CHAPTER 5

Artist’s Essay—The Neo-Baroque and Complexity

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Accounts of what we call the baroque often attribute the first use of the term to art critics of eighteenth century as they discuss the art of the previous century, suggesting the baroque has always been after the fact (see, for example, Helen Hills). This is something I recognise: I made some art that looked baroque; I hadn’t been planning to; I didn’t decide to become a neo-baroque artist. Rather, I was exploring an interest in Chaos Theory. But to me the visual similarities between my space-filling sculptural installations and the signature indicators of baroque style, particularly the architectural interiors of the Catholic clerical architecture of Southern Germany or colonial Mexico, were unmistakable. This “discovery”, arising out of a cohabitation of art and science, opened up a world of exciting possibilities: Complex Dynamical Systems Theory (to use the other and more useful name for Chaos Theory) and the baroque could be used to investigate each other. Art History becomes once more useful to artists, and a fragment of Science, one of its more interesting ways of understanding the world, can be used to find baroque tendencies in contemporary art.

It was not until I visited the seventeenth century pilgrimage church the Wieskirche, near Füssen in South Germany (figure 5.1), that I understood Gilles Deleuze’s concept of the monad. Deleuze remained cerebral without the concrete, bodily experience of this building’s overwhelmingly complex, folded space almost uncontained by its un-preposing exterior. Inside happens a riot of feeling as ornamentation proliferates, smothering the fabric of the building and good sense. This turbulent space is hard to see, hard to see in: hard to see where pulpit becomes wall, wall becomes become ceiling, where three-dimensional putti float amongst two-dimensional clouds. But where at first I saw chaos, I now see Complexity: multiplication of finite elements, non-linear bifurcating compositional structures, folded fractal density and, almost, an infinitely recursive strange attractor described as wonder. I think I understand how this comes about: not as the result of an overall concept, designed to be realised at the level of detail complete in its entirety, but of an ‘operation’, a set of serial actions that expose the creation of art as relational.

Perhaps I can explain what I mean by describing the making of No-one believes they are Evil (figures 5.2a–c), a viral infection of the gallery with numerous small fluorescent red coloured wax “trees”. This isn’t a static artwork with permanent form; I didn’t make these things beforehand in my studio,
Figure 5.1 Zimmermann, D. (construction 1745–1754). Wieskirche (Pilgrimage Church of Wies) Füssen, Germany.