

## **The Beautiful Code**

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Message and meaning never actually meet. They live simultaneously separate lives and combine conventionally with each other, nullified thereafter only by force, however subtle, in time and space. Art may show gaps in time and space by the use of rhetoric, metaphor and deferment to the point of annihilation and uselessness, to mention a couple of strong metaphorical signs from the trashcan of Modernism. In my work process, there is a nexus of decisions that goes something like this: From a vast model of a color space (RGB) I choose to make a number of QR-code diagrams, which react against a satisfying difference of dark-light, whatever the nuances or chroma. Binary contrast of light is enough. The QR-code refers to texts, but if the binary contrast is less than needed, no reading can be done. The QR-code is useless.

The useless QR code is “pure form”, only art. But the one that works, then, is design. This range of dysfunction versus functional instrumentalism covers the area from art to design. In contemporary art we accept, however, that communicative and functional messaging is the order of the day, at least since the Brillo Box days as, following Arthur Danto, art meets its end and becomes a “post-historical” affair. This amounts to saying that also communicative and functional form can be viewed as art. In any case, we are able to rationalize from two perspectives, perhaps more. Forms shown in a gallery or museum, such as Warhol’s Brillo Box, are de jure art, regardless of their iconic resemblance to a commercial product. My pigment prints are de jure art as they are placed in a show. De facto some of them can be interpreted by way of a QR-reference text and take the discussion further. Such a small detail can surely not disrupt the solemn tranquility of the white cube?

The discussion of what happened to beauty as the essence of art is what Arthur Danto deals with in a number of his later texts, following Dave Hickey and the Whitney Biennial of 1993, together with later comments (Danto 2003). The result seems to be able to encompass contemporary art as both “art” and “design”. Such a broader conception of art must accept a pluralism of arts that we take for granted when, for instance, considering a branch of it in discussing artist research, activism or applied service design with an “art” identity (for example in community art, relational aesthetics and so on). Furthermore, following Danto, we must accept that beauty in the aftermath of the “Intractable Avant-Garde” and Dadaism, does not belong to the essence of art, but that it may join in for what it is worth in symbolic expressions and manifestations within the field of contemporary art, simply because we necessarily need beauty in our life, while art does not.

Here, I will only point to the binary character of the world of form and content that keeps artifacts and interpretations running alongside each other, not always as

symptoms or as manifested signs that we are all able to share. My examples of modern form in the shape of QR codes, as effective as building grid-like structures in the spirit of the Bauhaus can be, are aligned with – or dysfunctional in relation to – a set of texts. Picking among texts and citations, as an homage to our current projects, you might find familiar thoughts or ones that might interest you. In any case, if the QR reader on your smart phone fails you, it is only art.

## Under the Hood or In the Studio

QR codes are graphical interfaces for the retrieval of data and information, evolved out of bar codes for commercial use. QR code (abbreviated from Quick Response Code) is the trademark for a type of matrix barcode (or two-dimensional barcode) first designed for assembly-line factory purposes, as in the automotive industry in Japan. QR code enables the quick recognition of data (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/QR-code> )

QR codes offer a simple setup for three things:

- 1) a graphical two-dimensional artifact
- 2) embodying the possibility for confirmation of data
- 3) pertaining to specific conditions (e.g. entrance with a ticket to a venue) and further information (e.g. of works in a museum).

This basic graphic form establishes a relation between information, for example text and images on-line, illustrating symbolic form referring to “its content”. Text as graphical and symbolic form is the most pervasive style of non-figurative “art”.<sup>1</sup> The differences in principle between OCR (optical character recognition) scanning, bar-codes and QR code are very small, as discussed in the following at the site User Experience Stack Exchange:

*Therefore, any possible use of a QR code could be implemented more nicely, and with less ugliness, by simply placing the alphanumeric text of a URL or any other identifier, and placing a nice easily-recognized standardized logo next to it which basically means “scan me!”. Whereas, using the square QR code is butt-ugly, and more importantly, requires the person posting the code to go to some app to generate the code. Isn't it*

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<sup>1</sup> QR-code introduces, seemingly, an innovation to written phonemic language bearing a culturally conditioned set of signs combining a concept and a sound/graphic pattern. The verbal economic flagging system combines approximately 28 letters in varying order to conform with spoken language and works over a field of different sign systems. Each language makes its own conventions of sound and concept. The QR-code binary system works for a scanner, two-dimensionally, as in principle also writing does, but it is designed for the recognition of light contrasts to a certain degree, in a binary way executed by a digital QR-reader program.

*more flexible and future-oriented to simply embrace that very, very strong OCR abilities are among us and QR codes will be left in the dust?’*

The comment that QR code is “butt-ugly” caught my eye. The older OCR supposedly uses as a “nicer” way of connecting a graphic form, such as a letter, or any character that is legible (though not by the OCR program itself) by a symbolic key with reference to the content (ours to interpret), by way of an icon, an index or a symbol. To my mind, two clear options remain. One is, again, a text referring to other texts, infinite semiosis eventually with the capacity to advance an action, event or the understanding of some referential circumstance, hopefully something that is familiar to the user/reader. The second option does not lead anywhere in conventional terms, becoming, then “itself”, with a deferred set of various possibilities of meaning. This is what an artwork might “do to us” (what in fact happens in any ordinary exchange of speech between individuals – it takes place in a negotiation between interpretations), however, less and less, considering deferment in poor communication. This is where contemporary art starts its return towards oratio recta, as if that would ever be possible.

### **And for what?**

A heavy-duty rhetoric begins to make itself visible: how can anything be presentable as “itself”, as nothing else as it is in itself? This reminds us of a Peircean icon in a pure state, impossible to arrive at actually. I choose to give an artwork the status of such an end-station of meaning, albeit embedded in the meaning of “as art”. This status of form “as art” evolved out of the modernist non-figurative painting. For some reason geometrical and simple form prevails, rectangles, cubes and squares, stripes and circles: Malevich (RU), Mondrian (NL), Ad Reinhardt (USA), Frank Stella (USA), Jules Olitski (USA), or Carolus Enckell (FI) and Kimmo Sarje (FI), and many others, have been keen to point out such a state, in us or in “them”, i.e. those artworks that celebrate utopian themes.

For some other reasons, art philosophers chose to notice the contextual development of art stripped of everything else but its status “as art” much later. This happened in connection with Andy Warhol and his Brillo Box piece analyzed by Arthur Danto (Danto 1998). The “other is gone” (Ostrow 2011) At the same time, it seems, “history” is gone as well, which pertains to the critical attention to the medium of an autonomous art genre, as in what Clement Greenberg understands should be a criterion of painting as an art.

The no-nothing and not anything coincide, or not. As philosopher of religion and artist Mark C. Taylor puts it: *“Though thought cannot think without thinking not, the Western ontotheological tradition has, in effect, been in an extended effort not to*

*think not*".(Taylor 1993). The option not to think not could be said to embrace the realization of endless semiosis. This is the realism of language revealed by the pragmatism of Peirce and Derridean deconstruction regardless of their different aims.

The option to think not would start at the effort to consider something "in itself", that mysterious object that Kant wanted to leave in peace marking the limit of his transcendental solipsism. From a pragmatist point of view, this seems useless and insane, an end-station of thought comparable to the ontological results of skepticism - which should make it safe to enter the street through a window on the eight floor. All these problems are overcome, perhaps for good, if we care to discard our symbolic languages for the benefit of naming them artworks, not knowledge. This will be my option, at the seam between art and design.

## **Sources**

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