



# Chimaera between Art and Nature

an interview with Prof. Dr. Horst Bredekamp on today's Neo-mannerism

by Tim Otto Roth

**TOR:** You visited [aiskju:b]. What were your impressions?

**HB:** I spent quite a long time at St. Elisabeth, immersing myself in the installation and observing the visitors. What really left a mark on me was the inductive calm that sets in even though one the main characteristics of [aiskju:b] is the interplay of light and sound. People become astonishingly calm, in a way we know from churches. The process is similar, yet brought about differently. It's a form of concentration on the almost mantra-like sounds. Subsequently a kind of introspection sets in that does not lead to the state of dullness we sometimes seem to observe, but to reflective perception. This is how I experienced the visitors' reaction. In terms of the sonic rhythm and its interplay with light, I was especially impressed by the installation refusing an aspect often seen when physics and visual art are brought together. In the act of transportation from one side to the other, what sometimes emerges is the kitsch of direct application. This is not the case here, for while the sounds and light come from afar, they act autonomously. The work [aiskju:b] is a response, not a reproduction. Maybe this is the best way to put it: it is a reflexive and reflecting work that [aiskju:b] is a response, not a reproduction. the definition of an art piece, not working by way of application, but presenting itself – by showing something beyond what would be expected from representation.

**TOR:** We both attended the conference "Physics and Art(efacts)" discussing the relation between physics and art. A physical component can be heard to resonate, not least, in the German term *Physik*. I am wondering if you could say something on physicality in terms of the charged link between physics and art?

**HB:** Historically such a charged link had to come about, as artists had for centuries been the harbingers of a true engagement with body and matter. This is the actual reason of why art formed part of the avant garde of the natural sciences. The invention of perspective – alongside letterpress printing Europe's greatest achievement – was pushed forward not by mathematicians, but by ar-

tists able to make calculations, such as Piero della Francesca, Filippo Brunelleschi and Leon Battista Alberti. This relation between empirical reality and contemplation is ongoing. We can observe that the invisibility of the world is described afresh again and again, yet that there is conversely an equal desire for visualisation. One of the most interesting points at the symposium was the despair of a highly serious quantum physicist bursting out: our maths are nearly perfect, but we cannot comprehend it. Because we cannot comprehend it, we cannot visualise it. To comprehend it, however, we need to visualise it. At this point, space turned into a vicious circle, highly productive. Partaking in this moment was very impressive, as an extreme example of the invisibility of the world being described as compulsive visualisation. The impossibility of performing this was formulated as an admission of failure. This reaches far into the question of the constructivity of our world view, which Ernst Cassirer and others made the subject of their lives' work. Is the insight reached by scientists an accord so genius-like that it internally makes sense without ever reaching reality, or are there – as Edgar Wind has argued against Cassirer – cross-over experiments that show reality as such? This is the certainty in which Ice Cube as well as your installation operate. And it is a topic that has permeated this symposium. For this reason, to my mind it constituted an occasion grappling with the most essential questions.

**TOR:** In your contribution you constructed a thought-provoking link between early modern mannerism and today, posing the question of how Today might be interpreted under the auspices of a neo-mannerism. Thus far, theorists have tended to compare the present age with the baroque period – Vilém Flusser, for instance, describes the world as a stage on hollow boards. Why do you consider mannerism as the more apt metaphor for describing the present?

**HB:** There are essential differences between mannerism and the baroque period as mirrors of the present age. There are two main elements in the baroque me-

taphor. The first lies in the return of the spectacle in the form of gigantic performances in baroque gardens or the inner courtyards of palaces which, in their event character, exceed much of what we think we can afford. The second and epistemologically more important element is the notion of the world being but a dream, as the affirmation of an idea. The world a dream, one can echo Calderon. Flusser was among those who asked again and again whether our reality is not really a hologram. And at the 1990 ars electronica I was there when Timothy Leary stated in an almost visionary manner that all of humanity had to move into a simulation space, a cyberspace, that would promise a higher reality. Against such ideas of spectacle and of a simulation taking the place of a world perceived as real, mannerism argues that there are zones of mixing and twisting between art and nature that do not undo the borders between the two – world remains world, nature remains nature – yet that do provide qualities of interpenetration, that call forth a third quality that is neither art nor culture and that is continuous, as in infinity mirrors. Torquato Tasso formulated this masterfully in the garden description in *Gerusalemme liberata*: nature smilingly imitates art, which believes it can

smilingly imitate nature. And this is only the beginning of a mirror of reversals, the interpenetration continuing infinitely. In our present, marked on many levels by the suspension of distances, this seems to me a more fitting period metaphor than the baroque era. The baroque describes the outside spectacle well, but the intrinsic interrelation between nature and art, public and private, body and image, these forms of the dissolution of borders were, around 1600, thought through and shaped by mannerism in a way probably never seen before. This is the reason why I suggest considering our era a kind of neo-mannerism.

**TOR:** Flusser's thinking was more concerned with oppositions, he confronted Descartes' rationalism and the stage.

**HB:** It was a good image, which did cause a stir. But it cannot describe the spheres of interpenetration that I interpret as neo-mannerist. This includes, for instance, synthetic biology. Neo-mannerism attempted precisely this, to produce chimeras of different beings or part-compositions of artwork and organisms. More recent pieces show clearly that real moss and insect remainders are inserted into many landscape paintings that present surface, demonstrating that there is no categorical difference between art and nature, but a border to be crossed playfully.



Meditative atmosphere in St. Elisabeth Church. *Meditative Stimmung in St. Elisabeth.* Image: imachination projects

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