

Toward a Phenomenology of Brazil's Baroque Modernism

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The milieu in which Brazilian life began was one of sexual intoxication.
—Gilberto Freyre, *Casa grande e senzala*

The Baroque and the Rococo are admirably adapted to the Brazilian landscape. . . . The country is so Baroque that one has the impression that the style was born here.
—Roberto Burle Marx, *Arte e paisagem*

We do not conceive of a work of art as a “machine” or as an “object,” but as a “quasi-corpus” [quasi-body], that is to say, something that amounts to more than the sum of its constituent elements; something that can only be understood phenomenologically.
—Ferreira Gullar, *Manifesto neoconcreto*

Where are we to put the limit between the body and the world, since the world is flesh . . . [since]

visible things are the secret folds of our flesh.

—Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*

Brazilian Modernism was born of a spiritual quest for cultural identity rooted in an aesthetic exploration of the tropical landscape and the colonial Baroque condition. An important dimension of this quest—the search for a Baroque unity of body and soul—is evident not only in much Brazilian painting and sculpture but also in the work of Brazil's great Modernist architects: Lúcio Costa, Roberto Burle Marx, and especially Oscar Niemeyer. Each in his own way has contributed to the definition of a Brazilian ethos through an architectural exploration of the tropical Baroque and the Modernist strategy of *antropofagia* (cannibalism). Architecture, the monumental extension of the flesh of the body into the flesh of the world, has been for Niemeyer a means to incorporate

(literally and metaphorically) a vision of the Brazilian soul and achieve a sense of cultural identity and intimacy with the divine. His work is thus important for understanding Modern Brazilian art because it has forged a conceptual and historical link between the colonial Baroque and Modernism, and in particular between the cosmic organicism of *antropofagia* and the phenomenological concerns of Neo-Concrete and contemporary art. His work has addressed not only the formal and ritual qualities of the Baroque but also the erotic primitivism of the Antropofagia movement, its rites of communion with nature and the body, and its attempts to return to a primordial world of spiritual meaning and intimate contact with the landscape before the conquest. The development of an architectural expression of Brazil's "Baroque Modernist" identity is best revealed through several important buildings and projects: the Brazilian Pavilion (1939) at the New York World's Fair; the project (1948) for a theater adjoining the Ministry of Education and Health Building in Rio de Janeiro; the Chapel of Saint Francis (1940–43) and related buildings at Pampulha; the Cathedral of Brasília (1958–62) and palaces in the capital; the Memorial da América Latina (1989) in São Paulo; and the Museu de Arte Contemporânea (1991–96) in Niterói.

The Baroque in Brazil

"Baroque" has been defined in many ways. What interests us here, especially in light of the epigraph by Burle Marx at the beginning of this essay, is the relation between the Baroque and Brazil, and the extent to which the concept in this case encompasses much more than a style. One of the most important English-language statements in this regard was Leopoldo Castedo's book *The Baroque Prevalence in Brazilian Art*.¹ Drawing on the observations of Brazilian anthropologists, writers, and artists (among them Gilberto Freyre, Jorge Amado, Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, and Oscar Niemeyer), Castedo

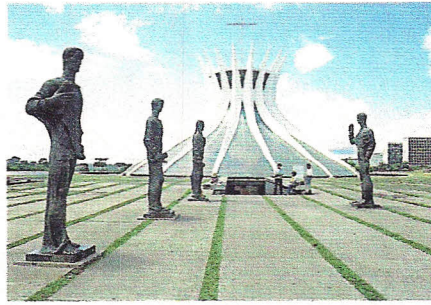
explored the plastic feeling, theatricality, and lyricism of Brazilian cultural forms as varied as the *capoeira* and the music of Heitor Villa-Lobos. Characterizing Brazil's Baroque ethos in philosophical and comparative visual terms by juxtaposing images of O Aleijadinho's architecture and sculpture with Niemeyer's buildings and spaces in Brasília, Castedo defined the Baroque in Brazil in terms of an intuitive nature comprising four attributes he found in the art and psychological profile of the people: universality, intimacy with the divine, sensuality, and audacity. To these he added several formal qualities "found especially in the Brazilian expression": the breaking up of outlines, the obsessive predominance of the curve, and an almost frenzied dynamism. While these are defining characteristics in all the arts, they are especially evident in architecture, "traditionally the head of the hierarchy."² In this connection, he adds, the most salient attribute of the Baroque is that of the multimedia expression—the *Gesamtkunstwerk*—"the tendency to intermingle the fine arts" in a "reciprocal subjection of architecture, sculpture, painting, music, poetry, drama, and the dance to the advancement of a common ideal." This fusion of the arts and the "yearning to achieve a community of form and expression" occurred "possibly nowhere more unmistakably than in the art of Brazil." Moreover, he adds that "if the Baroque means depth," open form, spatial feeling, and even scenographic value, then Hispano-American Baroque "is not Baroque at all."³ Whereas Spanish art exhibited "an abiding devotion to the ascetic," Brazilian Baroque delighted in the "tumescence of carnal forms," in the provocative swelling of the flesh.⁴

This sensuality and audacity of the Brazilian Baroque are in harmony with a universal quest for infinity and intimacy with the divine. In the introduction to the catalogue of his important exhibition *O universo mágico do barroco brasileiro*, Emanoel Araújo equates the

Brazilian soul with the Baroque spirit of “contagious emotion” and “collective ecstasy.”⁵ The cultural resonance of Brazil’s “mestiço spirit” results in a “syncretism that playfully incorporates body and soul.”⁶ The seductive quality of Baroque art—its ability to enchant the depths of the soul and inspire the faith of the masses—is emphasized. So too is the experiential dimension. Germain Bazin and others observe that understanding the poetry of the Baroque requires that we experience the ceremony.⁷ Nicolau Sevcenko suggests that no Baroque work can be appreciated in isolation from its ritual context or outside the “intense emotional atmosphere” of myth, faith, divine intervention, and miracles: “Baroque art has to be seen with the eyes of the soul.”⁸ For him, the Baroque in Brazil was not a passing artistic style, but a “profound dimension of the country’s entire history”—the “basic stuff of a totally new cultural synthesis”—a dimension that is best seen in Brazil’s festival celebrations: Carnival, Corpus Christi, and the Triumph of the Eucharist.⁹

The Baroque Festival and the World In-Between

According to Maria Lúcia Montes, the earliest Baroque festivals in Brazil served to “seduce and attract the savage natives” who continued to practice cannibalism after being converted and whose “inconstant souls” therefore demanded more and more of the festival celebration to conquer them for the Christian faith.¹⁰ The Baroque festival has a synthesizing and playful quality that resolves or incorporates contradictions, thereby demonstrating the impossibility of separating the sacred and the profane: “Festivals are ambiguous zones of the ‘in-between’ that permit the negotiation of a full range of mediations between extremes,” and in so doing reveal the extraordinary profusion of spiritual elements materialized in sensory experiences or aesthetic performance.¹¹ As Octavio Paz observes, in provid-



OSCAR NIEMEYER Cathedral of Brasília, 1958–62

ing a means to seek out and achieve some sort of primordial reconciliation with the universe, the festival “opens the doors of communion” and “prefigures the advent of the day of redemption [when] society will return to its original freedom, and man to his primitive purity.”¹²

Montes sees the monumental celebration of the Triumph of the Eucharist in colonial Minas Gerais as a paradigm for the festival in Brazil’s Baroque culture. The Triumph of the Eucharist had two levels of “text,” or meaning, the first of which was the written narrative published in 1734. Montes emphasizes the importance of the subtext beyond the narrative, that of the performance and experience of the festival itself.¹³ The essential Baroque quality of the festival celebration is not in the initial or literal level of text or narration, but in the deeper, performative level where the language of images and sounds is integrated into an experience of the simultaneous and the momentary, something which the text alone cannot capture. The most characteristically Baroque quality of the festival is its use of multimedia experiences to elevate the masses to a spiritual plane, using metaphors and allegories in which the concrete and literal take on indirect meanings. Herein lies the essential connection between the Triumph of the Eucharist and the celebration of Carnival. Both involve an allegorical level that expresses meaning only through the totality of its elements and the simultaneous integration of its multiple languages.¹⁴

But it is not just the modern-day Carnival celebration that illustrates the continuing presence of Brazil’s Baroque heritage. Without essentializing modern

ALEIJADINHO Terrace of the Prophets, ca. 1800,
the sanctuary of Bom Jesus de Matozinhos, Congonhas
Campo, Minas Gerais

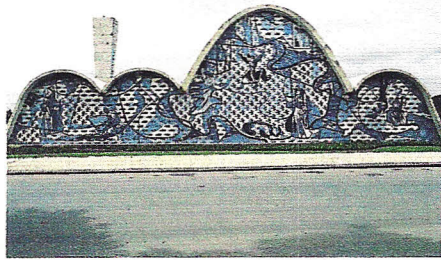


Brazil in terms of a Baroque derivation, we can see this heritage in a variety of modern forms, as Montes explains: “A single Baroque *matriz* [matrix, source, mold, womb] of the festival impregnates these cultural forms, which assimilate and re-create, fold and unfold back, and recombine in an infinite process of variation, thanks to the very dynamic of culture.”¹⁵ Montes’s use of the birthing metaphor and notion of culture as a continuous process of folding and unfolding bring to mind the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In its concern for finding ultimate origins, so too does her final question: What was the ultimate *matriz* of the corporeal language of the Baroque festival? The Indian? The African? The European? The mestizo or mulatto? Niemeyer searched for more primordial origins.

Merleau-Ponty: Theorist of the Baroque, Philosopher of Ambiguity

The philosophical writings of the French existential phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty are specifically referenced in the *Manifesto neoconcreto* (1959) by Ferreira Gullar, but the full implications of his search for a deeper understanding of Brazilian Modernism as a whole have yet to be brought out. These writings suggest an especially fruitful line of inquiry into the nature of the “Baroque world” as it relates to a modern Brazilian *Lebenswelt*

that Araújo has characterized as “an experience of ambiguity.”¹⁶ Mauro Carbone and Christine Buci-Glucksmann comment upon the relation between Merleau-Ponty’s aesthetic ontology (aesthetic approach to Being) and the Baroque’s ontological aesthetics (preoccupation with Being in aesthetics).¹⁷ More fundamental, Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical project was aimed at revealing the limitations of the traditional rationalist dichotomy between the mind and the body as two separate entities and formulating instead a holistic experiential philosophy with a Baroque sensitivity to the primordial realm of corporeality, aesthetic perception, and the “in-between” (*l’entre-deux*): the “intertwining,” or “chiasm,” of the “flesh” and the “polymorphous wild-world” of which it is an extension.¹⁸ Samuel Malin defines “chiasm” as “a grouping, a gathering or assemblage wherein the members are related sinuously or flexuously by means of bending themselves to each other.”¹⁹ In Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, the “flesh” of the incarnate “body-subject” mediates between the exteriority of the physical facts of the world and the interiority or “intentional projects” of psychic and spiritual states, of emotional and instinctual impulses. This mediation—this synthesis of body and soul—takes the ambiguous form of an “intertwining” of the perceived and the perceiver, of the hand that both touches and is touched, of imagination and expression, of body and art. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, “He who sees cannot possess the visible unless he is possessed by it, unless he is of it.”²⁰ This chiasmic state of reversibility is also characterized by a “synesthetic spatiality” in which different media or substances, “coextensive” with the body, can be “transubstantiated” into one another or into new artistic forms, without losing their depth, thickness, or meaning: “The thickness of the body is . . . the sole means I have to go to the heart of things, by making myself a world and by



LEFT: **OSCAR NIEMEYER** Chapel of Saint Francis, 1940–43, Pampulha, Belo Horizonte, facade with azulejo panels by Cândido Portinari. RIGHT: **OSCAR NIEMEYER** Chapel of Saint Francis, waterfront

making them flesh.”²¹ Merleau-Ponty’s “Baroque” sensitivity to the multisensorial dimensions of perceptual experience is announced in his phenomenological description of the high-school building to which he returns thirty years later: “It is not so much an object which it would be useful or possible to describe by its characteristics, as it is a certain odor, a certain affective texture which holds sway over a certain vicinity of space.”²²

What is particularly illuminating about this philosophy for an understanding of the Brazilian body and soul is the ethical dimension of Merleau-Ponty’s view of “carnality.” He describes the openness of the body’s “slippery hold on things” as a place of “communion” and “primordial faith” that enables the body-subject to “transcend” itself at the same time that it makes the soul incarnate, enabling the body-subject to both feel and believe.²³ Moreover, as Evans and Lawlor note, “both ‘flesh’ and ‘chiasm’ are terms that carry Christian connotations (the mystery of the incarnation and the cross).”²⁴ It is precisely this return to both the primordial physicality of the body and its inherent spirituality that we find at the heart of the Antropofagia movement—the manifesto of Brazilian Modernism—as well as at the heart of Niemeyer’s best architecture.

Antropofagia as Modernist Chiasm

What relates Brazil’s Modernist strategy to the Baroque spirit is the ritual synthesis of opposites—the ability to explore the liminal zones of the in-between, to find the layering, overlapping, and intertwining of the sacred and the profane. What unites the Christian communion with

cannibalism is the ritual and symbolic consumption of the flesh as a means to a new spiritual identity in which one body eats another in order to possess its soul.²⁵

The Antropofagia movement was a Modernist quest for cultural identity rooted in the possibility of a guilt-free “cosmic sexuality” and a “redeeming spirituality,” what Paz calls “true erotic communion.”²⁶ As Eduardo Subirats observes, it remains a “central leitmotiv” of Brazilian Modernism, “the expression of a permanent, creative, and vital nucleus of Brazilian civilization without which it would be difficult to understand the culminating expressions of its poetry, its music, or its architecture.”²⁷ Antropofagia fostered an appreciation of a Baroque sense of the “total work of art,” a sense of the integration of all of the arts under a common perspective that combined a critique of modern civilization and an idealization of a tropical utopia, the ideological basis of which was a “critical rehabilitation of a great matriarchal mythology.”²⁸ This mythos combined a focus on the vital cycles of nature, the body, and erotic desire with a humanized view of technology—a synthesis that would poetically reconnect or chiasmically bend modern civilization toward a fantasy rooted in nature, eroticism, reproduction, and poetic creation. According to Subirats, Antropofagia’s “orgiastic ritual of artistic creation” involved the discovery of a “free poetic language historically prior to the arrival of the European colonizers.”²⁹ The movement explored “a poetry of paradise regained and the nostalgia for a resexualized community, deeply rooted in a matriarchal conception

of nature," the restoration of a "sacred nudity," and a "shamanic sacralization of the body."³⁰

The values and goals of the Antropofagia movement were reflected and reinforced by the trip taken by Oswald de Andrade, Tarsila do Amaral, and the Swiss poet Blaise Cendrars to the ancestral (colonial Baroque) homeland of Minas Gerais. There they rediscovered firsthand the "situated" Brazilian body in a variety of spiritual settings and landscapes—in the buildings, sculptures, and festivals of the Barroco Mineiro. This trip was a quest for origins that went back to the premodern world of Brazil's colonial Baroque "wild being."

The central image of Antropofagia and of Brazilian Modernism in general is Tarsila do Amaral's *Anthropophagy* (1929, cat. no. 234)—the visual counterpart to Oswald de Andrade's *Manifesto antropófago* (1928). It is an image of both explicit and implicit intertwining. Shown are two primitive bodies, one male, one female, their fleshy, swelling limbs interlocked in a primordial statement of sexual union and fertility. Fertility and connection to the earth—to Mother Nature—are emphasized by the centrality of the breast and the size of the feet. The two figures reflect an explicitly sexual rite of cannibalistic consumption/communion—one that implies a "resurrection" of Brazilian culture—in a momentary and timeless intertwining of past, present, and future. This is a chiasmic image that intertwines body and landscape, male and female, European Modernism and Brazil, primitive and modern, primordial past and imagined identity for the future, sacred and profane. Antropofagia was a nostalgic longing for a mythical connection with primordial origins, a longing to reconnect with the body from which Brazilian culture was born.

Modern Architecture as Flesh:

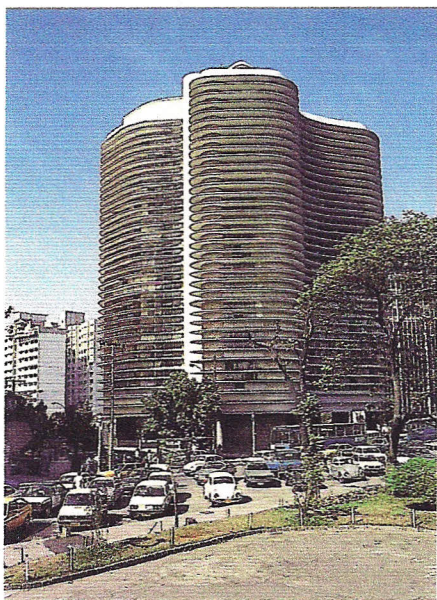
The Baroque-Modernist Chiasm

For Castedo, Brazil's Baroque was something "best epitomized by that country's

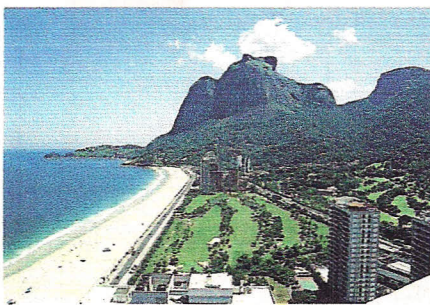
unique contribution to Modern art—its architecture: more specifically, that exciting conjunction of audacity and unfettered imagination, of richness and variety, of lyricism and love of the curve—Brasília."³¹ The chiasmic intermingling of the Baroque spirit and Modernism in Brazil can be best seen in the architectural masterpieces of Niemeyer. The groundwork for his achievement was laid by the Antropofagia movement and the work of his mentor Costa, who proposed a new Modernist curriculum for Rio de Janeiro's architecture school and a cosmic theory of the origins of Brazilian architecture. More than this, Costa promoted a new appreciation of the colonial Baroque and upheld it as the basis for a sort of Brazilian *Kunstwollen* (will to form).³² His plan for Brasília intertwined Christianity and the Conquest in the image of the Cross, at the same time that it, along with Niemeyer's architecture, sought to embody the perceived aspirations of the national soul.

Antropofagia and Costa's work also laid the foundation for the achievement of landscape architect Burle Marx, whose major contribution was to develop through his garden art the full implications of Brazil's tropical Baroque situation, and to explore as the basis for Brazilian identity the combination of the aesthetic and natural, as well as the colonial and modern. His exploration of Brazil's tropical milieu was both scientific and aesthetic, but the brilliance of his work lay in his ability to find a spiritual zone between the two, one that harmonized a botanical and Modernist ecology of form. The actual experience of the artist's intertwining of the natural landscape and the man-made garden was the chief means of knowing and establishing a tropical Baroque ethos for Brazilian Modernism.³³

It was through his frequent collaborations with Burle Marx and numerous other artists (including some very gifted structural engineers) that Niemeyer's best works came to express an integrated "Baroque" vision that brought together



space, structure, landscaping, sculpture, painting, and the decorative arts, including panels of native wood and *azulejo* (blue-and-white ceramic tile), into a dazzling spectacle of colorful, curvilinear form.³⁴ The most celebrated achievement in this regard was the Chapel of Saint Francis (1940–43) at Pampulha, with surrounding landscaping by Burle Marx, *azulejo* panels by Cândido Portinari, and parabolic vault structures calculated by Joaquim Cardoso. In Niemeyer's projects for Pampulha, the creation of an artificial place in the midst of a lush natural setting continued to reflect the priorities of Modernist identity politics and diffusionist modernization. The ambitions of the mayor, Juscelino Kubitschek, who sought political backing from a nouveau-riche industrial elite in search of a weekend playground and a place in which to indulge the body, were addressed through an entertainment complex including a yacht and swimming club, a gambling casino with a dance hall, and an open-air restaurant and dance club for the "popular classes." Niemeyer's response reflected the flashy innovation of a young architect striving to find an appropriate expression of Brazilian identity through the creation of an architectural festival that was both a statement of revolt and a project of transcendence in the native landscape. In Niemeyer's words, "the

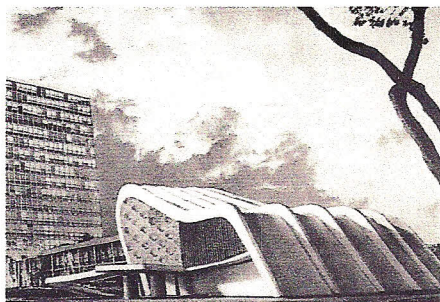


LEFT: **OSCAR NIEMEYER** Praça da Liberdade Apartment Complex, 1954–55, Belo Horizonte.
RIGHT: A comparison of the Rio de Janeiro landscape and the Praça da Liberdade Apartment Complex suggests a phenomenological approach to architecture.

intended protest arose from the environment where I lived, with its white beaches, huge mountains, old Baroque churches, and beautiful tanned women."³⁵ Conceived as a sort of a architectural fairground that would be conducive to the "opening out" of the "overworked" elite, the complex would focus visually on Niemeyer's personal ritual of innovation: the redemptive image of a chapel dedicated to Saint Francis. For Niemeyer, the essence of this new Brazilian identity was to be reduced, in a grand poetic gesture, to what Merleau-Ponty calls the "logos of the line": the free-flowing and sensual curve.

The stated basis of Niemeyer's emerging aesthetic at Pampulha, and, consequently, of his version of Brazilian cultural identity, was the free and sensual curve that he found in the tropical landscape and bodies of his native Rio de Janeiro.³⁶ This aesthetic inspiration led him to explore the origins of Brazilian architecture—before the conquest of Brazil—in terms of a pre-Baroque emphasis on the landscape itself. Niemeyer's architecture can thus be experienced and understood as an architectural phenomenology of the Brazilian landscape, one that also reflects a cannibalist intentionality, a gobbling up of the Modernist discourse of Le Corbusier.³⁷ Niemeyer is fond of recounting one of Le Corbusier's observations about his work: "Oscar, you always have the mountains of Rio in your eyes; you do Baroque in reinforced concrete, but you do it very well." A comparison of Niemeyer's Praça da Liberdade Apartment Building in Belo Horizonte with the mountainous landscape of Rio suggests that Niemeyer was indeed doing phenomenology in rein-

OSCAR NIEMEYER Photomontage, study for
Theater Project, 1948, Ministry of Education and Health,
Rio de Janeiro

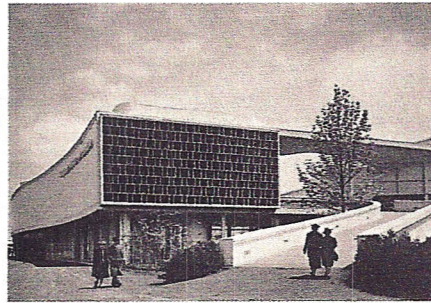


forced concrete, just as Merleau-Ponty observes that Paul Cézanne, when he painted Mont Ste.-Victoire, was illustrating the phenomenological approach in painting. Both artists were doing more than painting a picture or designing a building; they were using their special mediums and the “logos of the line” to “make a piece of nature.”³⁸

Niemeyer’s 1948 project for a curvilinear theater with twin auditoriums adjoining the Ministry of Education and Health Building in Rio de Janeiro was an important statement of Modernist intertwining in Brazilian architecture, one that recalls Antropofagia’s evocation of the primitive, sexualized, and matriarchal universe of the “wild-world” before the conquest. The unexecuted project was presented as a photomontage that deliberately contrasts (yet binds together) the mechanized, rectilinear slab of the Corbusian Ministry Building with a dramatically plastic and biomorphic form that stresses organic fluidity and curving sensuality: masculine versus feminine form. In Niemeyer’s “Poem of the Curve,” written about this time as a response to Le Corbusier’s “Poem of the Right Angle,” he states, “It is not the right angle that attracts me, nor the straight line—hard and inflexible—created by man. What attracts me is the free and sensual curve, the curve that I find in the mountains of my country, in the sinuous course of its rivers, in the body of the beloved woman.” His architectural mythos is in harmony with the idea of fertility based in a matriarchal nature found in Antropofagia. It also reflects the intertwining of male and female form, of European and Brazilian, and of rational and sensual.

Here, the identity problematic of a young Communist architect overshadowed by the European system of Le Corbusier was addressed through a ritual combination of revolt and innovation. The idea of a Brazilian place and culture was essentialized through a dramatically curving body-structure reflecting Niemeyer’s quest for the same evocation of “primitive purity” and primordial connection with a pre-rational consciousness celebrated by Antropofagia, Paz, and phenomenologists like Merleau-Ponty. This mythos would find its most mature expression in the 1953 Canoas House, where Niemeyer’s labyrinth of solitude finds redemptive connection with Mother Nature through a ritual synthesis of architecture, curving lines, and landscape.

The Brazilian Pavilion at the 1939 New York World’s Fair was the first building in which we find an authentic intuition of a phenomenology of Brazilian Modernism. This is evident on several levels. First, because the fair’s program privileged a blending of futuristic and nationalistic marketing criteria, the building had to express from the very start the intentionality of bringing out for an international audience what a “Modern Brazilian” building wanted to be. This meant that the collaborating partners, Costa and Niemeyer, had to not only “bend” their own ideas and forms but also had to accommodate those of Le Corbusier, the International Style, Brazil’s colonial Baroque heritage, and the new materials and structures of modern technology. This implied a phenomenological/eidetic reduction of the building’s elements and its essentialization in terms of the most basic Brazilian qualities that could be brought out using an inflected variant of the formal language of the International Style. This involved as well the replacement of rigid Cartesian visual perspectives by a more fluid “promenade architecturale” in which the architecture is experienced by body-subjects that move through and perceive a multimedia and multisensorial spatiality,



LEFT: **OSCAR NIEMEYER** Canoas House, 1953, Rio de Janeiro. RIGHT: **LÚCIO COSTA AND OSCAR NIEMEYER** Brazilian Pavilion, 1939, New York World's Fair

as in a Baroque ritual procession. Like Baroque festivals, the Brazilian Pavilion was intended to be experienced synesthetically: on several sensory levels simultaneously. As he or she navigated the shifting visual perspectives of a Modern, graceful composition of curving contours, textured surfaces, native plantings, and interesting audiovisual presentations and wall displays, the visitor heard the sounds of popular Brazilian music and tropical birds, smelled the aroma of Brazilian coffee and the fragrance of native orchids, tasted the food prepared in the restaurant, and perhaps even danced to the rhythm of the background music coming from the orchestra pit. Through the experience of moving through the pavilion, the visitor was to intuit the essence of the *Lebenswelt* (lived world) of modern Brazilian culture in all its tropical lushness and exotic sensuality. Using the flexuous curve as a sensual counterpoint to the rectangle, the building's forms "opened up" to the world of experience, making space for the nonrational experience of ambiguity, reversibility, and inversion. Probably the most compelling of these reversibilities was the experience of "entering" the building by "exiting" it, via a curving ramp that led to an open-air terrace, or ship's deck, with a splendid view of a tropical pool and garden below, the centerpiece of the whole composition. Both the exterior ramps and the interior gallery space were conceived as a fluid "nave" through which flowed a steady stream of visitors who, like Baroque pilgrims in search of festival relics, found themselves transported into another world.

The grandest poetic gesture in the

Baroque-Modernist spirit was Brasília, where the utopian rituals of colonial conquest and magical form produced almost overnight an image of a futuristic place in the middle of no place. The functional aspects mattered less than the symbolic imagery. The international marketing of an image of modernity was paramount. The creation of a universalist mythology was to ensure the erasure of the underdevelopment of the past. Formal innovation and universal spiritual redemption symbolized above all by the Cathedral of Brasília (1958–62), the Alvorada Palace (1956–58), and the Planalto Palace (1958) on the Plaza of the Three Powers. In all of these, Niemeyer extended his architectural body-language into the realm of pure and elemental form. Exoskeletons of sculptural wraps and bonelike structural frameworks echoing the Surrealist images of Yves Tanguy reflect the coming forth or pulling out of the architectural body to create a space for the spiritual itinerary of national redemption within.

Niemeyer's more recent work continues to reflect the ritual appropriation of the Brazilian body and its imagery to project a Baroque-Modernist identity to an international audience. In Rio de Janeiro's Samba Stadium (1984), the spiritual transcendence of Brazilian bodies through the ritual of Carnival was appropriated by Niemeyer and his state patrons as a symbol of the nation and showcased in a new permanent structure. Now even the grandest of rituals and its space were aestheticized and commodified for tourist consumption. Carnival is again the theme in Niemeyer's Memorial da América Latina (1989) in São Paulo, in which the physical

TOP: **OSCAR NIEMEYER** Alvorada Palace, 1956–58, Brasília. BOTTOM: **OSCAR NIEMEYER** Planalto Palace, 1958, Brasília

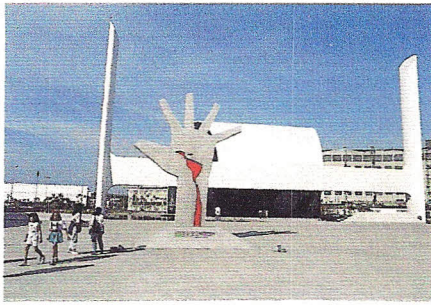


and linguistic isolation of Brazil from the rest of Latin America was addressed through a ritual of aesthetic unification, via the casting of an abstract and primitivist body-language of reinforced concrete sculptures that was intended to project an image of Latin American unity but in fact presents a forced, whitewashed view of it. Niemeyer's apparently subversive festival of surreal forms culminates in a concrete spectacle that is rooted in the Brazilian enchantment of the body politic with the body physical, a spectacle that ends up reifying the lived world of bodily interaction and human sensuality into abstract essences, sprawling concrete sculptures and spaces that obscure the rich and intimate details of Latin American culture. The memorial thus expresses both the triumph of the culture-constructing elite and the unresolved dilemma of Latin American development, for here we have the form of a monumentally severed hand from which trickles down not capital for development but the blood of the working class. It is their blood, as symbolized in the bleeding hand of Christ, that defines the map and experience of the region. Niemeyer's chiasmic intertwining of Modernist, Communist, and Christian meaning (the stigmata, sacrificial blood, etc.) is unmistakable here.

In the Museu de Arte Contemporânea

(1991–96) in Niterói, Niemeyer's most recent ritual structure, the cultural isolation of a city with an inferiority complex vis-à-vis Rio de Janeiro was addressed through the municipal government's attempt to create a new pilgrimage destination for "mass consumption" by tourists—a museum that would showcase the utopian redemption of Brazil's Modernist heritage. It is perhaps the definitive architectural festival in Niemeyer's career and his most eloquent, metaphorical, and Baroque statement to date about the redemptive role of abstract art in a society that he feels he cannot otherwise change.

The Niterói museum takes the form of a bulging white "spaceship" (*"aero-nave espacial"*), a baptismal font, or a ritual chalice of redemption, containing not the Eucharistic wine symbolizing the blood of Christ but the sacramental objects of a different, Modernist communion: 1,500 works of Brazilian abstract art. The museum can thus be read as an expression of the architect's continuing faith in the sacred power of abstract art and poetic form to lift humankind out of its dismal existence and into a nebulous spiritual realm as otherworldly as this spaceship chalice. It expresses Modernist dialectics of ritual and redemption, rupture and transcendence, withdrawal and return, being rooted and being free. For if it is a spaceship (as the popular press would have it) or a bird taking flight (as the architect himself prefers), it may also be seen as a body-place: a huge uterine form connected to the landscape via a coiling red-white umbilical chord carrying the lifeblood of Mother Earth into the fleshy, white, swelling form above.³⁹ Just as baptism gives birth to the spiritual Christian body, so the Eucharistic exercise enables it to be fed and grow, since the Eucharist aims ultimately for "something like an infinite swelling of the body" in both time and space.⁴⁰ Niemeyer's building projects the fertile swelling of the primordial body into the landscape as the basis, like



LEFT: **OSCAR NIEMEYER** Memorial da América Latina, São Paulo, 1989. RIGHT: **OSCAR NIEMEYER** Bleeding Hand, Memorial da América Latina, 1989

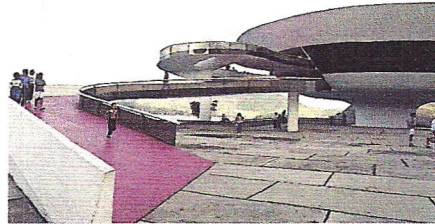
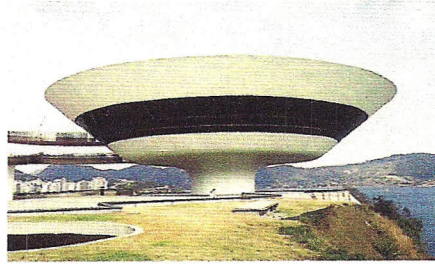
Antropofagia, of a utopian identity for the future. An architectural embodiment of Brazil's Baroque Modernism, the imagery of Niemeyer's museum intertwines Christian and cannibalist ideals of redemption in terms of Paz's "true erotic communion" and of fertility: the "*Mysterium unitatis*" via the "*Unitas Corporis*." The beauty of architecture, as Niemeyer's "Poem of the Curve" reminds us, is to be found in the body of the beloved woman.

The Museu de Arte Contemporânea is an architectural festival that finds what Paz has called the "navel of the universe" and the "mythical place of origin" in Niterói.⁴¹ The site chosen for the museum is historically "sedimented" (to use Merleau-Ponty's terminology) in another kind of communion, one that is profane: with its scenic view of Guanabara Bay, it was originally a lover's lane. The multiple meanings of Niemeyer's futuristic spaceship reside in waters that run at least as deep as these. The connections with the fluid, navelike pilgrimage/gallery space of the Brazilian Pavilion at the New York World's Fair, and with works by contemporary artist Ernesto Neto come to mind. Neto's *Ovulo-Nave* is another spaceship, a vessel conceived as a flowing setting for a collection of objects that appear phenomenologically to come into being as we move through the fluid space, inviting us to consider the cosmic time-space relationships among primordial beginnings, colonial past, momentary present, and imagined future, and to explore the experiences of birthing and growing, the metaphors of embodiment, the fleshy swelling of form, and the bulging of the *matriz*, "pregnant"

with multiple meanings, interpretations, and many other visions besides our own.⁴²

The semantic complexity of Niemeyer's museum and the many compelling artworks of Brazilian Modernism resides in their Baroque openness to the experiential dimension of body and soul, to multiple perspectives of vision and interpretation, and to the sedimentation and dense layering of intertwined meanings. These qualities connect Niemeyer's architecture and the works of Modern and contemporary Brazilian artists to the concerns of Gullar's *Manifesto neoconcreto* and the achievements of artists who felt its influence, especially Lygia Clark, Hélio Oiticica, Tunga, and Cildo Meireles. Neo-Concretism promoted a phenomenological openness to sensory experience and viewer involvement, and saw the body as its artistic metaphor. In her *Casulos*, *Trepantes* (e.g., cat. nos. 270–72), and *Bichos* (e.g., cat. nos. 263–65), Clark developed a poetics of the body that relies on spectator participation to shape flat surfaces into three-dimensional objects through a perpetual process of re-creation and unfolding. Oiticica's *Bólides* and *Parangolés* (e.g., cat. nos. 280–84) invite the public to touch objects and move through space with the whole body.⁴³ Tunga's works examine the metaphor of the whole body as a "field for the continuous interaction of processes," drawing a parallel between sculptural energies and the body's sexual energies, and exploring relationships in which one body is immersed in another, with the eroticism of space suggested through repeated use of the metaphor of swallowing. Tunga's works are always "woven together into an intricate, quasi-mythical,

FROM TOP TO BOTTOM: **OSCAR NIEMEYER** Museu de Arte Contemporânea, Niterói, 1991–96



existential realm.”⁴⁴ We see these tendencies as well in the work of Meireles, whose 1987 installation *Missao/Missoes (How to Build Cathedrals)* uses bones and communion wafers to evoke associations with indigenous rituals, the sacred space of the church, and miraculous redemption through the Eucharist—in a circular space that is “dark, primordial, shrouded in ambiguity; a reminder of death, like an enormous Catholic reliquary.”⁴⁵ These images remind us once again of some of the thematic and spiritual connections between the Baroque and Modernism in Brazilian art and architecture.

Notes

1. Leopoldo Castedo, *The Baroque Prevalence in Brazilian Art* (New York: Charles Frank, 1964).
2. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
5. Emanuel Araújo et al., *O universo magico do barroco brasileiro* (São Paulo: Serviço Cultural da Indústria, 1998), pp. 15, 18.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
8. Nicolau Sevcenko, “Barroco: A arte da fantasia,” in *O universo magico do barroco brasileiro* (São Paulo: Serviço Cultural da Indústria, 1998), p. 60.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Maria Lúcia Montes, “Entre a vida comum e a arte: A festa barroca,” in *O universo magico do barroco brasileiro*, p. 374.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 377.
12. Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (New York: Grove Press, 1985), pp. 51–52, 211.
13. Montes, “Entre a vida comum e a arte,” p. 372.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 378.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 379–80.
16. Emanuel Araújo in conversation with the author, Salvador da Bahia, June 2000. For Araújo, the ambiguity of Brazilian experience relates above all to the dilemma of race relations: that the colonial plantation was both the nexus of an unequal power relationship between white master and African slave, as well as a setting for racial hybridization and cultural blending.
17. Mauro Carbone, “The Thinking of the Sensible,” in Fred Evans and Leonard Lawlor, eds., *Chiasms: Merleau-Ponty’s Notion of Flesh*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000), p. 126; and Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *La Folie du voir: De L’Esthétique Baroque* (Paris: Galilée, 1986), pp. 73, 85–86.
18. For a recent discussion of Merleau-Ponty and his ideas, see Evans and Lawlor, *Chiasms: Merleau-Ponty’s Notion of Flesh*.
19. Samuel Malin, “Chiasm, Line, and Art” in Henry Pieterse, ed., *Merleau-Ponty: Critical Essays*, (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1989), p. 220.
20. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1968), pp. 134–35.
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Ibid.*
23. Evans and Lawlor, *Chiasms: Merleau-Ponty’s Notion of Flesh*, pp. 4, 11.
24. *Ibid.*, pp. 1 and 17, n. 2.
25. In Brazilian Portuguese, the verb “comer” means “to eat” but also has the connotation of sexually possessing the body of the other.
26. Eduardo Subirats, *Del surrealismo a la antropofagia* (Valencia, Spain: IVAM Centre Julio González, 2000), pp. 18, 10–12; and Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, p. 202.
27. Eduardo Subirats, *La penúltima vision del Paraíso*, p. 13.
28. *Ibid.*, pp. 13–15.
29. *Ibid.*, pp. 5–6, 15, and Subirats, *Del surrealismo a la antropofagia*, p. 18.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
31. Castedo, *The Baroque Prevalence in Brazilian Art*, p. 16.
32. See Hugo Segawa, "Um malcomportado aluno de racionalismo," *Novos estudos CEBRAP* 32 (March 1992), p. 214.
33. For a recent analysis of Burle Marx and his Anthropophagic appropriation of Corbusian forms and ideas, see Valerie Fraser, "Cannibalizing Le Corbusier: the MES Gardens of Roberto Burle Marx," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 59 (June 2000), pp. 180–93.
34. Gillo Dorfles has used the label "neobarroca" to describe Modern Brazilian architecture. See Segawa, "Um malcomportado aluno de racionalismo," p. 210.
35. Niemeyer, *Meu sosia e eu* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Revan, 1992), p. 34.
36. See David Underwood, *Oscar Niemeyer and the Architecture of Brazil* (New York: Rizzoli, 1994); and Underwood, *Oscar Niemeyer and Brazilian Free-Form Modernism* (New York: George Braziller, 1994).
37. Subirats has observed a basic similarity in intentions between Antropofagia and Niemeyer's work, noting the liberty of formal language and the erotic relation with nature. See Subirats, *La penultima vision del Paraíso*, p. 7.
38. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt," in Galen Johnson, ed., *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1993), p. 62.
39. This is not the first uterine image in Niemeyer's work. Consider the pear-shaped plan of the dance hall in the Casino in Pampulha.
40. Georges Didi-Huberman, "Disparate Thoughts on Voracity," *XXIV Bienal* (São Paulo: Fundação Bienal, 1999), p. 201.
41. Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, p. 208.
42. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 441.
43. Ivo Mesquita, "Brazil," in Edward J. Sullivan, ed., *Latin American Art in the Twentieth Century* (London: Phaidon Press, 1996), p. 215.
44. *Body to Earth: Three Artists from Brazil* (Los Angeles: University of Southern California, Fisher Gallery, 1993), pp. 26–28, 34.
45. *Ibid.*, p. 12.