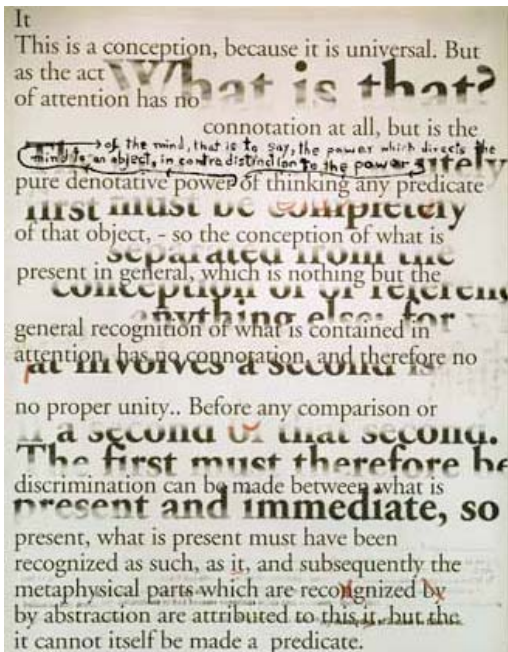


Jan Kenneth Weckman,  
IT, inkjet on canvas, acrylics, 255 x 200 cm,  
2001  
Icon@ Brave New World



I made a careless notation about the text for my large size inkjet print on canvas. The only painting, hence, is actually my task to paint the missing words and make a few corrections, by hand. Between the lines you may note other texts. (From the Peirce text of "The Idea of the absolutely first", CP 1.357, not including my own question: what is that?). The final outcome resembles a mental image or memory of a text. By the way, typography or writing, is the dominant abstract form in the world. Modern art swiftly engaged itself in experimental use of typography, still living strongly as concrete poetry, especially in the latin avantgarde.

The main text printed is by Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) and can be found within his thinking on scientific logic named A New List of Categories, written in the year 1867. Reference to the text can be found, for example in Collected Papers of Charles S. Peirce (1931-1958). 8 vols. Ed. by C. Hartshorne & P. Weiss (vols 1-6), & A. Burks (vols 7-8), Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, at the volume and paragraph number CP 1.547.

I will here by Peirce add a line before and after the excerpt printed on the canvas:

That universal conception which is the nearest to sense is that of the present, in general. This is a conception, because it is universal. But as the act of attention has no connotation at all, but is the pure denotative power of the mind, that is to say, the power which directs the mind to an object, in contradistinction to the power of thinking any predicate of that object – so the conception of what is present in general, which is nothing but the general recognition of what is contained in attention, of IT in general, is rendered in philosophical language by the word "substance" in one of its meanings. Before any comparison or discrimination can be made between what is present, what is present must have been recognized as such, as it, and subsequently the metaphysical parts which are recognized by abstraction are attributed to this it, but the it cannot itself be made a predicate. This it is thus neither predicated of a subject, nor in a subject and accordingly is identical with the conception of substance.

Peirce spent much of his life pondering on the important doctrine of categories in relation to scientific thinking. His categories are conceptions, ideas which help in forming and grouping scientific analysis and clear philosophical terminology. Peirce's categories are simply Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness. Peirce ends up in defining also phenomena as well as conceptions according to this division. The excerpt above is connected to the definition of Firstness. In his letter to Lady Welby, an important English sign-theoretician, Peirce states to Lady Welby: "... In pursuing this study I was long ago (1867) led, after only three or four years' study, to throw all ideas into the three

classes of Firstness, of Secondness, and of Thirdness. This sort of notion is as distasteful to me as to anybody; and for years, I endeavored to pooh-pooh and refute it; but it long ago conquered me completely. Disagreeable as it is to attribute such meaning to numbers, and to a triad above all, it is as true as it is disagreeable. The ideas of Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness are simple enough. Giving to being the broadest possible sense, to include ideas as well as things, and ideas that we fancy we have just as much as ideas we do have, I should define Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness thus:

Peirce: CP 8.328

Firstness is the mode of being of that which is such as it is, positively and without reference to anything else.

Secondness is the mode of being of that which is such as it is, with respect to a second but regardless of any third.

Thirdness is the mode of being of that which is such as it is, in bringing a second and third into relation to each other.

I call these three ideas the cenopythagorean categories.

Peirce: CP 8.329

329. The typical ideas of firstness are qualities of feeling, or mere appearances. The scarlet of your royal liveries, the quality itself, independently of its being perceived or remembered, is an example, by which I do not mean that you are to imagine that you do not perceive or remember it, but that you are to drop out of account that which may be attached to it in perceiving or in remembering, but which does not belong to the quality. For example, when you remember it, your idea is said to be dim and when it is before your eyes, it is vivid. But dimness or vividness do not belong to your idea of the quality. They might no doubt, if considered simply as a feeling; but when you think of vividness you do not consider it from that point of view. You think of it as a degree of disturbance of your consciousness. The quality of red is not thought of as belonging to you, or as attached to liveries. It is simply a peculiar positive possibility regardless of anything else. If you ask a mineralogist what hardness is, he will say that it is what one predicates of a body that one cannot scratch with a knife. But a simple person will think of hardness as a

simple positive possibility the realization of which causes a body to be like a flint. That idea of hardness is an idea of Firstness. The unanalyzed total impression made by any manifold not thought of as actual fact, but simply as a quality, as simple positive possibility of appearance, is an idea of Firstness. Notice the naïveté of Firstness. The cenopythagorean categories are doubtless another attempt to characterize what Hegel sought to characterize as his three stages of thought. They also correspond to the three categories of each of the four triads of Kant's table. But the fact that these different attempts were independent of one another (the resemblance of these Categories to Hegel's stages was not remarked for many years after the list had been under study, owing to my antipathy to Hegel) only goes to show that there really are three such elements. The idea of the present instant, which, whether it exists or not, is naturally thought as a point of time in which no thought can take place or any detail be separated, is an idea of Firstness."

Without going further here, and start to discuss the relation of the Peircean categories to his famous semiotic theory where you can connect the well known sign types or conditions of icons, indexes and symbols, to Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness, I will return to the text, and my work. I am inspired by the philosophers quest to analyze ideas. I find here a comparison between Peirce's text and the manifestoes of modern art, in their approach to try to picture the unimageable, the new – in efforts paralleling the definition of Firstness. The history of Modern is actually a series of changes, where traditional artworks are analyzed into their elements, one after the other (media, form, inference).

Many modern artists, however, especially in the later stages, for example Donald Judd and Frank Stella, did not want to think that their work is anything in the direction of analytical "reduction" – they were according to their own words only interested "in other things", like the material or color as such – I will anyway position the Peirce text as an icon to modern thinking, colored by analysis. The Peircean way of analysis in its anti-cartesianism, realism and pragmatism

seems to reach over structural and metaphysical borders of subject and object, inner/outer, mental/physical dichotomy

A CONCRETIST work of art is, admittedly, also a new synthesis, or a rhetorical model library for new combinations of colors and planes. Only, however, such a one where no space is given to the "natural". A concretist-constructivist work is "technical", like an anonymous drawing by an engineer for a machine that eventually never exists. In the long run, abstract formats in painting are non-functional playgrounds, however functional seen from the point of the art world and its rules. Comparing to Peirce one might say, that the abstract painting tries to show those iconic features, of which images are made but this time without their traditional task to convey something. The elements are disconnected from their function to mediate a natural order of things we may interpret an image by identifying familiar features. Peirce was a founder of pragmatism. In his semiotic theory Peirce investigated various practical examples. Paintings play a role as well, in exemplifying both iconic and symbolic functions. You may analyze a painting as a conventional and symbolic object, bound to social codes and values, still it can also be judged by its iconicity, as how the image is made possible by ordering the colours in the right form. Indexical is, of course, the fact that nothing in the painting is not without its causal relations to the environment and that it has been made confronting the resistance and use of force in manipulating the parts of the world, materials and tools.

There is a paradox ripening when the modernist thinks he can reduce as much as possible from the painting, ending up in pure color and a monochromatic work and then offer that "as such" as the only solution for art as art. Well known examples are those by Ad Reinhardt, the black rectangles and Postpainterly Abstraction by Clyfford Still, Morris Louis and Frank Stella.

Comparing to the modern history of art, nothing is out of its context when reproducing a Firstness-related text by Peirce as a piece of "concrete poetry", where its visual character plays the first

tones of attraction. Whatever follows, like that somebody tries to read the text, connects it to Peirce's philosophy and recovers other contexts, will be another adventure. Without regarding the additions and corrections by hand, and acrylic paint, there is not much modern in the work itself – even if the display follows ordinary white cube tactics – since there is no need for deconstruction of the typography on my part. I settle for just showing what Peirce said. In this, there is in my opinion, a shift from rhetorical deconstruction toward pathetic and contemporary preaching. I just love to read Peirce and study his theories, together with other discursive ways of deciphering how we discuss and understand ourselves, art and society. If there is a note of Brave New World here, it must be the faint note of Modernism, a bygone era of utopia well on its way to total dystopia. Who knows!

I have benefited from the exegesis of Peirce by several writers and regard myself as an complete amateur in philosophical matters, but want to recommend a well written introduction into Peirce's thinking, by Mats Bergman, *Fields of Signification - Explorations in Charles S. Peirces Theory of Signs*, Vantaa, Helsinki University 2004. There are, naturally, many others, besides Peirce's own texts to be found.