad in imperial red silk and decorated with golden ornaments. It was commissioned by Duchess Louise Ulrike in the 1760s. The Princess of Prussia was married to the Prince-Bishop of Eutin, Adolf Friedrich. In the hope that her prominent brother, Emperor Frederick II of Prussia, would pay a visit to her court and thereby bring him even more fame, she had this splendid and beguiling canopy bed made for him. But the bed and the princess were to wait in vain for the emperor. Thyes is now working with material from the film *Dangerous Liaisons* (1988) by Stephen Frears, starring Glenn Close and John Malkovich. The film is based on Pierre-Ambroise-François Choderlos de Laclos's (1741–1803) novel *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (*Dangerous Liaisons*). Written in the form of 175 letters, its first publication in France in 1782 – at the close of the Baroque era – offered a critique of the Ancien Régime and became a scandalous success. The plot: Marquise de Merteuil and her ex-lover Vicomte de Valmont spin intrigues driven by a desire for revenge and seduction. Sexuality becomes a power game and a means to power, even leading to rape. An entanglement of manipulations ensues, which ends bitterly for the two schemers. Thyes: "The 99th letter, from Valmont to Merteuil, is in my view a culmination point, because Valmont's vanity and his will to power (over women) come to light here for the first time openly and without pleasantries. Merteuil's next reply to Valmont assigns him a place far below her own, and she describes her youth to him, how she trained her powers of observation and dissimulation so that from then on she could completely control herself and manipulate others." The lavishly decorated film drama managed to combine various baroque characteristics in an exemplary way. Thyes' work of art shines with a method that further enhances the unfolding of the baroque, because boundaries are crossed several times - in a very "baroque" way. The video superimposes and visually fuses the faces of the female and male schemers, doubling those who – metaphorically speaking – possess multiple faces. It turns them against themselves, quite literally holding up a mirror to their own reflection. The manipulative aspect is accentuated by the fact that the soprano soloist's voice on the soundtrack has been distorted in an eroticising way, as it is an excerpt from the aria *Der Hölle Rache kocht in meinem Herzen* (*Hell's vengeance boils in my heart*), sung by the Queen of the Night in the opera *The Magic Flute* (first performed in 1791) by W. A. Mozart (1756-1791) and played at 25 per cent of the original speed. The perception of the artwork becomes an overall spatial experience - not least thanks to the site-specific installation in conjunction with the stucco ceiling and parade bed. Multiple levels of meaning are condensed here. And the separation of artistic genres dissolves intermedially.



Has anyone ever curtsied to you before? Twelve women appear one after the other in front of Thyes' camera. They come from different parts of Germany. And for all of them applies: **I Still Had To Curtsy** (2023-2025). Remembering the courtly-noble traditions they were obliged to practice during their childhood, they perform the movements spontaneously. They do this quite differently – in terms of tempo, variations and emotions. The comments they make in the process are faded in around them. Until the 1970s, most girls in Germany had to curtsy and boys had to bow. "Nothing about curtsying itself fascinates me," Thyes states, "I find it ridiculous and humiliating. And I'm glad that we didn't know this in Switzerland. I was interested in how long this tradition lasted in the German bourgeoisie – and, above all, how these women felt about curtsying. A lot of old feelings came up, also through curtsying in front of my camera. Some girls had learnt exactly how to curtsy, others had not. The more bourgeois or conventionally educated they were, the better they knew how to do it. Some curtsied sloppily or minimalistically out of reluctance. The upper middle-class girls had to curtsy the most and for the longest, even in front of uncles and aunts. Girls from working-class or farming families only curtsied to the priest and other authority figures." For her premiere at Eutin Castle, Thyes projected the video in a circle onto the ceiling of the Red Salon. It is significant that the artist does not make the women kneel before us. Instead, she has them "curtsy down" towards us and towards an ensemble of two thrones and a canopy – life-size and anti-anamorphic. An illusionistic perspective may be rejected here, just as a moralizing and didactic understanding of art – one often associated with absolutist court culture – may also be set aside.

Myriam Thyes employs the real and fictional protagonists of her works in such a way that they often turn to address us directly. She involves the viewer, transforming the rebound of the Baroque into a direct hit in the present. Thus, while Thyes's Baroque-related works contribute to our understanding of a past era, they simultaneously sharpen our awareness of contemporary life.