

**On the occasion of my participation in the exhibition: Icon@Brave
New World Jan Kenneth Weckman, April 2008, Prague and
Gallery Mánes**

“Sources” / “Lähteet” / “Källor”

"O wonder!
How many goodly creatures are there here!
How beauteous mankind is!
O brave new world
That hath such people in't!"

William Shakespeare, Miranda's speech in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Act V, Scene I

My contribution to the exhibition of Icon@ BraveNewWorld at the Prague Mánes gallery, April 10th – May 4th 2008 could be twisted into the context of Aldous Huxley´s famous book of 1932, *The Brave New World*, but with a tone of hesitation. I will try to emulate the inertia, or, rather, to create a link between Huxley´s ironic dystopia and my artistic endeavour. This is, as is standard, tried out in the theoretical sphere of interpretation if not in aesthetic *ekhprasis*. The latter option, I think, is often used, certainly by artists in love with their own work, like myself. But where would it lead to. looking at my prints, and reading the texts of the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce? This attempt would be the ordinary option, to try to

decipher the content of image and text, musing on the why's and wherefore's of textual form. My suggestion would rather be, yes, you could, but to do it, you need collateral knowledge, so, be patient. In a modern work of art, no collateral knowledge supposedly was needed, only appreciation of color, lines and planes – while at the same time, of course, a fair amount of contextual familiarity was and is necessary in order to pass some serious time in the art gallery. Contemporary art does not want to play around that much, at least, not to indulge in implicitness. On the contrary, direct messages are favored, like those on the street, where the demand for collateral knowledge, or rules of the game, is obligatory.

I am aware of the probable outcome by some viewers, who might ask why the artists chooses to reproduce this philosopher, and not another one, furthermore, why not some other topic or issue? This reaction is the result of the fact of the text being a direct reproduction without deconstruction which should supposedly contain the artists viewpoint towards that what has been the target of deconstruction. If nothing has been caused to the chosen object, the text, one might think that the artist must be trying to propose his message in complete accord with Peirce. That is, the artwork presents the philosophical fragments of this particular thinker, for a reason. The artist is supposed to function as a medium for a philosophical discussion. But that can not be the case, since the work as such is not a discussion in itself. The artwork could function as a starting point or aid-memoire for such a discussion. The responsibility of a discussion on philosophy is given to the

viewer. This responsibility does not differ from the one given over to the viewer of any other kind of work of art. The discussion does not belong to the artwork. It may cause one, without itself being anything else than a icon on Peircean thought and a possible interpretation of something seemingly pictorial.

Peirce, famous for his both tragical and confusing life and for his ever-growing stature as one of the founders of modern semiotics, besides a number of other things (geodesy, logic, mathematics, pragmatism) does not seem to be anything like an ironic man. As for other visual forms shown, an image does by itself not mean anything, unless somebody interprets it in some respect. Where´s the dystopia? And who calls Brave New World a dystopia? Everybody is managed into happiness and contentment by the World State government, Coca Cola, Ikea and Kela (The Finnish State Welfare Organization) – EU and, perhaps, NATO.

Before I go into (one of my) preferred areas of interpretation – something a par with the title of the work given by the artist - I will share with you my gratitude towards an interpretation of Peirce´s philosophy out of which the texts in my images are excerpt citations, surrounded by inspiring and clarifying comment. This exegetic feat, and a very readable one, is done by the Finnish Peirce scholar, Mats Bergman, whose work: *Fields of Signification, Explorations in Charles S. Peirce´s Theory of Signs* (Vantaa, Philosophical Studies from the University of Helsinki 6, 2004) forms the

milieu of the Peirce texts. Mats Bergman applies a context of communication to the corpus of Peirce's thinking, and raises an interest in the hypothesis, that *"his (Peirce's) conception of sign and sign action is intrinsically communicative; that his often obscure and abstract reflections on sign and sign action can beneficially be approached from the point of view of communicative relations....I intend to show that there is a pertinent sense in which Peirce's basic sign-theoretical concepts can be said to be abstractions from ordinary communicative practices (cf Colapietro, 1995, 25).* My work should be accepted as an intuitive icon of that sphere, where Bergman's context sets off, the area of rhetoric communication of art as icons. An icon, by itself, is a degenerate sign in Peirce's theory, and must be surrounded by other signs and elements of interpretation in order to fulfill its function in a complete sign-relation. Art as pieces of furniture in an art space, must be surrounded by interpretative processes. This is necessary of art in order to be art. As such, art is never mere iconographic figures and pieces of the world, but communicative praxis within a shared set of habits of action named visual culture.

I will relate basic Peircean proposals with the utopian and thoroughly modern visual formalities of non-figurative imagery. The distance between the scholarly perspective, the context of modernity seen through Huxley's interpolations and artistic modernism, will be an iconic adventure. The following writing will try to travel that distance, completely virtual, potential and hypothetical area – an irony if there ever was any, since we do not have

a complete trust of philosophers as in older days of Hegel, or the hybris of artists like Joseph Kosuth for that matter. To the advantage of Charles S. Peirce, he did not trust philosophers either. Peirce (1839-1914) believed that the experience of the diversities of life is the starting point of philosophic enquiry.

The concepts of communication and meaning were deeply questioned within modernist art, some of the results of which were motivated by and committed to both utopian and subversive symbolism (say Malevitsh, Mondrian, and Beckett, for example). Others entrenched in utopian modernity, as poets and scientists, like Roman Jakobson, Claude Levi-Strauss or Samuel Beckett, tried structuralism and eventually ended in deconstruction. Either a positive endeavour, like Jakobson, searching for the units and polyphony of parole against systems of langue, or a negative one, like Barthes and Derrida, in deconstruction and demythologizing semiology, Husserl, Artaud, anything that moves in the jungle of modernist thought – my idea of Derrida will always be as a hunter – structuralism and deconstruction needed each other. To create a system, another one, preferably the “old system”, must be defused. Here, I will not separate existential and absurd deconstruction, or even theosophic idealism from each other. The deluge of industrial and political revolt, urban disorder and capital management, made both artistic and social utopias and dystopias into convincing icons, were accompanied by both pessimistic and optimistic reactions which took place in relation to the changes in the modern societies of 19th and 20th centuries. By the way, Marshall Berman makes a both-and

reading of the upheavals of modern world in his famous review on modernity (Berman, Marshall, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, New York , 1982).

Comparing with Huxley and , say Orwell´s 1984, the mood of the writers are more sinister. As found in Wikipedia lines on Huxley associated to Neil Postman, the difference between these two famous books are clear: while Orwell is worried about the possibility of books being burned, Huxley worries about the onslaught of consumer society, and that, eventually, nobody will be interested to read any books anymore. Which dystopia is more distressing? The unhappy or happy end of our world?

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brave_New_World).

I have another, more personal image, if you will, of Peirce, related to my doctoral thesis (*Seitsemän maalaus katsominen/Maalaus maailman osana*, Helsinki LIKE 2005). There I introduced a possibility in Peircean sign theory, or rather, took my starting point from the phenomenological perspective behind the theory, and in line with the Peircean categories Mats Bergman introduces in his work, proposing that Peircean phenomenology could be helpful in designing a view on artistic praxis as a sign process. My proposal to connect a theoretical perspective, such as Peirce´s with an usually aesthetic-oriented undertaking, such as the artistic praxis, did not explicate the distance between these two “habits of action” , the practical and the theoretical. Initially, the invitation to take a look at the conglomerate of semiotic pragmatism represented by its founder Peirce, was given to me in a short but intensive educational care of the Finnish philosopher Pentti Määttänen (1993). Advantageous was, as well, the synthetic view of the Finnish sociologist Risto Heiskala (1997) in trying out an

inclusive framework of discussing and linking macro- and microlevel semiotics with structural framing theory of social semiosis. Määttänen as well as Heiskala favors a hybrid structure of the viewpoints created to discuss phenomena of aesthesis, semiosis and power related interpretation in culture. With Määttänen, the need for an exegesis of power does not arise, but instead, his naturalist view combines the spatial and embodied interaction with the environment together with construction of relations between percept/perception in perceptual judgments, that is, as a semiotic process of interpretation on several levels of action/cognition. As an artist constantly in need for manipulation of the environment, small or big, a hybrid and inclusive set of theories must be adopted to discuss and describe the event of artistic planning – exactly as other human activities in societal context. In this respect, art is never outside society, but inside it and partaking in the changes of society and its surfaces/meanings. Meaning is, then, superficial? Convincingly so, since meaning is a social condition, not anything tied to the particular individual. The thematics of Brave New World deal with the embodied beings in context, in society, in interaction with each other. The crucial subtheme, for any utopia/dystopia, consists of the state of the art, of those technological constraints and possibilities we encounter – to create and destroy, create the new by destroying the old. It's a very binary metaphor, utopia/dystopia. Things may go and have gone wrong, but often seen gone wrong only in hindsight. That is why we need dystopias.

My series of Peirce texts are from the outset easily seen as a dichotomy between text and image, something interpretable by reading and something less understandable but visual, pounding at our synapses. They are, as usually art

works are compared to life events, much less sublime, but more beautiful, and will be found wanting in life size experience. The art experience, contrary to many testimonies, feel diluted from the life experience. The main reason for this must be the lesser scale and lack of repetition available in white cube environments compared to other environments. Following traditional aesthetics constrained by practical conditions, the series of pigment prints are rather small sized and function, perhaps, more as a pointing finger, not as the moon itself.

Both parts, the text and the image, if it is one, form their particular abstract, hence, less an iconic result than an iconic starting point. The finish will always play out in the symbolic, as suggestion for conventional interpretation. But the starting point can be iconic possibility. Not lesser potential will be offered by the texts. But, however, only thorough acquaintance with the Peircean thinking will reveal their fuller meaning. The elliptic content is exactly the creating of meaning. That is the theme of the Peirce citations. But before this stage of understanding is reached, if ever, both sides express a modern dichotomy between text and image. In my opinion, they have still much in common, initially and eventually, when we start to mediate our contemplation into conceptual and critical thought.

A basic and poetic notion tied to the idea of the BNW, or utopia/dystopia, is its binary determination. Irony and horror must turn either towards light or into darkness. The black/white mode of both image and text is not without its association to the dichotomy of utopian dreams. The second notion is tied to the general abstractedness or abstraction of both image and text. If we could

have a key to the deciphering of the images – to what they depict – and, on the other hand, if we had a more deep knowledge of the Peircean interests and terminology, then the pictorial and theoretical perspective could be complemented with understanding, of meaning in its diverse sense – or grades which Peirce discusses in his writing. Meaning is suspended, eventually until further experiences makes us more in shape to understand what we have felt and undergone in life.

A more complicated association, which arrives while the artist runs his agenda and gives in to interpretation, is the cultural fact of the distinction between modern art (modernism) and contemporary art. The series of images/texts include a possibility to reflect on what seems different between these habits of thinking and doing. In my opinion, modernist art is mainly interested in itself, its own forms, its own media. Modernists experiments seem to end in deconstruction, transgression and poetic irony and abstraction which is resolved only in a conceptual sphere, like in conceptual art which allows for constant change of media and form within a general and abstract theme. In modernism, this theme was art itself.

Contemporary art strategies abstain from the deconstructivist strategy – well exemplified by, say, concretism, abstract art and minimalism – regardless of the manifested attitudes of the artists. Situationism and conceptualism form a kind of transition area or a threshold where modernist deconstruction moves into its last phase, by their respective interests of politics and philosophy, in a shared expression of transgressing the border art/life – a sincere step of any modern

avantgarde. Contemporary interests in political and personal affairs or the publishing of opinions on the political/personal in art, taken as a space of power and discursiveness – which it is, promotes the development of art as a discourse on important issues. (This development might have started already on the basis of the modernist disruption of art disclaiming its own autonomy). The results of, say, contemporary sculpture like what happened with the so called Young British movement at the beginning of the 90's, driven as it was by Saatchi & Saatchi sponsorship, and a sense of street credibility, scale and volume based realism, not irony, subtlety or deconstruction – we might arrive at the conclusion that contemporary directness of speech, albeit rhetorical shock-oriented methods, is a result of the deconstructive drive itself! – all this entail completely new demands on what and how art should move around in society.

Modernist reflection on the formal features and media of art, and its deconstruction, transforms into narratives of contemporary art, admittedly, with a large repertoire of ways of presentation and representation. If an artist trained in modern methods of mise-en-scene wants to state a clear question – or a clear answer – he/she is in trouble. Modernist deconstruction as a tool for political or personal narratives does not make for clearness. In practice, we have to give in to a long tradition within visual culture, its established means of presentation. Thus, no small aesthetic fee is paid to modernist history and its aesthetic tradition whatever the contemporary issue at hand. Here, I stress the dichotomy between modern and contemporary. Modernist schemes serve as practices of presentation also for contemporary attitudes, which makes for

trouble, unless we settle to accept ourselves as modernists, albeit with a postmodern and emancipated view on each and everything.

My small contribution to the evanescent distinction between modern and contemporary is simply the fact that there is no added modernist deconstructing additions or flavors manipulating the Peirce texts. Its is the real, undeconstructed form, exactly as Peirce wrote it. No playing with words, syllables, forms, here, just direct speech. The question is left open, if the text in this “as it is” form can be treated as a part and parcel of an art work and thus legitimately reproduced without permission from the publishers. My preliminary opinion is, that the text is part of the art work, physically, contextually and thus free to be read as any text in an art work. Is this replica of Peirce, both art and philosophy? I would answer yes, both and. (This unmodern, non-playful representation does not apply to one of the other works of mine at the BNW exhibition outside of the Series named “**Sources**”. The work, titled **It**, does present an excerpt from CP 1.547, but is damaged by bad memory and complemented by hand writing, the only painting process shown in these works, and, as well, includes an initial **It**, not belonging to the original Peirce text.)

As it were, then, the ambivalent and open “image” is modern, the unadulterated text is contemporary. For those, who will acquaint themselves with other works of mine at the BNW exhibition, there will be a contradiction of this emulation of the distinction between modern and contemporary, for example, in the work called “**It**”, explained elsewhere. But, with the Peirce texts, the space of art is turned into a scholarly place, a spot where discussions can be made, not deconstructions of meaning but construction of meaning. If the opportunity is

taken, however, to make such a discussion, is wholly another question. That is why our immediate, intuitive encounter with the visual, regardless of symbolic possibilities of meaning, is more or less the same toward image as text. It depends on collateral knowledge and familiarity with the symbolic. The immediate encounter with the moment of *aesthesis*, or percepts drenched in iconic beauty, carry no one definite meaning by themselves and require collateral and conventional knowledge to be judged useful and interpretable. Textual form and typography does no exception to this immediacy. The requirements of contextual knowledge to pin down the lines of an text, say, Peirce in exegesis, does mean that a text can not be deciphered by itself. It demands other texts and collateral knowledge in order to be useful, it too. Here, then, is the last link between image and text, its formal history of topological order differs, but is of same category, a seen form useful if other aspects are fulfilled. This makes for a final point, interpretation of both would-be images and texts are mediations of communication, which always implies a community. Communication per definition is engagement within a social context of speech and action. Modernist art and culture partakes in the deconstruction of communication, many times driven by critical, utopian, or political interests. To harass ways of communication in order to find the universal unit of inner and out realities has deeply influenced the forms and surfaces of modern society, as icons of modern thinking. To brake down conventions and look at the matter of contemporary society, we seem to need both modern irony and contemporary pathos, as legitimate heirs of new brave worlds of experience. You will find my dichotomy unsuccessful and temporarily out of order, something never happens in the brave new world. Looking back, I tend to see the pioneers of modernism

less ironic than what I would like them to be. The more near my own awareness and history advances, the stronger the feeling of irony gets. So be it, let´s believe that Peirce was as un-ironic as was Kandinsky or Malevitch, or Jakobson, not to mention Mukarovsky or Trubetskoy, on the occasion of this exhibition in Prague which gave its name to one of the most famous schools of semiotics. In their commitment that sign theory arises from the applied functions within communication, they advanced the concept of art as a special rhetoric of communication – something useful to our understanding of contemporary art discourse, if not modernist rhetoric of non-communication (which is a great irony, of course).

“Sources”

Those sources on art, semiotics and aesthetics, which clearly should be mentioned, are not definable here due to the low grade of scientific ambition in my writing. I will focus only on noting the Peirce sources. Otherwise, I just write to remember what to return to if needed. Artists like me write usually only when pressed to do so before the opening evening of an exhibition.

Bergman, Mats, *Fields of Signification, Explorations in Charles S. Peirce´s Theory of Signs*, Vantaa, Philosophical Studies of Helsinki University 6, 2004

Heiskala, Risto, *Society as Semiosis, Neostructuralist Theory of Culture and Society*, Helsinki, University of Helsinki 1997

Määttänen, Pentti, *Action and Experience*, Helsinki, Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1993

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brave_New_World

Huxley, Aldous, *Brave New World*, London, Chatto and Windus 1932

Orwell, George, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, London, Secker and Warburg 1949

Sources of excerpts from Peirce as in Bergman, 2004, from

Charles Sanders Peirce texts are indicated by abbreviations, following Bergman (2004):

CP v:p refers to The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce; v indicates volume number, p paragraph number.

EP v:p refers to The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings; v indicates volume number, p pager number

MS m:p refers to an original manuscript, see Bergman, 2004, 7.

W v:p refers to Writings of Charles S. Peirce: A Chronological Edition; v indicates volume number, p page number

SS p refers to Semiotic and Significs: The Correspondence between Charles S. Peirce and Victoria Lady Welby; p indicates page number.

Peirce bibliography mentioned above:

Collected Papers of Charles S. Peirce (1931–58).. 8 vols. Ed. By C. Hartshorne & P. Weiss (vols 1–6), & A. Burks (vols 7–8). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings. (1992–8). 2 vols. Ed. By N. Houser & C. Kloesel (vol1), & The Peirce Edition Project (vol 2). Bloomington: Indiana University Press

Writings of Charles S. Peirce: A Chronological Edition. (1982–). 6 vols. to date. Ed. by The Peirce Edition Project. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Semiotics and Significs: The Correspondence between Charles S. Peirce and Victoria Lady Welby. (1977). Ed. by C.S. Hardwick. Bloomington, Indiana University Press

Texts sources mentioned and reproduced in art works:

1. **Three grades**, pigment print on paper, 50 x 70,5 cm, 2008
MS 649: 1–3 – 1910
2. **“Essay on Pragmatism”**, pigment print on paper, 50 x 70,5 cm, 2008
text source EP 2:256 –1903; cf SS 159 –1903
3. **“...unless the Phaneron”**, pigment print on paper, 50 x 70,5 cm, 2008
text source, EP 2:363–364 – c. 1905
4. **“Directly experiencing”**, pigment print on paper, 50 x 70,5 cm, 2008
text source CP 1.349 – 1903; MS 462:84–86 – 1903
5. **“Consider that”**, pigment print on paper, 50 x 70,5 cm, 2008
text source MS 1135:2 – 1897
6. **“Just as the first”**, pigment print on paper, 50 x 70,5 cm, 2008
text source W 6:171
7. **“Let us say”**, pigment print on paper, 50 x 70,5 cm, 2008

- text source CP 7.619 – c. 1903; CP 7.643 – c. 1903
8. **“Phenomenon”**, pigment print on paper, 50 x 70,5 cm, 2008
text source CP 2.197 – c. 1902; MS 337s:10
9. **“The idea of the absolutely first”**, pigment print on paper, 50 x 70,5 cm, 2008
text source W 6:170–171
10. **“Terms”** pigment print on paper, 50 x 70,5 cm, 2008
text source W 2:50–51 – 1867
11. **“Phanerосcopy”**
pigment print on paper, 50 x 70,5 cm, 2008
text source **CP 1.286–287 – 1904**
12. **“ Looking at the matter”**
pigment print on paper, 50 x 70,5 cm, 2008
text source MS 805:19–20;cf MS 804:22; CP 8.368n23 cf. MS 1135:7–8
– c. 1897
CP 2.357 – 1902; MS 797:10

13. "It" inkjet on canvas and acrylics, 250 x 200 cm, 2001
text source CP 1.547. This work is, except for the injunction: It, at the beginning, only what will be found as the text by Peirce, regardless that it displays handwriting in acrylic paint. The deconstruction, is, then, only a stylistic guise, pertaining form, not reference. Absolute dichotomy between form and theme can not be found, since different forms, while perfectly legible and as such semiotically redundant – and as it was called: only *substance*, not *form*, does not partake in the sign system = significant/signifie. But art, especially modern art, is interested in form turning into substance and vice versa.

14. "What is that?" Inkjet on canvas, 250 x 200 cm, 2001
text source W 6:170–171. This text has an intro, that does not belong to Peirce: the question what is that?. Disformation usually takes the shape of disinformation, in the guise of the form which it wants to deconstruct.

