"Anachronism and Environment: Towards a Concept of the Baroque in Post-Minimal Art"

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In his 1978 article ‘The Present Tense of Space’, the American sculptor Robert Morris makes a surprising allusion to a ‘Baroque sensibility’ within the ‘new work’ of the 1970s. Morris’s Baroque invokes the use of distances, deep spaces, durational time and ‘exploration of new relations to nature’ in site-specific and installation art. In doing so, he attempts to coin a new way of seeing which counters the static, reconstitutive ‘imagery’ of object based art. Yet this Postminimalist reading of the Baroque alerts us to a conflict of temporality; the Baroque is both anachronistically ‘new’ and, at the same time, distant, remote and in need of retrieval for the present. The environment, far from being the site of the ‘new work’ in question, is framed anachronistically, as the place where a crisis of resources, waste and decay periodically recurs. How far, then, can a return of the Baroque precipitate an awareness of Postminimalism’s global impact?

As well as Morris’ own work, I will discuss two other artists who deployed some notion of the Baroque as a means of reflecting upon their role in an exclusively U.S. based field of practice. In his Hotel Palenque (1969-72), Robert Smithson’s ironic ‘discovery’ of a Mayan Baroque emerges out of an engagement with transience and states of decay. Conversely, the legacy of Gordon Matta-Clark’s project Office Baroque (1977-78) periodises the Postminimal within a context of financial crisis and urban regeneration. By asking ‘what, if anything, was new about the Postminimal Baroque?’ the centrality of Postminimalism to contemporary debates on innovation can be considered.