

Hanse-Wissenschaftskolleg  
Institute for Advanced Study

Workshop

# Neuro-Socio-Aesthetics:

*What your brain finds beautiful can  
change our society.*

Delmenhorst, 03. December 2019  
19.00/ 7 p.m.

**Organiser:**

Lida Sherafatmand, Independent Artist/ HWK Artist in Residence, Malta

**Venue:**

Hanse-Wissenschaftskolleg  
Institute for Advanced Study

Lemkuhlenbusch 4  
27753 Delmenhorst  
Germany  
[www.h-w-k.de](http://www.h-w-k.de)

Program

## Schedule

- 19:00                    **Neurology - the Bridge between C.P. Snow's Two Cultures - Science and Arts.**  
*Prof. Dr. Vilayanur Ramachandran*  
*University of California San Diego, USA (via Skype)*
- 19:30                    **Visual Frameworks and their Political Implications.**  
*Prof. Dr. Richard Ned Lebow*  
*King's College, London, UK*
- 20:00                    **In Search of Connection - Reflecting Neuroaesthetics and Social Science in Art.**  
*Lida Sherafatmand*  
*Independent Artist, Malta/ HWK Artist in Residence*
- 20:30                    **General Discussion**  
*Speakers and Audience*

## Background

In **1999**, **Prof. Ramachandran** wrote the article on neuroscientific rules of aesthetic experience. In **2009**, **Prof. Lebow** published his book on the cultural theory of international relations. Both approaches are combined by the paintings of **Lida Sherafatmand**: Ramachandran's laws of artistic experience have been inspiring Lida's florescencism paintings, and her artwork is explicitly intended to create a positive resonance not only in individuals but in our society. Hence, **2019**, twenty years after Prof. Ramachandran's paper and ten years after Prof. Lebow's book, sees the birth of **Neuro-Socio-Aesthetics**, or simply spoken: What your brain finds beautiful can change our society!

How artwork is created and how we perceive and judge it is largely influenced by the setup of our brains. Conversely, we as individuals but also in larger collectives are affected by the artwork to which we have been exposed. Using the information on neuroscientific bases and sociocultural effects of art to create inspiration for changes in our society is a radically new approach, which will be discussed in this seminar both with respect to its scientific background as well as regarding the practice of art. Looking at the present state of our world, it is generally agreed that conflict resolution, societal cohesion, and the focus on positive goals are desperately needed to avoid the potentially catastrophic effects of humankind's current trajectory. While at first glance, it may appear naïve to counteract war with flowers, historical events at large and the concrete practical experience of the artist show that this informed approach of art creation might be a powerful inspiration for changing the frameworks of our perception as a society in conflict.

# Speakers' Biographies and Abstracts

## **Prof. Dr. Vilayanur Ramachandran**

*Director of the Center for Brain and Cognition, Distinguished Professor of Psychology and Neurosciences, University of California at San Diego, Adjunct Professor of Biology, Salk Institute, La Jolla*

Professor Ramachandran is one of the world's leading cognitive and clinical neuroscientists with a specialization in cognitive and perceptual deficits in human neurological patients, neural plasticity, "phantom limbs", stroke rehabilitation, human visual perception/cognition, and visual psychophysics. He is one of the pioneers of neuroaesthetics, giving rise to the birth of this new field with his 1999 seminal article "The Science of Art: A Neurological Theory of Aesthetic Experience", stating eight laws of artistic experience.

Talk:

### **Neurology - the Bridge between C.P. Snow's Two Cultures - Science and Arts, Laws of Aesthetics, and Conflict between 'Real' and Kitsch Art.**

We speculate on the possibility of aesthetic universals - or laws - that cut across cultural boundaries e.g. symmetry, grouping, contrast, "peak shift" or caricature, isolation, understatement, abhorrence of coincidence, hyperbole, perceptual struggle and problem solving ("peekaboo"). Culture plays an enormous role in shaping aesthetic sensibilities, yet we are attracted to butterflies even though they evolved to be attractive to other butterflies not to us - we infer that the nine laws of aesthetics cross not only cultural but species boundaries (butterflies and humans. diverged 600 million years ago) through convergent evolution. For each law, three things need to be spelled out a) a precise statement, b) the evolutionary rationale, c) neural mechanism. Lastly, deployment of such laws is hardly *sufficient* to "explain" aesthetics, for it fails to explain why kitsch "art" might utilize these very laws but to no avail. Perhaps the laws need to "harmonize" in some hitherto mysterious way. Nor can aesthetic value be determined by democratic vote. We are conducting experiments to show that one can "graduate" from kitsch to real but rarely go backward and this *irreversible directionality* provides an objective criterion.

## **Prof. Dr. Richard Ned Lebow**

*Professor of International Political Theory, Department of War Studies, King's College London; Bye-Fellow, Pembroke College, University of Cambridge; James O. Freedman Presidential Professor Emeritus, Dartmouth College*

Professor Lebow is a leading political scientist best known for his work in international relations, political psychology, classics and philosophy of science. He also specialises in the policy of conflict prevention and management, and in 2009 he pioneered an influential volume "The cultural theory of international relations". In 2013, he published the book "Constructing Cause in International Relations" about the innovative analysis of the effect of art works as frames of reference for political changes on a collective level.

Talk:

### **Visual Frameworks and their Political Implications**

I explore the connections between deep cognitive frames, political goals, and the mechanisms that connect them. I argue that the visual revolution of the Renaissance was an underlying cause of the territorial state because it made it possible, even necessary, to imagine this political form. The Renaissance visual revolution was characterized by linear perspective, but also by a concern to represent people as distinct individuals. There was a greater commitment to what we call realism and to life in this world in contrast to the next. The principal mechanism linking developments in the arts to

political conceptions was maps, which underwent a radical transformation in design and purpose. At a deeper level, that visual revolution and territorial state alike might best be understood as expressions of the growing commitment to autonomy. This initially had individuals as its focus but was extended to political units. There has been a more recent visual revolution that initially found expression in Riemannian geometry, and later in parallel but independent developments in art and literature. Non-linear perspective – the key feature of this revolution – has nevertheless had relatively little effect on political conceptions and practices. At most, it contributed metaphors like webs, networks and filaments. The difference in political consequences between the two visual revolutions may be due to the absence of any underlying psychological transformation of identity. The Renaissance and early modern project of constructing the autonomous individual relied on the new visual frames or provided incentives for their application in diverse spheres of representation.

### **Lida Sherafatmand**

*Independent artist, international relations scholar, Fellow of the Hanse-Wissenschaftskolleg*

Lida Sherafatmand is a Malta-based artist who was born in Iran and witnessed the atrocities of the Iran-Iraq war in her youth. She became an international artist exhibiting her works since 1997 in 22 countries to this day. She integrates social science knowledge and neuroaesthetics in her art creation in order to touch her audience and pass on her messages. Based on her approach of florescencism, she creates positive pictures on human nature. A scholar of international relations, she seeks to expand the positive resonance of her paintings to more collective effects.

Talk:

### **In Search of Connection - Reflecting Neuroaesthetics and Social Science in Art**

Art is considered to be a reflection of our time. But although the fields of neuroaesthetics and conflict resolution/ peace studies are part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century achievements of human civilization, art works in the mainstream galleries and museums are not reflecting these achievements. Instead, either the dominating type of art works expresses questions on life through purely conceptual installations purposely discarding aesthetics, or contest cruelties by literally recreating those cruelties in art pieces, or it is purely abstract and thus discarding knowledge. Based on digital technologies, we live in a highly interactive international society that requires upgrading our knowledge on conflict resolution and crisis management. Our environmental crisis currently also requires a re-bonding with nature and its beauty. Applying Prof. Ramachandran's neuroscientific principles in creating my art pieces has proved to transcend people's cultural and intellectual subjectivity with respect to what they find "beautiful". Evidence on the effect of art on our brains comes from a recent study from the Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics. They found the so-called default-ode network to be activated "if –and only if- art works are aesthetically pleasing, they activate an unusual process in the brain that deals not only with external stimuli but also with mental and emotional responses." (Vesselet al., 2019). While being captivated by beauty, the audience then gets curious about the metaphorical composition in the paintings, thus their intellectual reflective side is stimulated. Also, by reading the background explanation on the image they are informed about the social science context. Prof. Lebow pinpoints in his work different elements in human nature that influence the quality of international relations in collectives - knowledge that I pass on in my works. I believe that it is important to allow space for neurological aesthetics and the consideration of societal effects to counterbalance the amount of art that is currently discarding beauty and knowledge.