

## In retrospect

### Do we have to choose between art and research practice

**H**ow do artists experience and address beauty at present? Has the notion of beauty vanished completely from artistic discourse? Are ornaments still allowed? What does a contemporary ornament look like? In the exhibition *Ornament & Beauty*, mounted at Titanik Gallery (5–29 May 2016) in connection with the conference *Art Approaching Science and Religion*, 12–13 May 2016, the artists intended to comment on questions such as those in the texts published here and through the art works presented.

THE EXHIBITION WAS CURATED by the artists DFA Jan-Erik Andersson and Jan Kenneth Weckman, together with the philosopher and Professor Bengt Kristensson Uggla, all involved in the AmosLAB, a laboratory for artistic research in connection with Åbo Akademi University, aiming to bring art projects and artistic thinking into the public spaces of the city as well as into academic environments.

The following statements, together with reproductions of the works, form a catalogue in retrospect of the show which exposed a range of attitudes and intentions which, however, were not necessarily detectable from the works themselves. The texts produced by the six artists are not analysed here, but may be understood as source material for further thought. Let me, however, make a few general points, as well as introduce a context for the artists' writings together with their artworks in my postscript.

The 'intentional fallacy' (Wimsatt and Beardsley 1962), the hallmark of modernist aesthetics, is a lost cause by now. Nor do the artworks reveal any relationship to pre-modern styles considered beautiful, say, in terms of the 'licked surface' of nineteenth-century French paintings (Rosen and Zerner 1984) amid

emerging changes that were to be the dominant set in visual thinking for a hundred years. Why, therefore, make a phone call to Gustave Caillebotte, or Ingres for that matter? Everything turned out to be different from the attempt to reach transparent illusion and beautiful sentiment.

In opposition to earlier modernist interests, contemporary art asserts its contents, leaving formal solutions as instrumental to the content. Retreating into formalism, erstwhile modernism took quite a few steps away from the infernos of modernity in order to reach a universal ground behind the ephemeral events constituting such a destructive, violent and ugly world. To a certain degree modernism was a sedative, or from another point of view, an ironic proposal for a new utopia that never arrived.

Perhaps, the only argument on behalf of beauty in contemporary art was made in 1993 by Dave Hickey, a writer, critic and former gallery owner (Hickey 2012), who instigated a discourse on beauty, although probably for the wrong reasons, as he was intimidated by the institutionalism and hypocrisy which ensued with the advent of tight ideological relations between museums and patrons, as well as the demands for art that 'is good for us.' Commenting on Hickey, Arthur Danto in turn, laid down his own aesthetic by-laws on the matter, including his elatedness over the inevitable amendments to aesthetic theory enforced by Dadaism and the 'intractable' avant-garde (Danto 2002). Hence, according to Danto, beauty may or may not be included in a good and important work of art, but it will intrude into our lives, sometimes via art as well, because we need beauty in our lives, while art does not necessarily provide that – anymore.

# ORNAMENT & Beauty

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# ORNAMENT & Beauty

*Gallery Titanik*

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How do artists experience and address beauty at the moment? Has the notion of beauty vanished completely from artistic discourse? Are still ornaments allowed? What does a contemporary ornament look like? In the exhibition Ornament & Beauty, besides the art works presented, the artists also want to comment on such questions in the texts published here.

The exhibition is curated by artists DFA Jan-Erik Andersson and Jan Kenneth Weckman together with philosopher and Professor Bengt Kristensson Ugglå, within AmosLAB, a laboratory for artistic research in connection with Åbo Akademi University. AmosLAB engages in bringing art projects and artistic thinking within academic environments ([www.amoslab.fi](http://www.amoslab.fi)).

## THE GHOST IN THE CORNER

*Heini Aho*

### Beginning and end

The starting point of this work is the corner. In the man-made, square world, the corner is the beginning and end of a room. A right angled corner cut off from its attendant framework shows where walls meet a ceiling or a floor. A small corner thus removed from its context immediately becomes a miniature of a space, with walls and floors endlessly continuing and expanding from it.

### No gaps, no overlap

I looked for recurring forms (hidden ornaments) in my surroundings and I noted corners. A corner contains three parts of the same size and form that can be used to construct a recurring tessellation continuing in the manner of a mosaic. The shapes fit each other perfectly with no gaps or overlap.

More important than the geometric image was the three-dimensional – and existing – corner, hidden and camouflaged within a square.

### The shift from round to rectangular

When man moved from tents to live in houses with corners, the world could be viewed from a given angle, focusing on one thing at a time. Living in a room among diagonal lines and forms was made possible when corners appeared.

Pieces of furniture are the children of rooms, repeating the same forms in different size. Shelves are attached to the wall, and box shapes are piled on top of each other. There are often many other corners in the lap of a corner. There are corners and box-shaped compartments and drawers in our cupboards, and smaller boxes within larger ones.

The organic world does not achieve strictly angular forms. A small bead will roll into the corner of a drawer and it can be hard to remove it with your fingers. A round finger will not reach into the smallest corners.

### A Ghost Story

Hard to access, the furthest corner will gather dust and be forgotten. A dark corner is a good place for ghost stories and the ghost illusions of films, and a metaphor for things remaining hidden in the

subconscious. What might be found in the darkest corners?

A corner is the beginning or element of many stories and ideas. Geometric forms have sometimes been regarded as the elements of the world (the Platonic solid) or God has been considered the Geometer of the World. The title of the piece, *The Ghost in the Corner*, refers to the dark, everyday corner that our environment repeats like a mantra, asking whether something sacred might be lurking there.

### The Ghost in the Corner

*The Ghost in the Corner* consists of four parts. Its recurring form is a *tri-rectangular tetrahedron*, a 45-degree angle three-sided pyramid with one open side. I have removed by hand 13 x 13 cm sized corners using a handsaw and a keyhole saw. The cut faces of the corners reveal their respective materials and give hints about where they were taken from.

Which side was the base of a piece of furniture, and which one was a thin wall? Why is a corner reinforced with metal?

In the first part, corners of the same size sawn off from various objects, are placed alongside each other. The second part of the installation is a box that appears to be entering the ground. A corner has been cut off from it. Part of it, in a sense, is unseen, underground, on the other side of the present space.

The third part of the artwork is a saw-blade placed in one corner of the gallery space, giving the impression that the blade emerging from one side is cutting off the corner of the room. Cutting grooves in the wall, dust from the cutting on the floor and the blade are visible.

The fourth part is a separate corner standing on its own.

The corner invites the viewer to zoom in. Its three lines, three sides and their intersection in the middle give the viewer's gaze a point on which to focus.



Heini Aho, *The Ghost In The Corner*, installation, mixed media 2016

## TABLES, ART AND TOOTHBRUSHES

*Jan-Erik Andersson*

### **William Morris and the “free beauties”**

The prestigious Turner Prize of 2015 went to the Assemble collective, which mixes art with design and architecture without scruples. The prize was awarded for their socially engaged activities with the residents of a suburban area in Liverpool, their idea being to regenerate the community. The decision stirred a lot of reactions in the art world. One of the members of the jury, the critic and author Jan Verwoert, held a lecture at the IHME conference in Helsinki 2016 in which he was upset that the prize went to people who work with art that can be useful to society. In his opinion, art should protect its precious value of being unnecessary!

This shows how sensitive this area still is and how sharply late-modernist boundaries are still being drawn. This led my thoughts back to the artist, philosopher and social activist William Morris (1834 – 1896), one of the foremost figures of the Arts and Crafts Movement.

Morris is known for his advocacy of useful objects, a simple lifestyle – in castles and cottages alike – where you have to think carefully about the things that surround you. In his opinion, the home is the basis of life: ‘If I were asked to say what is at once the most important production of Art and the thing most to be longed for, I should answer, a beautiful House...’ (Morris nd).

Morris’s view of beauty can be seen in his way of regarding man’s desire to ‘show off’ and of luxury being an obstacle to experiencing a deeper life. As a remedy, he suggested that one should actively study one’s environment with the following in mind: ‘... nothing can be a work of Art which is not useful; that is to say, which does not minister to the body when well under command of the mind, or which does not amuse, soothe, or elevate the mind in a healthy state’ (Morris 1962: 102).

Morris was a staunch advocate of getting rid of objects, artworks and ornaments with which there is no deep relationship. This, however, does not mean replacing them with minimal surfaces without ornament. In this case, modernists have consciously misinterpreted the concept of ‘simplicity’ to mean a monochrome, unadorned surface.

Rather, ornaments based on figurative shapes taken from nature were a central element for Morris and he devoted a great deal of his creative time to producing complex, timelessly beautiful patterns, of which wallpapers are still being made.

Morris had a very straightforward and clear view of beauty: “... everything made by man’s hands has a form, which must be either beautiful or ugly: beautiful if it is in accord with Nature, and helps her; ugly if it is discordant with Nature, and thwarts her; it cannot be indifferent: ...” (ibid., 85.)

But he was of course familiar with the problems that occur when nature is re-presented. This not a question of imitating nature; the artist and the craftsman work according to their own laws, but the result, the object that is created, should ‘...look as natural, nay as lovely, as the green field, the river bank, or the mountain flint’ (Morris 1962: 85).

Morris understood that in the process towards a more complex society, art also becomes more complicated and begins to deal with more and more intricate problems. He was thus concerned that artists would begin to withdraw into their ivory towers and lose contact with artisans, who by producing objects for use have a more direct contact with society. He maintained that both the artist and the artisan, as well as society, would benefit if these groups could work together in a fruitful way.

My own artistic work is influenced by Morris’s thinking. The total art work, the house *Life on a Leaf*, which I planned together with architect Erkki Pitkäranta and 20 invited artists and artisans, is a concrete example how collaboration between the three groups can be carried out in the contemporary world. Like Morris, in my experience nature is still an infinite store of aesthetic experiences – colours and forms, which can be considered beautiful in the same way as Morris saw them. But the ways of representing nature are of course different, mediated, of course, through my own personal playfulness and the experience of growing up in a postmodern society. The aesthetics of the house and its structure are based on metaphors taken from nature. The ground floor is like a dark cave beside a brighter meadow, the first floor is like being at the level of the treetops. The





Jan-Erik Andersson, Six tables with ornate patterns designed for Beautiful Mistake: *Pine, Rowanberry, Granate Apple, Bluebell1, Bluebell2, Apple*. 2015; *Ornament & Beauty*. The design of the pattern uses all the items found in a bathroom cupboard. Painted metal. 2016

second floor is filled with light, as on a mountain-top. Many of the artworks deal with culture as a membrane through which nature is transported in various ways into the house.

Ornaments with both abstract and figurative motifs, strong colours and cheerful expressive forms – designed with devotedness and executed with skill – create, in my eyes, a beautiful experience of space. But someone else might see it as something naïve, suitable for day-care centres perhaps but not to be taken as serious architecture. This razor-sharp borderline, which was cultivated during the modernist era, relegates colour to leisure time at the beach, the children’s corner and the effervescent world of commercials, in contrast to the serious world of adults with their box-shaped buildings of black, gray and white walls, which are also the code for ‘seriousness’.

Morris also undermined another of the cornerstones of modernism when he saw no difference in



Jan-Erik Andersson, *Ornament und Verbrechen*. Table with built-in sound sensors reacting with lit LED ornaments on changes in sound. Made in collaboration with the IT department at the Åbo Akademi University. 2016



aesthetic value between designed, usable objects and art objects. In many ways, late modernist thinking is still based on that of Immanuel Kant, who banished objects that have other interests (for example to be used for something) from the domain of the 'free beauties'. Among these outlawed objects Kant included architecture (you can actually live in a house!) but not ornaments, which he considered to belong to the category of 'free beauties' – something that irritated architect Adolf Loos, who wrote the essay 'Ornament and crime' (Loos 1913), and other ornament-haters, some 200 years later.

Now, a century after Loos, the system of reference has changed again and one can see the dream of 'pure' and 'free' art in a new, and not always so flattering, light. Contemporary elite art is a very narrowly knit system tightly bound to different layers of narrative, theory and lines of development. It becomes even more interesting when you consider that Kandinsky and the other pioneers of abstract art needed the help of spiritual stories of the fourth dimension to avoid their art being considered 'just wallpaper'. Perhaps it is so that the real 'free beauty' exists in ornament, which lives on the margins, not drawing attention to itself, but 'framing' in an un-dramatic and free way.

## Works on display in the exhibition

In my project for *Ornament & Beauty*, I present the firm Beautiful Mistake, for which I have designed a complete, small coffee table built in three aesthetic layers: Closest to the floor is a triangular shelf, which also gives support to the table's three organically shaped legs. It is inspired by tables made during the Arts and Crafts and Art Nouveau periods, when a shelf close to the floor was often included in the design. The second layer consists of the three legs made of form-shaped plywood, which takes the mind to 1950s Finnish design and Alvar Aalto. The third layer, the table top, brings us into the contemporary aesthetic world. Extraordinary present-day printing technology makes it possible for artists to create works that are printed out and incorporated between sheets of hard acrylate. Beautiful Mistake invited artists to make surfaces for the tables.

As one of the invited artists, I designed a series of six different table surfaces by making digital drawings with ornamental motifs from nature. The idea was to reposition the artwork from the wall, where it exists as a 'free beauty' without function,

out on the floor and change it into a (part of a) usable object. In the exhibition, a selection of these surfaces is displayed.

How can these tables be interpreted? A table with an in-built artwork? Or just a piece of designed furniture? But what happens if you stand over the table with no objects placed on it and look straight down at the surface so that the legs cannot be seen? Is it possible, under these conditions, to look at the surface as an example of 'free beauty' without thinking of its function as a table? Is the experience the same as viewing the surface hung on a wall without the legs?

One of the tables has a surface which is the result of a collaboration with the Department of Information Technologies at Åbo Akademi University in Turku, Finland. The basic state of the table is a 30 mm thick sheet of acrylate with a white, semi-opaque surface: modernism at its most basic! But when you place upon it a cup of coffee or some other object which can make a small sound, the table responds with a row of different, ornate patterns created by the LED lights built into it. The shape and the length of the light patterns depend on which sounds are produced by moving the objects on the table.

Can this light/colour experience be perceived 'differently' from the table's function as a table? The same question also concerns the leaf-shaped house entitled *Life on a Leaf*. When the house, through its appearance and details such as its drop-, heart- and leaf-shaped windows, has lost most of its points of reference with the concept of 'house', is it possible to look at the house (at a distance, from the road in front of it) as a 'free beauty'? Immanuel Kant would perhaps not approve of this, but on the other hand, a lot has happened since Kant. In my view, the house (or the table) can be seen in two ways: as colours, forms and so on, but also, when the frame of reference is changed, they can be seen in terms of their function as a house or table.

In many private art collections, there are objects that were originally made as utility items, as plates and vases, and are on display in showcases, to be seen only as art objects, with no other interest connected to them. Picasso made series of ceramic plates which were never meant to be eaten from, but of course could be used for that purpose.

Besides the tables, produced by Beautiful Mistake, I show a work mounted on the wall entitled *Kosmos*. It is an ornate circle, 2000 mm in

diameter, the pattern of which is constructed from objects found in my family's bathroom cupboard. The objects are used in our rituals of personal beautification.

According to Kent Bloomer, the term *ornament* has its origins within the Greek term *kosmos*, which means something like 'universe', 'order' and 'ornament'. For the Ancient Greeks, *kosmos* was the opposite of chaos, and *eros* was a prerequisite for creating *kosmos* from chaos. Bloomer says that 'ornament' can thus be said to be a force that transforms conflicting worldly elements. Bloomer continues to examine the term *kosmos* and finds a graceful connection with femininity. The Greek word *kosmeo* means 'to arrange' and 'to adorn'. A person *kosmése* ('adorns') herself or himself in order to make her/his *kosmos* visible. (Bloomer 2000)

## LETTER TO JOROINEN

*Niran Baibulat*

### Letter to Joroinen writing test I

At the age of fifteen my father wrote in a letter to his father: 'I sent your bicycle by train but the designation was wrong', as he had filled out the form and put on a luggage tag stating that somebody was travelling along with it. In fact he was sending the bicycle unaccompanied. When he realized the mistake, he couldn't correct the label. Then his mind was consumed with worry and trouble as the bicycle was precious to his grandfather, as a vehicle for carrying goods to market. He ended the letter by writing the numbers of the luggage tag: six thousand and five and one hundred and sixty-five.

In 1940, every man was called up to serve in the army. My grandfather, aged thirty-eight at the time, was sent to Joroinen and stationed with the troops. He was old for recruitment, but every man was needed. He served in food supplies for the front. Almost twenty years earlier, he had been an immigrant, on the run and hiding in the woods, with no papers to show.

The letter is in the Tatar language, my mother tongue, which is rarely spoken in public or with strangers. It is in Arabic script.

Now, this letter, me copying, is written onto a snowy landscape. My foot writing, remnant of the act, is heavy and shivering. Pressing down on the snow, shifting, tapping with my feet, printing marks and getting familiar with the suburban woods under the water tank on a rocky field or near a walking path. Only random passers-by, some dog walkers, confront my act.

My concerns are practical ones; whether my breath will mist up my eyeglasses while I'm taking photographs, will three pairs of socks be enough?

### Letter to Joroinen writing test II

My father gave me an envelope. Look and see if there is anything interesting, he said. A worn-out, brown envelope full of old documents containing several bicycle registration documents, a licence to peddle in the countryside, and a court order concerning an accident with a kick sled and a van.

It is a sheet of paper perhaps torn out of a notebook, pages with lines forming squares. In some

places the ink has spread leaving the trace of a blue spot. Anyway, it is wrinkled, barely legible in some parts.

In January, the temperature was minus twenty and foot writing was more challenging. First, I was worried whether there would be any snow at all, or if it would stay long enough for me to finish the letter. I searched for snowy places, extended my walks to a conservation area nearby. But it was cold, far too cold. I shortened my walks. Anyway, in winter the days are short and the sun is low in the sky.

What kind of place did I need? Sure, a surface that does not slope too much and is wide enough for a whole word to be filled in – then a good spot for photographing it. I hoped for sunshine. Locating myself so that the sunshine comes from my right side with the shadow of my body pointing out the direction where the writing proceeds. Arabic script runs from right to left. In some cases, I have to turn around to form a letter and that is when I easily lose direction. I move ahead word by word, sometimes only a couple per day.

Here the body of writing is not primarily concerned with communicating a message but instead is more about measuring space, making constant negotiations with situational factors. In her book *Agency and Embodiment* Carrie Noland investigates how culture is filtered through our corporeal acts. She claims that the effect of using inventive forms of kinaesthetic acts affords knowledge (Noland 2009).

Transcription gives a sequence of places, a diversity of surfaces; first, there is a sheet of paper, then landscape and gallery space. What is shown in a gallery space is only inscriptions, imprints, not the movements themselves.

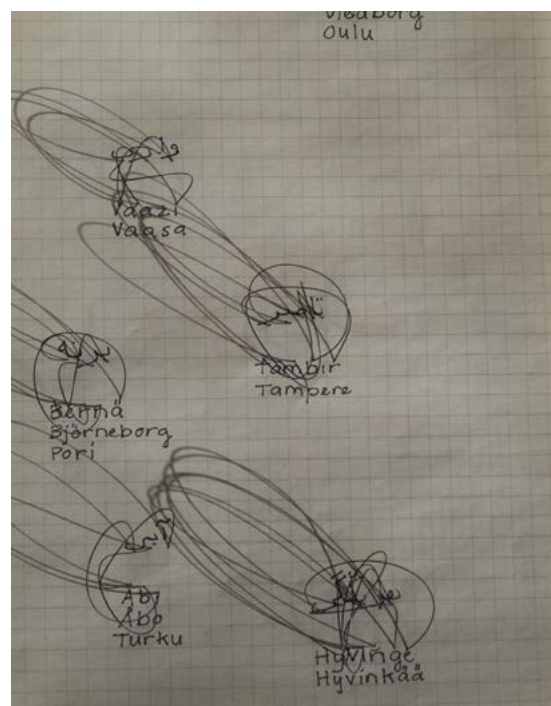
In *Writing Exercises* I use two kinds of script; Latin and Arabic. I connect them with a thread line indicating that the letter here occupies two different kinds of sign system. The thread line implies three-dimensionality, rising from the plain sheet.

Ornament is regarded as an aesthetic issue and designs a surface by covering it. Thinking of ornament as having a parasitic quality, being supported by the other, could also be approached from another viewpoint: by thinking of it in terms of flexibility.



Niran Baibulat, Letter To Joroinen, installation detail

An ornament can be seen as a trace or shape produced by motion. It is that which remains when the motion is gone. Seen through kinaesthesia, an ornament can therefore be regarded as an open concept embodying the potential and capacity for change. It then becomes a tool for responding to stimuli, for acting in response to some reason or event.



Niran Baibulat, Letter To Joroinen, installation detail



## FORM AND LIFE

**Kimmo Sarje**

*The International Style*, the mainstream current of architecture and design that emerged in the inter-war years offered typography as ornament. As succinctly stated by Henry-Russell Hitchcock Jr and Philip Johnson in 1932, 'lettering is the nearest approach to arbitrary ornament used by the architects of the international style'. The headline posters of tabloid newspapers are a parasite of this principle as a commercial ornament, like a force of nature in the streetscape.

In 1926 Piet Mondrian noted: 'The task today, then, is to create a direct expression of beauty ... expressed exclusively through lines, planes, or volumes and through color.' Pure abstract beauty was created, but alongside it also the unholy alliance of geometric abstraction – the sister of the International Style in the visual arts – and ornament.

The advertisements – headline posters – of tabloid newspapers are a visible element of the everyday existence of media. In Finland, the 'yellow press' is true to its name and prefers posters with a warm yellow ground, black lettering and black

images. Red is also used as an addition, and occasionally the poster comes out in four colours.

The headline poster is a genre of publicity. The main rule is that bad news is good. The posters are showcases for scandals and screw-ups, in which Adolf Loos's indictment of 'ornament as crime' is the literal graphic message.

Headline posters are graphic and rhetorical signs dotting the public space. They are ornaments passing on perceptions and feelings as montages of texts and images. They are a graphic matrix onto which we project our lives. Their layout is primitive; grubby pictures juxtaposed with grotesque typography. The power and character of the headline posters lies in this roughness, which distinguishes it from designed posters and even advertisements. In my montages, modern typography and abstraction intersect within ornament. Form and life taking measure of each other.

*Translation by Jüri Kokkonen*

Kimmo Sarje, *Abstraction on Nykänen I & II*, 2016, montage, cardboard  
*Abstraction on Nykänen I*, installation detail



## THE BEAUTIFUL CODE

Jan Kenneth Weckman

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 trash can of Modernism.

In my work process, there is a nexus of decisions that goes something like this: from a vast model of a colour 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. A binary contrast of light is enough. The QR-code refers to texts, but if the binary contrast is less than what is needed, no reading can be done. The QR-code is useless.

The useless QR code is a '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, however, we accept that communicative and functional messaging is the order of the day, at least since the days of Warhol's *Brillo Box* as, following Arthur Danto, art meets its end and becomes a 'post-historical' affair. This amounts to saying that communicative and functional form can also be viewed as art. In any case, we are able to rationalize from at least two perspectives, perhaps more. Forms shown in a gallery or museum, such as *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 tranquillity of the white cube?

The discussion of what has 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 some subsequent 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 one of its strands in discussions of 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. The term '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 such as the automotive industry in Japan. QR codes enable the quick recognition of data.

QR codes offer a simple set-up 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 online, illustrating symbolic form referring to 'its



content'. Text as a graphic and symbolic form is the most pervasive style of non-figurative 'art'. The differences in principle between OCR (optical character recognition) scanning, barcodes and QR codes 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 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 (UX User Experience website).

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: but 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 (Russia), Mondrian (The Netherlands), Ad Reinhardt (USA), Frank Stella (USA), Jules Olitski (USA), or Carolus Enckell (Finland) and Kimmo Sarje (Finland), 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.

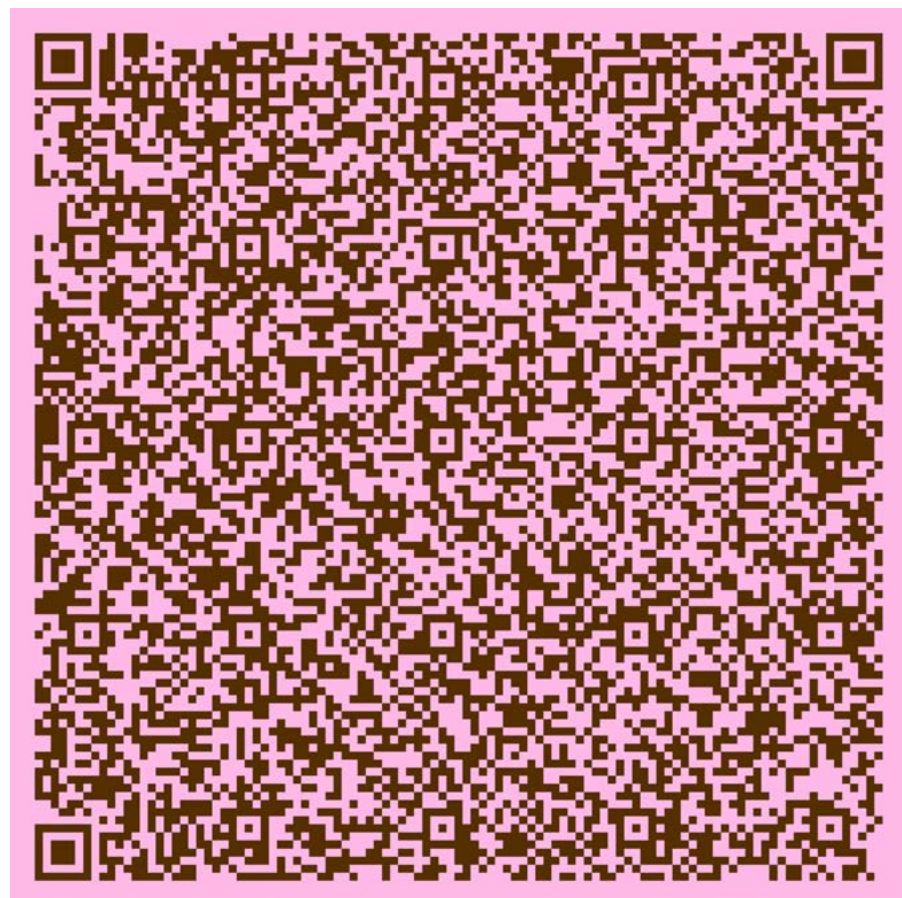
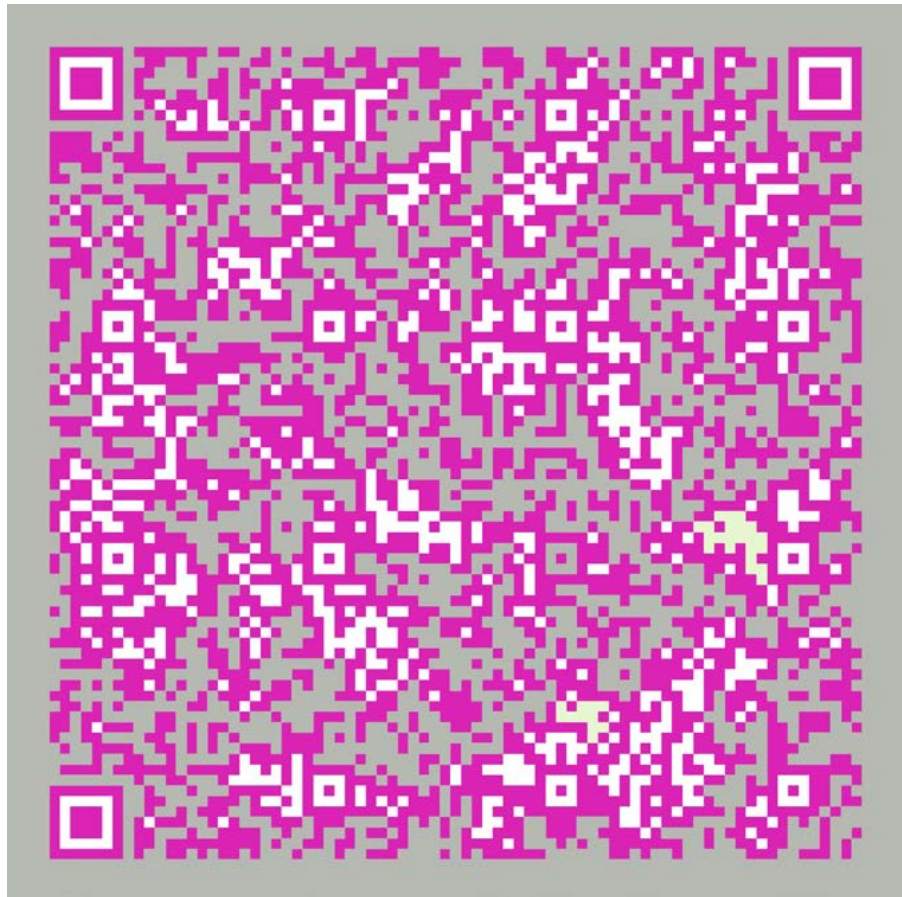
For some other reasons, art philosophers chose to notice the contextual development of art stripped of everything else but its status 'as art' much later. This happened in connection with Andy Warhol and his *Brillo Box* piece, analysed by Arthur Danto (1998). The 'other is gone' (Ostrow 2011). At the same time, it seems, 'history' has gone as well, which pertains to the critical attention to the medium of an autonomous art genre, as in what Clement Greenberg (1960) understands should be a criterion of painting as an art.

The no-nothing and not anything coincide, or not. As the 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 both 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 pragmatic 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 eighth 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 seams of art and design.

1 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 writing also does, but it is designed for the recognition of light contrasts to a certain degree, in a binary mode executed by a digital QR-reader program.



Jan Kenneth Weckman, *Without a Single Traveler, In The Void That Holds*, pigment print 2016

## WALKING NEXT TO A FENCE

Denise Ziegler

### The fence

The type of fence in question is a so-called two-sided fence with cross-members placed horizontally at three levels (bottom, middle and top) and attached on both sides to upright members with nails and bolts. The upright boards are arranged so as to leave wide gaps between them.

### The case

When viewing the fence from a moving vantage point, that is to say, walking next to it with the gaze turned 45 degrees forward or 45 degrees behind, one can see through it to the other side. The view on the other side of the fence has the appearance of an illusion, or the movements of a film. The upright boards and the gaps between them alternately block and reveal the view on the other side. The upright boards and their gaps function like an analogue film projector, in which the rapid alternation of the shutter animates quickly changing images into a film.

When the fence is viewed directly *en face* from a 90-degree angle, the interspersed upright boards completely prevent a view of the other side. This can be interpreted so that the fence gives someone walking next to it two opportunities to observe what is happening on the other side: to anticipate (to observe what lies ahead) or to recall (to observe what one has left behind). The person thus walking next to the fence will not have the present moment. (Just as there will not be any actual moving image either. What we call the moving image is an illusion of perception, a trick playing on the limitations of our visual apparatus.)

### Assumption

If the gazes reaching through the gaps in the fence were solid matter, for example the boughs of trees or objects like oars, the perceptions of a person walking next to the fence could be manifested by means of sculpture. By this I mean that the experiential perception would be given a form and material. This is the idea behind *Walking Next to a Fence*.

Mounted on the wall of the exhibition space is an imaginary situation constructed out of rough-cut boards, showing a bird's eye view of a two-sided fence and stylized oars. The piece has experimental and ornamental features. For me, beauty, in turn, resides in the imaginary state.

Denise Ziegler, *Walking Next to a Fence*, wood, text, 2016  
*Walking Next to a Fence*, detail





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## Postscript

The *Art Approaching Science and Religion* conference in May 2016 picked a range of items (cases, intentions, methods) in the field of science, academically considered as part of research in cultural history, religion, architecture, philosophy. Because artists and designers writing were also invited for the round table part of the conference, another context for artist writings emerged: artist or artistic research, here labelled as art/(ist) research.

## Art/(ist) research

Annotated here as *art/(ist) research*, the term fully complies with a contemporary development in art practice which the Swedish committee for artist research (within the Swedish Research Council) defines in the following manner: 'The point of departure for artistic research is found in the artistic process and works. Research, regardless of art form, is practice-based and includes intellectual reflection aimed at developing new knowledge. The results of artistic research are usually presented both as creations and in written form.'

While AmosLAB made an effort to invite artists within artist research for the round table part of the conference, there was not much success. The statements by artists prior to the opening of *Ornament & Beauty*, however, which as such does not consider artist research, create a backdrop to such a development, judging by the evidence in a number of European art academies and universities. What makes the context ambiguous, however, is the gliding boundary between art practice and artist research. No clear boundary is to be found between these, judging by the use of the term. The Swedish Research Council presents only one version.

The Society for Artistic Research (SAR), based in Bern, Switzerland, proclaims that it

nurtures, connects and disseminates artistic research as specific practices of creating knowledge and insight. SAR facilitates a range of encounters for its community of artistic practitioners in the pursuit of transformative understanding that impacts on political and societal processes as well as on cultures of research and learning. (SAR website)

PARSE, the platform for artistic research at the University of Gothenburg raises thematic issues to be explored in artistic research jointly with art practices and is currently launching a co-operation with Göteborg International Biennial for Contemporary Art (GIBCA) 2017 as follows:

Aiming to be fundamentally generative, GIBCA 2017 will be a multi-faceted project, incorporating art exhibitions and numerous artist-led initiatives developed in collaboration with different groups and organizations in Gothenburg, as well as significant events and debates that function necessarily at the level of the civic, the academic, the cultural and the political. The collaboration between GIBCA 2017 and *PARSE Journal* is based on an understanding that artistic research and production have an important role to play in contemporary debates on the relations between governance, religion and freedoms, which will form the foundations of the biennial. It will look to open a genuinely pluralistic debate, independent of the mediated landscape, allowing artistic intelligence to encounter other, perhaps conflicting, perspectives. We invite proposals for contributions to this special issue of *PARSE Journal* on secularity. ('Secularity – in collaboration with GIBCA, *PARSE Journal* website)

An obvious and interesting difference between SAR, PARSE on the one hand and the Swedish Research Council statements above is shown by the clear thematic interest and intentional programme the first two statements open up for reflection. The Swedish Research Council (SRC), on the other hand, does not imply any thematic or other political aim suitable for artists engaging in artist research. Using the version: *artistic research* (PARSE, SRC) instead of artist research (SAR), seems to be a slight nod to what some might say about academic research in such a case; that is, that it seems 'a bit artistic'. The best defence is to attack – or ironically anticipate an attack from established institutions of research.

An explanation for the developing area of artist research refers to the arising of two needs. Academic discourse, following the linguistic turn and rise of hermeneutics and pragmatism needs access to new ways of enabling research in ambiguous themes between clear cut segments of differentiating

scientific object areas from each other: a need for holism. The other motivation arises from the furthering of 'extended fields' in contemporary art together with the demands of instrumentalizing human sciences and the arts for political and economic gain, if only to keep art schools and art departments 'useful' to society. Admittedly, it also seems that with artist research a deeper level of critical stance might be reached (here understood as a thematic issue in art practice) moving into thematic interests for artistic research that combines with the artwork. An obvious goal is to broaden the underpinnings of art practice while at the same time articulating one's mission, as an artist, and now also as a researcher using one's art practice to produce new knowledge.

One may easily detect here an underlying 'media is the message' melody, making us recognize that what become possible to do, will be done. So far, most practitioners of artistic research are active in a purely artist-educational environment, within the evolving department of art in a university, proliferating a new venue to work in as an artist researcher and curator. If an artist can make an interesting statement for an academic public, then they are welcome on board. That's what we artists would like to hear. ■



Represented in numerous museums and collections of painting and drawing, **Jan Kenneth Weckman** works as a visual artist, having graduated with a doctoral degree in Fine Art at the Fine Art Academy (University of Arts, Helsinki) in 2005. His research interests focus on the semiotics of art and artistic practice as well as public and environmental

art pertaining to communication and rhetorical theory. Weckman held a professorship in visual composition at the University of Art and Design, Helsinki, and has exhibited extensively in Finland and internationally. His writing practice unfolds occasionally, amid mainly artistic work, with a short publishing history for Turku University (public art), thesis reviews (Fine Art Academy and Aalto University) as well as postgraduate level reviews (Aalto, University of Lapland).

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