Why we cannot make life

Bert Meijer

“The origin of life on earth” is without doubt one of the most intriguing scientific topics, while the wish to create life in a laboratory is amongst the most difficult challenges. The enormous progress in science and technology over the past decades has provided many deep insights into the miraculous composition and functioning of living systems. Today, on the one hand, we can clone sheep, grow organs from stem cells, while cells, plants, animals and bacteria have been genetically modified. On the other hand, the synthesis of small and large molecules has become so sophisticated that almost every molecule that exists on earth can now be made in a laboratory, including long strands of DNA, proteins and complex drugs that can cure diseases. These many insights, however, also show the enormous complexity of the chemical biology of living cells. As a result, the more intriguing is the question how life could ever have originated. The lecture will illustrate the most important challenges encountered while trying to understand the origin of life, including an explanation of why it will take a very, very long time before a living cell can be made in a laboratory out of its individual components, if it is possible at all. Special attention will be paid to the self-organization of complex molecular systems as a critical step in the building process.

E.W. "Bert" Meijer is Distinguished University Professor in the Molecular Sciences, Professor of Organic Chemistry at the Eindhoven University of Technology and scientific director of the Institute for Complex Molecular Systems. After receiving his PhD degree at the University of Groningen with Hans Wynberg, he worked for 10 years in industry (Philips and DSM). In 1991 he was appointed in Eindhoven, while in the meantime he holds part-time positions in Nijmegen and Santa Barbara, CA. Bert Meijer is a member of many editorial advisory boards, including Advanced Materials, Angewandte Chemie, and the Journal of the American Chemical Society. Bert Meijer has received a number of awards, including the Spinoza Award in 2001, the ACS Award for Polymer Chemistry in 2006, the AkzoNobel Science Award 2010, the International Award of the Society of Polymer Science Japan in 2011, the Cope Scholar Award of the ACS in 2012, the Prelog medal in 2014 and the Nagoya Gold Medal in 2017. He is a member of a number of academies and societies, including the Royal Netherlands Academy of Science, where he is appointed to Academy Professor in 2014. Since 2016, he is a visiting professor of the MAINZ Graduate School and received the Humboldt Research Award in 2017.