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Peirce's Esthetics: A Taste for Signs in Art

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What is man's proper function if it be not to embody general ideas in art-creations, in utilities, and above all in theoretical cognitions?

—C. S. Peirce<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract**

Is Peirce's esthetic relevant for the philosophy of art—what is usually referred to today as *aesthetics*? At first glance Peirce's idiosyncratic esthetic seems quite unconcerned with issues of art. Yet a careful examination reveals that this is not the case. Thus, rather than attempt to “apply” Peirce's views to some aspect of the practice or the theory of art (e.g., creativity, historiography of art, style, genre), or even to a particular work of art, my intention is to examine how art fits into Peirce's own conception of his esthetic theory. The argument is divided into two parts. In the first section I present Peirce's conception of esthetics in the context of the normative sciences. I argue that esthetics connects with various strands of Peirce's philosophy, most notably his cosmology, his agapasm and with the way that important aspects of them hang together around the principle of abduction and the corresponding notion *insight*. In the second section, I consider in what way art may be said to be *admirable*, to contribute to the *summum bonum*. I try to show that Peirce's esthetic suggests that what attracts us towards art is first and foremost a *semeiotic* quality *qua* quality of mind or quality of Thirdness.

*Key words: Normative Sciences, Esthetics, Art, Semiotics, Summum Bonum*

*Peirce's  
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Can Peirce's conception of the esthetic contribute anything to the theory or the philosophy of art—what is usually referred to today as *aesthetics*?<sup>3</sup> The question opens up a perspective from which I have sought to examine some of Peirce's later writings where he explains his conceptions of both the normative sciences and his pragmatism. At the outset we shall see how much Peirce's commitment to esthetics as the science of the "admirable in itself" departs from the more common view of esthetics as the philosophy of art. Yet, Peirce's many hesitations whenever he ventured to discuss esthetics may be seen to illustrate some of the difficulties he wrestled with in trying to distinguish his conception of this science from the idea that it should primarily be concerned with art and the beautiful. What is more, there is no evidence to be had that Peirce ever arrived at a definitive statement on the matter nor even that he had settled it to his own satisfaction. But the absence of any such truly comprehensive or final account that would clarify once and for all the place occupied by art or by the esthetic experience of art within Peirce's conception of esthetics in no way implies that there is nothing to be gained by giving the issue careful consideration. The following is an attempt to do just that.

In the first section, I go over the main points of Peirce's esthetics and consider its role as a "normative science" within his mature classification of the sciences. In the second section, I offer some hypotheses as to what conception of art and of aesthetic experience one may legitimately draw from Peirce's approach to esthetics.

### *Esthetics and normative science*

To avoid any misunderstandings, it is important from the start to point out that what Peirce meant by "esthetics" differs greatly from that which the modern tradition has identified as the part of philosophy which concerns itself, as Hegel put it in the introduction of his *Aesthetics*, with "the realm of the beautiful; and more precisely [. . .] art, or rather, *fine art*."<sup>4</sup> Indeed, while art eventually became the paradigmatic domain of esthetics, especially in the post-Kantian period, the Peircean conception of this science seems at first glance to be somewhat indifferent to it. In fact, Peirce even appears at times contemptuous of esthetics so understood, as can be seen in a manuscript of 1911 where he writes that "instead of a silly science of Esthetics, that tries to bring us enjoyment of sensuous beauty,—by which I mean all beauty that appeals to our five senses,—that which ought to be fostered is meditation, ponderings, day-dreams (under due control), concerning ideals" (*EP* 2: 460). Earlier, in his "Minute Logic" of 1902 he had stated that esthetics has been "handicapped by the definition of it as the theory of beauty" (*CP* 2.199) and that logicians ought to avoid the German way of calling upon sensibility and feelings to judge the value of reasoning, of looking "upon the natural judgment of rationality as a mere judgment of feeling" (*CP* 2.165).

Only late in his life did Peirce ever come to offer esthetics an important role within his philosophical system as a normative science, alongside ethics and logic.<sup>5</sup> No one, of course, could deny that, taken as a whole, his many contributions to philosophy are first and foremost that of a logician, and not of a specialist of ethics or esthetics—especially if the latter is understood to be the philosophical science of the fine arts. At several occasions Peirce mentions that he considers himself ill informed, even incompetent, with regards to esthetic matters. “Like most logicians,” he wrote in 1903, “I have pondered that subject far too little” (*CP* 2.197). But to this he adds immediately thereafter: “Esthetics and logic seem, at first blush, to belong to different universes. It is only very recently that I have become persuaded that that seeming is illusory, and that, on the contrary, logic needs the help of esthetics. The matter is not yet very clear to me.”

Peirce's initial hesitancy regarding esthetics may be accounted for in several ways. On one hand, he was reluctant to consider it to be a true normative science on the basis that “*de gustibus et coloribus, non est disputandum.*” In other words, the commonly held view of esthetics as the philosophy of taste and of the beautiful in the fine arts seemed to impede its conception as a true normative science. On the other hand, there was the problem of psychologism. We know that Peirce always refused to found his logic or epistemology upon psychological ground. This was precisely what he found objectionable in German philosophy. One of the possible pitfalls of esthetics considered as a normative science alongside logic, therefore, was that its concern for “feeling” might lead to psychologism in any effort to unite the normative sciences. Finally, an evil just as serious was the threat of relating logic and its search for truth to the quest of sensual pleasures. For whatever its form, hedonism was for Peirce an irrational doctrine and therefore one incompatible with logic. Esthetics could only be integrated into Peirce's conception of the normative sciences once he could make sure these pitfalls were avoided, illustrating in the process how it could belong to the same “universe” as logic (and ethics).

This “universe,” for sure, is one governed by the architectonic scheme offered by the Categories, as is, for that matter, all that which pertains to Peirce's mature attempts at the classification of the sciences. There is no room here to go into a detailed account of such a rich taxonomic endeavor.<sup>6</sup> Suffice to say that Peirce saw the normative sciences as belonging to the sciences of discovery, and more specifically to philosophy—the latter finding its place between mathematics and the special sciences (in short: the physical and the psychological sciences). Philosophy itself being divided into three scientific sub-classes: phaneroscopy, the normative sciences (where one finds esthetics, ethics, and logic), and metaphysics. The three-part division of philosophy as well as that of the normative sciences is made on the basis of how a

given science foregrounds aspects of the three Categories of Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness. Simply put, this implies that the normative sciences, being set between phaneroscopy-First and metaphysics-Third, must display characteristics of Secondness. Next, the internal subdivision of the normative sciences implies that, relative to one another, they all display different categorial characteristics: monadicity of esthetics, dyadicity of ethics, triadicity of logic. Finally, according to Peirce's categorial taxonomic scheme, sciences which are "Firsts" offer operating principles to those that are "Second" and "Third", and those that are "Second" do the same for those that are "Third"—this is how one must understand Peirce's statement that "logic needs the help of esthetics."<sup>7</sup>

In short, according to this breakdown, esthetics must manifest a dyadic character, just as ethics and logic do—this is related to their status as "normative sciences" (see below) —, but it must also manifest a monadic character such that it may further determine itself in ethics and logic, which evidence dominant dyadic and triadic characters respectively. The sum of these categorial characteristics (dyadicity of the normative sciences relative to the monadicity of phaneroscopy and to the triadicity of metaphysics; monadicity of esthetics relative to the dyadicity of ethics and to the triadicity of logic) is what formally defines Peirce's conception of esthetics, ethics, and logic.

Peirce insists on the fact that the normative sciences are not concerned by *what is* or by *what must be*, rather they seek to examine the conditions of possibility for *what ought to be* with regards to feeling, conduct, and thought. More specifically, explains Peirce, they investigate "the universal and necessary laws of the relation of Phenomena to Ends" (EP 2: 197, 1903). This is why he also states that the normative sciences are the "most purely theoretical of purely theoretical sciences" (CP 1.281, 1902–03). Thus, contrary to certain *practical* sciences that claim to discriminate and evaluate concrete and manifest feelings, actions, and thoughts, the normative sciences offer a theoretical investigation of the conditions that make possible these sorts of discrimination and evaluation in the first place. Now, the only way to consider what *ought to be* with regards to feeling, conduct, and thought and therefore to envisage possible discrimination and evaluation in these matters—for instance: to distinguish between an ethically good and a bad action—is to conceive of *ends* or *ideals* which ought to be conformed with as much as possible so that they may accomplish or fulfill themselves. This also serves to explain the dominant dyadic nature of the normative sciences. Indeed, what *ought to be*—that is to say, *the conformity of phenomena to ends conceived conditionally*—should not be understood as the result of either chance or necessity, but rather as the outcome of a rational process of deliberation subjected to critical self-control conducive to the formation and to the growth of habits. Thus, even though ends are Thirds for Peirce, the appeal to deliberation and

self-control—which always imply effort or resistance—as the condition making possible the free conformity of phenomena to ends evidences the duality that confers to the normative sciences their dominant dyadic character.<sup>8</sup>

If esthetics shares with ethics and logic this dyadic character as a determining trait of normativity, it also possesses a monadic quality which, as mentioned above, characterizes it relative to the dyadicity of ethics and to the triadicity of logic. This further breakdown reflects the nature of the aboutness of each of the three sciences: qualities of feeling in the case of esthetics, conduct in the case of ethics, and thought or the use of signs in the case of logic. As we shall now see, this division also illustrates the overarching architectonic categorial scheme of the classification of the sciences, according to which logic and ethics require the help of esthetics.

For Peirce, the indebtedness of ethics and logic to esthetics lies at the very heart of the normativity and the rationality of both sciences. For to be truly normative and rational ethics and logic require ideals or ends, that is, something admirable that conduct and thought seek to carry out or accomplish in a concrete manner through the formation and the development of rational habits. These ends are simply that against which conduct and thought may be measured and evaluated. However, *the adoption of an ideal* and the attempt to see it through by way of our actions and our thinking first presupposes *the possibility of forming ideals* such that they can associate with something admirable in itself, independently of anything else, a *supreme ideal*. Such an ideal is precisely the object of esthetics and this is why both ethics and logic can be said to require the help of the first of the three normative sciences. No longer the science of the beautiful in the fine arts, esthetics becomes for Peirce the science of the admirable in itself, the science of ends, of which the good in ethics and truth in logic constitute further, specialized, determinations. More specifically, esthetics is the science that studies the formation of ideals and of the supreme ideal, the *summum bonum*. But esthetics not only offers ethics and logic the ground for their own normativity and rationality, indeed it is itself a rational and normative science. The idea is well encapsulated when Peirce states that “if conduct is to be thoroughly deliberate, the ideal must be a habit of feeling which has grown up under the influence of a course of self-criticism and of heterocriticisms; and the theory of the deliberate formation of such habits of feeling is what ought to be meant by *esthetics*” (*EP* 2: 378, 1906). Let us examine the idea more closely.

The ideal which Peirce has in mind is such that it must be *admirable in itself*, that is, its admirableness must be independent from any reason, indeed independent from anything else. This implies that it must chiefly be conceived from the point of view of Firstness, as a *quality of feeling*, to which Peirce adds that it is a *habit of feeling*.<sup>9</sup> From the start,

this excludes making pleasure the end or supreme ideal since, like pain, it is not a quality of feeling strictly speaking—nor is it a habit of feeling —, but rather, according to Peirce, a “secondary” feeling or a form of generalization that groups together different qualities of feeling which must nonetheless remain separate and distinct in themselves (indeed, though both may be said to be painful, the *sui generis* feeling of a tooth ache remains distinct from that of an arm being broken).<sup>10</sup> If pleasure does indeed accompany the accomplishment of the ideal, it is as a symptom, not as a cause. But what exactly is a *habit of feeling*?

We know that Peirce understands habit in relation to phenomena exhibiting the tendency to spread out into a continuum, that is to say, to regularize and to reproduce themselves indefinitely in the future. This tendency manifests itself in the fact that once a phenomenon appears, the possibility of another one just like it appearing in the future becomes more likely. Qualities of feeling are monads and thus unrelated to anything else, and yet, by their very appearance they acquire the power of making their reproduction, their growth, and their regularization more likely than before. Once regularized in this fashion, qualities of feeling become what Peirce calls *ideas*. Indeed, writes Peirce, when feelings “become welded together in association, the result is a general idea” (CP 6.137, 1892). This is the very principle of habit-taking that Peirce describes as the ‘law of mind’: “Feeling tends to spread; connections between feelings awaken feelings; neighboring feelings become assimilated; ideas are apt to reproduce themselves. These are so many formulations of the one law of the growth of mind” (CP 6.21, 1891). Consequently, the *summum bonum* may be defined as the quality of feeling of the admirable in itself which spreads, grows, and reproduces itself by habit, for as Peirce says it is a *habit of feeling*. Now, in as much as this habit is teleological—and therefore controlled —, the growth of this quality of feeling corresponds to the very principle of rationality. This leads Peirce to conclude that the only thing that is admirable in itself, independently of any reason, is reason itself. But reason here must not be understood as nor reduced to a faculty. Rather, we must see it as the quality of feeling that regularizes itself in the *idea of reason*, as its very essence whose character is to be in a state of constant incipency. This state may be described as *the never-fully-embodied habit the universe has developed of acquiring habits in an ever more controlled fashion, of constantly growing in concrete reasonableness*. It is this quality that is admirable and that enables us to conceive of the *summum bonum* as lying in the “rationalization of the universe” (CP 1.590, 1903), or as corresponding to the “development of concrete reasonableness” in the universe (CP 5.3, 1902).

Only by maintaining that the formation of this ideal worthy of adoration is subject to a process of self- and heretocriticisms can Peirce argue that esthetics manifests the characteristic dyadicity of the norma-



tive sciences mentioned above. However, since criticism seeks to control the conditions according to which a phenomenon—the *summum bonum*, in this case—can embody and fulfill an ideal *whose attractiveness or admirableness acts upon it as does a final cause*, we are left to wonder how to avoid an infinite regress of ideals in accounting for the normativity of esthetics. The only possible answer I can think of that is congruent with Peirce's views—though it is left implicit by him—*is to consider in itself the supreme ideal as that which corresponds to the very formation and growth of ideals*. This implies that the *summum bonum* is itself its own norm, since the growth of concrete reasonableness in the universe would be impossible and unthinkable were it not for the formation and growth of ideals.

With the *summum bonum* reason contemplates itself and, like some great Narcissus, brings to bear upon itself the power of its own attractiveness in an attempt to achieve its accomplishment. In other words, the ideal that makes possible criticism, that which makes possible approval or disapproval in the formation of the *summum bonum*, corresponds to the principle or process that governs its very formation. According to this process, ideas form themselves and grow through an ever more controlled course of associations between qualities of feeling. As mentioned earlier, this is what Peirce calls the 'law of mind' or 'law of habit-taking,' whose rationality lies at the heart of esthetic normativity. Now, not all actions prescribed by this law may appear rational to us, that is, from our limited human perspective, as some—like perception, for instance—are beyond our control. (Of course, logic for Peirce impels that we consider phenomena in ways unrestrained by the psychological limitations of our *human* mind.) The important point, however, is to understand that the law of mind constitutes an essential condition for the emergence of rationality, being entirely compatible with it for at least two reasons. On the one hand, the formation and the reinforcement of habits of feeling, the rejection of past ideals and the formation of new ones, the growth of habits of feeling and their influence over other habits of feeling, all require procedures of control analogous to those found in ethics and logic. According to Peirce, these procedures possess the formal characteristics of either abduction, induction, or deduction (*CP* 6.144–6.147, 1892). On the other hand, habit-taking and habit-growth set up the conditions for *both* a) the formation of ideals—ideals are hierarchized habits: they are formed by way of habits being formed, by their growth, and by other habits being discarded in time—and b) the growth of self-control according to which the entire habit-taking process that characterizes the law of mind continually grows in rationality.

Obviously one cannot envisage the formation of a first ideal, of some initial manifestation of the *summum bonum*—anymore than one could envisage the emergence of the first sign—since every rational



action and every rational thought require an ideal that it attempts to carry out concretely by conforming to it. At best we may envisage the formation, by way of chance initially, of an extremely vague ideal ceaselessly determining itself while also growing in complexity and variety through the conjugated and opposite effects of chance and habit. The notion that ideals can grow thus implies a constant process of revision, re-evaluation, and criticism. Not surprisingly, this picture of growth is analogous to how Peirce, in his cosmological writings, conceived of the teleological evolution of the universe. As early as "A Guess at the Riddle," Peirce claimed that one finds three elements that are active in the world: "first, chance; second, law; and third, habit-taking" (*W6*, p. 208, 1887–8). If habit-taking is third, it is because it enables mediation between a universe entirely governed by chance in some infinitely remote past and, at the other end of the spectrum, in some infinitely remote future, a universe entirely governed by law. This future universe would be one completely under the sway of reason, yet it would be one from which reason itself—understood as that which "always must be in a state of incipency, of growth" (*EP* 2: 255, 1903)—would necessarily be absent. Therefore, it is in the interval between these two infinitely remote points that the law of mind comes to manifest itself. With it, reason appears as an incessantly emerging and perpetually growing property predicating everything in the universe, until it is replaced in some infinitely distant future by law, that is, by a habit having practically lost all of its plasticity, a habit that chance can no longer influence—such a future, need we add, would be analogous to death (*CP* 8.317, 1891). Finally, since the tendency to develop habits occupies a space in between two asymptotic points, it is impossible, explains Peirce, to conceive of any actual moment in the past or future where this tendency would be absent, just as it is impossible to conceive of any actual moment in the future from which chance would be absent.

Not only does the *summum bonum* correspond to Peirce's scheme for growth in the universe, it also yields to this scheme in subjecting the formation of all our ideals to it. The *summum bonum* therefore appears as an indefinitely *growing process of growth*, as does its mode of growth. This implies both a growth *of* rationality, but also a growth *within* rationality, or, to put it differently, growth in the very exercise of self-control. For as Peirce writes, in its most advanced stages, evolution or the development of reason "takes place more and more largely through self-control" (*CP* 5.433, 1905). Concretely, this translates into ever more opportunities to criticize our habits and even our ideals. In fact, the possibility for such criticism is a necessary outcome of the growth of reasonableness. By submitting our habits and our ideals to self-control and criticism, either for approval or disapproval, final causation can begin to know itself and make itself known, which in turn may lead to ends being further developed, refined, and even modified if need be.

To belong to the continuum of the *summum bonum*—much like the conclusion of an induction can be said to belong to a continuous series of experimentations—an idea must possess *admirableness*, it must be *fine* or “*kalos*” (an ancient Greek word usually translated as “beautiful”, though the latter, claims Peirce, is inadequate to express its meaning). In an unpublished definition likely written as an addition to one of the *Century Dictionary*'s entries (c. 1888–1889), Peirce states that admiration,

. . . is simply a high degree of emotional approval of, or delight in any object as being such or acting as it does regardless of any ulterior considerations of utility, interest, morality, or truth. Thus, I may admire the simplicity of a woman's dress, or the accuracy of a man's language, without any particular wonder at it. . . . My admiration consists in the delight I take in looking at the one or attending to the other. I may wonder at God's creation of the world. But if he was to create it at all there can be no wonder that he made it one way rather than another. Neither can there have been any utility or advantage of any kind of which we can have cognizance in its being constructed one way rather than another. But that he created a world capable of developing ends is something which, though taken as a whole it subserves no purpose whatsoever, excites an emotion in me which corresponds, as I think to some real general attribute of goodness [“goodness” was struck from the manuscript] or excellence; and that emotion together with my deliberate acceptance of it as a judgment, constitutes admiration. (R 1597a)

The passage is interesting in showing that a great number of things may be admired at any given moment, such as clothes, rhetoric, or more to the point, the development of ends in the universe. Indeed, human beings find different things admirable and have different ideals. Yet, the issue for esthetics, as we have seen, is not to consider what *is* or *may be* admirable but rather what *ought to be* admirable. Now, it follows from what was said earlier that in order “that it ought to be so”, an admirable idea must be able to grow indefinitely, it must be capable of further determination and of determining itself in other ideas, notably through conduct and reasoning. In short, it must be *reasonable*. Moreover, it must also be able to *attract* us, to attract our habits, and, in order to be considered admirable in itself, it must be capable of attracting us before we can inductively measure the consequences of adopting it on our conduct or our reasoning.

This attraction lies in part in the compatibility of the idea with habits and ideals that have already been formed. However, this alone is insufficient. In fact, attraction for the *summum bonum* must first rely on what Peirce, in his cosmology, refers to as Love or the *agapastic* development of thought. “The agapastic development of thought,” he writes, “is the adoption of certain mental tendencies, not altogether

heedlessly as in tychasm [a mode of evolution resting on chance, as exemplified by Darwinianism], nor quite blindly by the mere force of circumstance or of logic, as in anancasm [a mode of evolution resting on necessity, as exemplified by Hegelianism], but by an immediate attraction for the idea itself, whose nature is divined before the mind possesses it, by the power of sympathy, that is by virtue of the continuity of mind" (*CP* 6.307, 1893).

There is an obvious resemblance here between agapastic development and Peirce's conception of the norm of validity of abduction. Indeed, according to him, the only way that one can explain the success of abductive reasoning, and by the same token, the progress of scientific inquiry, is to consider that hypotheses must first *appear* adequate to us thanks to a sort of natural insight or instinct (Galileo's "*il lume naturale*") according to which human beings, notwithstanding all the failings of their conjecturing, evidence a tendency to guess the truth. And although this is the only sort of epistemic assurance that abduction affords, it nonetheless constitutes a rational form of control, as weak as it may be. This same sort of abductive assurance, namely, the fact that an idea appears immediately attractive, equally secures the rationality in the formation of new ideals. It explains not only the success, but also the general tendency we exhibit of advancing reason despite all our collective failings in this regard.

A unique feature of Peirce's agapasticism resides in how novelty and chance are integrated into its account of the teleological—*though non necessary*—evolution of the universe. A similar picture can be drawn to account for the formation and evolution of the *summum bonum* and of ideals which, because they serve the normativity of ethics and logic and, therefore, equally serve the rationality of metaphysics and of all the special sciences, enable us to contribute to the evolving universe, to give "a hand toward rendering the world more reasonable" (*EP* 2: 255, 1903). According to the doctrine of agapasticism, the initial chance emerging of qualities of feeling, their subsequent growth into growing habits of feeling, establish *teloi* that increase the probability for the growth of continua of qualities of feeling. The recurrence of this process with various qualities of feeling, different habits, entails numerous *teloi* subject to ordering themselves hierarchically, to opposing one another, to grow, to perfect or transform themselves. At the same time, the general tendency to acquire habits undergoes a similar process through the recursive application of its own habit. What clearly distinguishes agapasticism from necessitarianism (or anancasticism) is the way it conceives of final causality not as absolute, immutable, and eternal laws, but rather as habits whose evolution, despite its telos, must make room for chance, spontaneity, and creativity. For habits are *tendencies*, not *laws*, which is why chance may manifest itself in agapastic evolution.<sup>11</sup> As a result, Peirce can assert, without any paradox, that evolution leads to an

increase in complexity and diversity in the universe all the while reducing in it the role played by chance.

From the standpoint of practicality, it is obvious that esthetic normativity, in relying chiefly on attraction or insight—that is to say, on the only form of assurance afforded by abduction—, offers very little security in making esthetic discriminations in the actual process of forming new ideals. Yet, this being said, one must not believe that Peirce conceived of abduction as an unbridled process of invention arrived at through the sole agency of *pure chance*. Rather, he saw it as a process of forming hypotheses *subject to final causation*. This means that abduction's rationality—based on our ability to insightfully guess the truth, to instinctively grasp the continuity of things—is itself increasing, if only infinitesimally, as it takes into consideration other, established, hypotheses.<sup>12</sup> Guessing right, in other words, is also subject to growth. Now, the more an ideal or a habit of feeling grows and consolidates, the more qualities of feeling tend to be attracted to it. A simple example can serve to illustrate the point. Imagine a young filmgoer who develops a taste for so-called “modernist” cinema. A film by Antonioni may lead him to discover the work of Godard or Pasolini, and then that of Glauber Rocha, Chris Marker, or even Robbe-Grillet. At each stage the developing habit of feeling is likely to find greater assurance and grow, so that the young man's taste may eventually affirm itself and even produce hierarchies. In the process, this taste or ideal—that is to say, whatever had initially attracted the young filmgoer to Antonioni and then to the work of the other filmmakers—is further determined and, in a sense, can start becoming aware of itself and of its own identity.

Yet, despite the growth in our abductive ability to guess right, greater assurance in exercising self-control and discriminating between our ideals can only come from considering the consequences of adopting them with regards to conduct or thought—either by way of imagination through deduction or concretely through induction. The upshot being that esthetics, while it is concerned with the rational formation of ideals, is ill-equipped to handle discrimination between them, independently from ethics and logic. This may explain why Peirce claims that the characteristic dualism of the normative sciences, patent in both ethics and logic, “is softened almost to obliteration in esthetics” (*EP* 2, 379, 1906). “Nonetheless”, he adds, “it would be the height of stupidity to say that esthetics knows no good and bad”. Thus in his writings Peirce offers, here and there, examples of ideas he considered to be admirable. These include truth and justice (*CP* 1.348, 1903; 5.431, 1905; 8.272, 1902), the three theological virtues or habits of charity, hope, and faith—to which Peirce gave a logical turn (*W* 3: 276–289, 1878)—, and, of course, love (*CP* 6.287–6.317, 1893). However, it may well be with the famous “Neglected Argument for the Reality of God” that Peirce presents most compellingly the formation of an

esthetic idea, that of God, whose description bears stunning resemblance to that which he gives the *summum bonum*.

For Peirce, all these ideas are admirable because they belong to the continuum of reason, the continuum of the *summum bonum*. They are reasonable feelings or “logical sentiments” (*W* 3: 281–285) whose adoption as ideals—as a result of our habits being indefinitely attracted and harmoniously associated to them—makes us partake in the growth of concrete reasonableness in the world. Now, one might well say of a person who adopts such habits of feeling as ideals that they are cultivating a *taste* for reason and that the admirable in esthetics is all that which is continuous with such a taste, that is to say, all that which is perceived as being compatible with it or as possessing the quality it approves or looks for, and through which it can grow, improve, renew or even transform itself. This taste for reason which we all possess, though some cultivate it more fervently than others, is that which might equally be known as *the taste for Thirdness*.

### *Esthetics and Art*

The above survey of some key aspects of Peirce’s esthetics may help measure the considerable distance that separates his normative conception of this science from that of the majority of modern philosophers who narrow its domain to the fine arts exclusively. More recently, that is, starting at the turn of the last century, most thinkers have endeavored instead to ban normativity from their conceptions of *artistic* production, products, and reception. As a result, few contemporary estheticians, or art theorists, have shown much interest in this aspect of Peirce’s philosophy. Not surprisingly, perhaps, Peirce himself considered, around 1905, jettisoning the term “esthetics” altogether as the designation for the first of the three normative sciences, and replacing it with the neologism “*axiagastics*”—from the Greek “*axiagastos*”, which means “worthy of admiration”. Yet this is not to say that one cannot use Peirce’s esthetics to investigate a number of issues that have been significant in the tradition of Western art theory. Thus, for instance, a few years ago, Douglas Anderson examined artistic creativity in relation to agapastic evolution, which, as we saw earlier, underlies the theory of the formation of ideals and of the *summum bonum*.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the same *developmental teleology* might also be called upon to investigate such issues as the formation of artistic genres, themes, or even that of artistic personality or style. Finally, if Hegel could conceive of the history of art as the progress and realization of *Geist*, there is no doubt that, forgoing Hegelian necessitarianism, and with sufficient patience and ingenuity, one could envisage instead an agapastic perspective on the history of art. Of course, I’m skeptical about the prospect of this kind of project fitting-in with current trends and with the the overall “*goût du jour*” in esthetics and art theory, and I have no

way of knowing in advance what results it might yield. Nevertheless, such a history would undoubtedly appear as a series of ends constantly emerging, forming and developing themselves—possibly through chance alone initially and later through more controlled means—, while others are transformed and eventually abandoned. In short, it would likely show the history of art to be an infinitely complex network or web created out of a multiplicity of histories and *teloi*.

But such considerations are not what concern me here. Indeed, rather than attempt to “apply” Peirce’s views to some aspect of the practice or the theory of art (e.g., creativity, historiography of art, style, genre), or even to a particular work of art, my intention is to examine how art fits into Peirce’s esthetic theory and to consider what, if anything, the latter has to offer esthetics (or *aesthetics*) in the current usage of the term. What, then, is the place of art within Peirce’s esthetic theory?

At first glance, one might be tempted to answer that there is none; that Peirce’s esthetic theory is in no way concerned with art. But such, however, is not entirely the case. In fact, in at least one key essay, Peirce, as we shall see below, ties the presentation of basic aspects of his esthetic theory to a few brief, though important, remarks on art and on the “esthetic enjoyment” that the contemplation of an artwork may produce in us. As brief as they may be, these observations open up a series of questions: What is the meaning of art for Peirce’s esthetic? Is it merely one of many examples that can serve to illustrate the function of esthetics, or is there an implicit theory of art “hidden” somewhere in Peirce’s esthetics? What counts as admirable or *kalos* in art? What is the role of art with respect to the growth of concrete reasonableness in the universe?

As mentioned earlier, we all possess a taste for reason and all of us collectively participate in the realization of the *summum bonum* through our habits, the formation of our ideals, and the rationality of our ethics (our conduct) and logic (our thought). In this sense, artistic practice is no different from other rational human enterprises: artists form ideals, adopt them, and attempt to fulfill them. The implication is that artistic practice is subject to the theoretical principles of the normative sciences, just like any other practical sphere of human activity. This, of course, is a commonplace and Kant, for one, made essentially the same claim when, in the *Critique of Judgment*, he wrote in 43 that “by right we ought only to describe as Art, production through freedom, i.e. through a will that places Reason at the basis of its actions.”<sup>14</sup> On this ground, one could certainly consider studying how artists form and express ideals, how these ideals manifest themselves in their work, or the way that artists have of adopting and incarnating habits and, then, of abandoning them for the development of new habits. And to some extent, art historians often do just that when they study the style of an artist. Now, as long as the end of a work of art could be said to find expression in those artistic habits that have led to its realization and to serve no other



ideal than to enable such habits to grow so as to render possible (or ever more likely) the emergence of other works where the same ideal could find expression, and so on indefinitely, the practice of art could be considered as admirable in itself, at least, *in so far as the artist and the act of artistic creation are concerned*. Yet what about art understood not as an object of willful or rational creation, but rather as an object of experience? For although it could be argued that the practice of art, as just described, belongs to (or better yet: *is continuous with*) the *summum bonum*, nothing in what has been said so far implies that the product of this practice, i.e. art itself, equally belongs to it.

Let us begin with a truism: by not making art or the beautiful the object of his esthetic theory, Peirce avoids folding the esthetic onto the artistic. The same might be said of Kant to the extent that he made nature, not art, the paradigmatic *locus* of the esthetic. Yet, by approaching it in terms of the beautiful and of disinterested pleasure it could be said that the *Critique of Judgment* was nonetheless conducive to the further conflation of the esthetic with the artistic. Peirce, on the other hand, fully understood that the use of the term “beautiful” would have considerably narrowed the province of his esthetic theory. Indeed, as he saw it, esthetics was the theoretical science whose object was the growth of qualities of feeling into ideals. Art being made up of qualities of feeling—much like perception in this regard— it is the formation of ideals within its sphere, the presence of habits of feeling attracting other habits of feeling into their orbit, that will fall under the umbrella of esthetics.

Looking at what Peirce wrote on the subject of esthetics, there appears to be only one paper where one can find more than mere passing remarks concerning art. The piece in question is “The Seven Systems of Metaphysics”, the 4<sup>th</sup> in the Harvard lecture series on pragmatism of 1903. In a section entitled “The Reality of Firstness” we find an unusual amount of observations pertaining to the activity of artists, “esthetic enjoyment” and, as we shall soon see, a remarkable comparison between the universe and a work of art. The same section, moreover, is also concerned with *perception* as the royal road of access to qualities of feeling. Here, Peirce explains that qualities of feeling are *real* and that they are not a product of some individual’s mind, as is often believed by those who investigate such questions from the vantage point of psychology rather than logic. The very same point is also made later, albeit more succinctly, in the “Neglected Argument for the Reality of God”, where Peirce writes that Ideas (defined as “anything whose Being consists in its mere capacity for getting fully represented, regardless of any person’s faculty or impotence to represent [them]”, *EP* 2: 434, 1908) owe their Reality to “the mere capability of getting thought, not in anybody’s Actually thinking them” (*EP* 2: 435). According to Peirce, all that is present to some mind must be so through a quality of

feeling, whether it is a perception, a dream, a mathematical formula or an argument. Peirce conceived of the terms “quality” and “feeling” as practically interchangeable since feeling is the *undifferentiated* mode of Being of quality in consciousness. Indeed, there is simply no way we could distinguish between the *quality* of “red” and the *feeling* of “red.” Once they have actualized themselves in perceptual judgments, qualities of feeling become the first premisses of reasoning. We might say that they constitute the essential predicates—the *icons*—for all that which appears to the mind in its *suchness*. Qualities of feeling are thus of great import for everyone, yet they acquire special significance for those whose life is dedicated to them in one way or another, and especially artists and scientists who are both expressly concerned with the *suchness* of appearances. Artists, of course, often seek to make us aware of qualities of feeling by presenting them to us through the mediation of their art. As for scientists, their goal is to discover the distribution and regularization of qualities of feeling in nature, what we often refer to as the *laws* of nature.

We saw earlier how, for Peirce, esthetics is concerned with the formation of ideals and of the *summum bonum* out of qualities of feeling that grow and regularize themselves so as to form ideas and ideals. We also saw how, through his cosmology, he conceived of the universe as a growing mind, one subject to the same law of mind and agapastic evolution that equally determines the growth of the human mind. These ideas are brought together in the Harvard lecture when Peirce considers that what appears to us, through perception, as perceptual facts, are qualities of feeling of nature and therefore, we might add, possible ideas or even perhaps ideals of nature:

... if you ask me what part Qualities can play in the economy of the Universe, I shall reply that the Universe is a vast representamen, a great symbol of God's purpose, working out its conclusions in living realities. Now every symbol must have, organically attached to it, its Indices of Reactions and its Icons of Qualities; and such part as these reactions and these qualities play in an argument, that they of course play in the Universe, that Universe being precisely an argument. In the little that you or I can make out of this huge demonstration, our perceptual judgments are the premisses *for us* and these perceptual judgments have icons as their predicates, in which *icons* Qualities are immediately presented. But what is first for us is not first in nature. The premisses of Nature's own process are all the independent uncaused elements of fact that go to make up the variety of nature . . . . Those premisses of nature, however, though they are not the *perceptual facts* that are premisses to us, nevertheless must resemble them in being premisses. We can only imagine what they are by comparing them with the premisses for us. As premisses they must involve Qualities. (EP 2: 193–4, 1903)

In as much as nature grows agapastically, and in as much as it is subject to the law of mind, its qualities of feeling are most likely evolving into ever growing *ideas* and *ideals*. Indeed, Peirce was absolutely convinced that the laws of nature—or, better yet, the *habits of nature*—are subject to growth and agapastic evolution. This, however, clearly implies the existence of an *esthetic dimension* (as well as an ethical and a logical one) to the effective growth of the universe, a process whose “total effect is beyond our ken”, writes Peirce, “but [of which] we can *appreciate* in some measure the resultant Quality of parts of the whole” (ibid., emphasis mine). The *esthete* who can *appreciate* this quality, perhaps even more so than the artist, is undoubtedly the scientist whose quest to discover the *habits of nature* may now be recast as a quest for the *esthetic norms* or *ideals* of the universe. The artist, on the other hand, might seem confined (like the rest of us) to merely contemplate such ideals on the basis of what he perceives as qualities of feeling (the perceptual facts that form premisses *for us*).

Yet the artist, of course, does more than merely contemplate what he perceives as qualities of feeling. He must also *present* them to us and “most of his effort”, writes Peirce, goes to *reproducing* what he perceives. Surprisingly enough, however, we are told that the requirements of art narrow the artist’s capacity for esthetic appreciation, whereas Peirce himself claims to have undergone, throughout his lifetime, a systematic training program in recognizing his feelings which has likely given him “a fair share of capacity for esthetic enjoyment” (ibid):

The artist has such a training; but most of his effort goes to reproducing in one form or another what he sees or hears, which is in every art a very complicated trade; while I have striven simply to see what it is that I see. That this limitation of the task is a great advantage is proved to me by finding that the great majority of artists are extremely narrow. Their esthetic appreciations are narrow; and this comes from their only having the power of recognizing the qualities of their percepts in certain directions. (Ibid)

But regardless of Peirce’s views on the “limited” esthetic appreciation of artists, an analogy begins to unfurl whose terms are the universe and the work of art. Like God, who produces a universe whose ideas and ideals appear to us as qualities of feeling from which, with the help of the law of mind, we may draw ideas and ideals of our own, the artist—despite his failings—produces a work where habits of feeling, and perhaps ideals, first appear to us as qualities of feeling by way of our perception of a work of art. If the universe offers itself as the growth and the making concrete of an idea turned into an ideal, Peirce seems to imply that this account holds equally for a work of art (I shall return below to consider the implications of the analogy). If works of art, then, fall under the umbrella of esthetics as I mentioned earlier, one could say that it is

because all of us are, in some respect, “artists” the moment our feelings form habits and our habits ideals whose purpose is to attract other feelings and ideals, and so on. In short, we might say that we each possess an esthetic “style” of our own. And it is this entire process, as we have seen, that Peirce considers worthy of admiration; which is why, to his mind, any narrowing down of esthetics to art or to a theory of sensual beauty would constitute an unacceptable limitation of the breadth of esthetics. This explains why Peirce, unlike most of his predecessors—save perhaps Plato in the *Symposium* or the *Phaedrus*—chose to develop an esthetic theory, a theory of the admirable in itself, regardless of any major consideration for art.

Once we accept the irreducibility of the esthetic to the artistic, we can move on to consider the possible *integration* of the artistic within the esthetic. The goal is not to produce an *ars poetica*, but rather to theoretically consider the admirableness of art and its contribution to the *summum bonum*.

Now, the first observation we can draw from what has so far been said is that the admirable in art, or “esthetic excellence,” shouldn’t be looked for initially in *the material or plastic qualities of a work* (something Greek Antiquity was aware of, though in its own way, as can be seen in the *Greater Hippias*). The reason being that the qualities of a work constitute what is presented to our perception: they are Firsts and are present to our consciousness as icons in perceptual judgments. Every quality of feeling may be considered to be an idea *in potentia*, but as such, none should be considered *less* admirable than any other. The quality of feeling of “red” is thus no less admirable than that of “green,” that of the *Mona Lisa* no less so than that of *Guernica*, or that of Duchamp’s *Fountain*. The implication is that every quality of feeling, without discrimination whatsoever, offers *esthetic potential* (or *power*, in a mathematical sense). As Peirce writes in the 5<sup>th</sup> Harvard lecture (« The Three Normative Sciences »):

In the light of the doctrine of categories I should say that an object, to be esthetically good, must have a multitude of parts so related to one another as to impart a positive simple immediate quality to their totality; and whatever does this is, in so far, esthetically good, no matter what the particular quality of the total may be. If that quality be such as to nauseate us, to scare us, or otherwise to disturb us to the point of throwing us out of the mood of esthetic enjoyment, out of the mood of simply contemplating the embodiment of the quality—just, for example, as the Alps affected the people of old times, when the state of civilization was such that an impression of great power was inseparably associated with lively apprehension and terror—then the object remains none the less esthetically good, although people in our condition are incapacitated from a calm esthetic contemplation of it. . . . I am seriously inclined to doubt there being any distinction

of pure esthetic betterness and worseness. My notion would be that there are innumerable varieties of esthetic quality, but no purely esthetic grade of excellence. (*EP* 2: 201–202, 1903)<sup>15</sup>

What may strike us today in these ideas, once we apply them to art, is their resolutely *modern* character. Indeed, the upshot of separating the esthetic from the artistic and from sensual beauty is that all qualities, even “ugliness” or “difformity,” must be regarded as possessing *full* esthetic potential. How much Peirce knew about the burgeoning modern art scene in 1903 is impossible for me to tell. There is no reason to think, however, that he could have foreseen the coming of Duchamp’s *Readymades* (first produced only ten years after the Harvard lectures!), Dada, or Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes*. Yet an astute listener, pondering or *mus- ing* the consequences of Peirce’s words outside the confines of their application to logic and applying them instead to the artworld, might well have been led to guess at the possibility of such new artforms and consider the “crisis” of Western art that was already brewing. But whatever the case may be, the crux of the matter is that we should look elsewhere for the source of our attraction to works of art. But where?

The answer lies in two passages from the 4<sup>th</sup> Harvard lecture to which I alluded to earlier and to which we can now return. The first one is concerned with the sort of experience a work of art may afford its viewer, what Peirce calls “esthetic enjoyment. He writes:

. . . and ignorant as I am of Art, I have a fair share of capacity for esthetic enjoyment; and it seems to me that while in esthetic enjoyment we attend to the totality of Feeling—and especially to the total resultant Quality of Feeling presented in the work of art we are contemplating—yet it is a sort of intellectual sympathy, a sense that here is a Feeling that one can comprehend, a reasonable Feeling. I do not succeed in saying exactly what it is, but it is a consciousness belonging to the category of Representation, though representing something in the Category of Quality of Feeling. (*EP* 2: 190, 1903)

What does this characterization of the esthetic experience of art reveal? Or, more to the point: toward what manifestation of the “admirable in itself” is the art viewer’s *attraction* or *sympathy* directed to on the basis of a guess (an abduction)? Peirce claims that what is involved in the esthetic experience of art is a *reasonable feeling*, one that offers itself to consciousness as belonging to Thirdness (the category of Representation) though it represents a First. Such characterization might seem paradoxical in light of Peirce’s categorial scheme. For how can a quality of feeling belong to Thirdness and represent something that belongs to Firstness? The answer lies in semeiotic: *iconicity* alone can account for the peculiar state of affairs Peirce is describing here. Granted, as I stated earlier, that all which is present to consciousness

must be so by way of a quality of feeling, *including signs, which belong to Thirdness*, it would seem that what Peirce is really describing here is *the contemplation of signhood (i.e. the quality of a sign qua sign) iconically standing for itself*. Indeed, 1) understood that signs are Thirds; 2) understood that Thirdness is the category of mind; and 3) understood that the essence of Thirdness-mind lies in continuous growth according to the law of mind, it follows that the *sui generis* quality that signs actualize—not in body but in soul<sup>16</sup>—can only be that of a *reasonable feeling*. I take it, then, that Peirce is saying that esthetic experience involves consciousness of “representedness.” The latter, moreover, can only but *attract* us, or form a *sympathetic bond* with us, since both it and our mind belong to the same *continuum*.

This hypothesis gains in credibility when, just a few paragraphs later, Peirce compares the universe to a work of art:

The Universe as an argument is necessarily a great work of art, a great poem—for every fine argument is a poem and a symphony—just as every true poem is a sound argument. But let us compare it rather with a painting—with an impressionist seashore piece—then every Quality in a Premiss is one of the elementary colored particles of the Painting; they are all meant to go together to make up the intended Quality that belongs to the whole as whole. That total effect is beyond our ken; but we can appreciate in some measure the resultant Quality of parts of the whole—which Qualities result from the combinations of elementary Qualities that belong to the premisses. (*EP* 2: 194, 1903)

The statement is not without reminding us of Schelling who, in his *Philosophy of Art*, claimed that “the universe is God in the form of the absolute work of art and in eternal beauty”.<sup>17</sup> Without a doubt, however, the difference in the two statements rests on how both philosophers conceive of the universe and its evolution, and consequently, on how both conceive the work of art. The specificity of the universe for Peirce, as we have seen, is that it shares all the essential attributes of mind and, therefore, of Thirdness. This is why the universe is a sign, even an argument—which is to say the most complete sign according to the classification of signs Peirce produced that same year for the Lowell Institute lectures.<sup>18</sup> By 1903, of course, all the fundamentals of Peirce’s cosmology were already well in place, and he conceived of the universe as he did a growing mind whose tendency to acquire habits manifests itself through the evolution of habits or laws of physics and nature. The universe, in short, is a rationally embodied idea endlessly growing in variety and complexity. Could a semiotician ever consider a more fitting definition of a work of art?

If the universe, as argument, can be compared with a work of art by virtue of its semeiotic character, it can only be so because the qualities of an artwork, like those of the universe, require embodiment through



interpretants. Esthetic contemplation, the *reasonable feeling* Peirce is at pains to describe, constitutes the first step towards this embodiment. But this reasonable feeling that attracts us to a work of art isn't a quality of feeling such as the quality of "blue" or "red." For as I mentioned above, all qualities are equally admirable or attractive. Rather, we must conceive of it as an *idea* or a *habit of feeling* capable of attracting or pulling towards it different qualities of feeling that belong to the work, or *different perceptions* of it. Such an idea would be *vague*, but one that would seek to determine itself through various interpretants, as we *interpret* the work. It would follow that interpreting a work of art is a way to ensure the growth of qualities of feeling that belong to it into habits of feeling in the hope of concretely "realizing" the work.

Peirce, then, seems to suggest that what attracts us towards art is a *semeiotic quality qua* quality of mind or quality of Thirdness. This quality would embody itself in the viewer as a habit of feeling and, through the work of interpretation, in habits of action and thought. Now it might be objected that this is true for *all* signs, not just works of art, and that consequently all signs are likely to produce "*esthetic enjoyment*" as a symptom or result of *semiosis*. This is correct, I believe. But although every sign can indeed lead to contemplation in such a manner, we need to realize also how in our cultures it has, for the longest time, been incumbent upon what we call art to ensure and create an environment for this sort of contemplation.<sup>19</sup> I shall try to be more precise by referring to an example of a "perfect" semiotic process borrowed from a 1906 manuscript for a projected article entitled "The Basis of Pragmaticism in the Normative Sciences":

A sign . . . just in so far as it fulfills the function of a sign, and none other, perfectly conforms to the definition of a medium of communication. It is determined by the object, but in no other respect than goes to enable it to act upon the interpreting quasi-mind; and the more perfectly it fulfills its function as a sign, the less effect it has upon that quasi-mind other than that of determining it as if the object itself had acted upon it. Thus, after an ordinary conversation, a wonderfully perfect kind of sign-functioning, one knows what information or suggestion has been conveyed, but will be utterly unable to say in what words it was conveyed, and often will think it was conveyed in words, when in fact it was only conveyed in tones or in facial expressions. (*EP* 2: 391, 1906)

As I read this passage I cannot help but think of the actor's performance in theater. We know that a good deal of the thespian's art lies in the ability to convey information—usually fictional—through tone of voice and facial expressions. The theater lover who appreciates performance looks for these signs, in part so as to contemplate them as *expressive* or *semiotic* forms. This is what, from a completely different

semiotic tradition, Roman Jakobson used to call the “poetic function” of communication. Reflecting on Peirce’s example for “perfect” semiosis, one could say that in ordinary conversation “esthetic enjoyment” is usually minimal, whereas in the theater it tends to maximize itself. There, and through abduction, the sign will initially be interpreted as an icon—a rheme, in fact—of the *summum bonum* (which is to say, the sign will be appreciated *as* sign). If all signs have the potential to be so contemplated and interpreted, it would appear that the semeiotic function of art is to bring semeiosis to our consciousness as an object of contemplation, to enable us to “esthetically enjoy” the reasonable feeling of semiosis. And yet, the attention for the sign itself—for its signhood—in no way implies that it is incapable of normal semeiotic functioning (i.e. of conveying information about its object), since it is this functioning, after all, that is admirable in itself.

Now, what Peirce calls “esthetic enjoyment” requires that we attend as much as possible to the entire array of expressive means that make up a sign, granted that, as he writes in “*Kaina Stoicheia*” (“New Elements”), “a whole book is a sign,” as is a whole literature (*EP* 2: 303, 1904). In the 5<sup>th</sup> Harvard lecture of the 1903 series, Peirce explains that there exists “a special variety of esthetic goodness that may belong to a representamen, namely, expressiveness” (*EP* 2: 203). Every sign *must* possess it to some degree. Peirce then adds two other modes of goodness with regards to representation, *veracity* which he considers to be a moral goodness and *truth* which is a logical mode of goodness. The esthetic function of what we call “works of art” implies contemplation of “esthetic goodness”, or *semiotic expressivity*. Now, modern and contemporary art have indeed shown us that any expression, any sign, can be *contemplated* with regards to its *expressivity*—from Barnett Newman’s color field paintings to Piero Manzoni’s *Merda d’artista* tin cans. As for moral or logical goodness, there is nothing to prevent any sufficiently complete sign from embodying them, though these further determinations of the *summum bonum* imply other functions than the purely esthetic one.

To *contemplate* a sign (as sign) is also, of course, to contemplate its *interpretability* to which contemplation itself belongs. For in the end, *interpretation*—that aspect of semiosis which pertains to interpretants—is how all signs, including works of art, can hope to *achieve* goodness. But interpretation (including its performance by a reasonable agent) is also itself a habit that grows in complexity and variety, despite the growth of its reasonableness. Its source is an abduction, a feeling of attraction, something that resides in the way our perceptions are moved by an idea that emerges along with that very attractiveness. Its only security, at this stage, is instinct. It is a manifestation of what Peirce, in his “Neglected Argument for the Reality of God” relates to “Pure Play” or *musement*. Indeed, Peirce explains that *musement* and esthetic contemplation are both *forms* of pure play, the only difference being that in *musement* one

“considers some wonder in one of the Universes [of which there are three: the Universe of Ideas or Firsts; the Universe of Brute Actuality or Seconds; the Universe of signs or Thirds] or some connection between two of the three, *with speculation concerning its cause*” (EP 2: 436, 1908, emphasis mine). It is through such play that, in contemplating a work of art, in contemplating a sign *qua* sign, reason contemplates itself by way of mind (or Thirdness). Of course, we cannot expect that everyone will be able to contemplate and interpret a work of art, any more than we can expect everyone to adopt what ought to be the scientist’s wonderment toward the admirableness of the universe. What is at stake is our growing collective ability to do so. Peirce writes:

Tell me, upon sufficient authority, that all cerebration depends upon movements of neurites that strictly obey certain physical laws, and that thus all expressions of thought, both external and internal, receive a physical explanation, and I shall be ready to believe you. But if you go on to say that this explodes the theory that my neighbor and myself are governed by reason, and are thinking beings, I must frankly say that it will not give me a high opinion of your intelligence. (EP 2: 439, 1908)

Just as the ability to conceive of the universe as the unfolding of an argument grows with each new scientific discovery, so too does our ability to contemplate works of art with each new *interpretation* of them. To develop, cultivate, and nourish the habit of interpreting works of art may, for that reason, appear to be nothing short of cultivating *a taste for signs*. In art, then, human beings contemplate their contribution to the *summum bonum* by contemplating their own ability to use and interpret signs. A process both modern and contemporary art seems to have incorporated into their own art-making practices.

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Peirce believed that the reaches of esthetics were far wider than that of art alone. He therefore resisted any easy identification between the two. This said, however, there should be no doubt—as indeed the quotation used as epigraph to this essay illustrates—that he came to understand the *continuity* that exists between art and science. Peirce, of course, never produced a full-fledged *theory of art* and his direct contributions to the philosophy of art are at best minimal. Yet his writings on esthetics nonetheless indicate a will to *integrate* art into his esthetic concerns. It is the terms of this integration that I have attempted here to unravel from what, in the absence of a theory of art, seems to be a series of presuppositions and assumptions on Peirce’s part. It shows where an esthetic *and* semeiotic theory of art might properly begin its investigations.

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## NOTES

1. I thank Vincent Colapietro and André De Tienne for their kind suggestions and comments.

2. *EP* 2: 443, 1908. All citations from Peirce's writings will follow the standard notation: *CP* for *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, followed by volume number and paragraph number, *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, 8 vols. vols. 1–6 C. Hartshorne and P. Weiss (eds.) (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931–35), vols. 7–8 A. Burks (ed.), (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958); *W*, followed by volume number and page number for the *Writings of Charles S. Peirce. A Chronological Edition*, vols. 1–6, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982–2000; *EP* for the *Essential Peirce*, vol. 2, followed by volume number and page; and *NEM* for *New Elements of Mathematics*, followed by volume and page number, *New Elements of Mathematics*, 4 vols., Carolyn Eisele (ed.), The Hague, Netherlands: Mouton, 1976.

3. For simplicity's sake I shall henceforth use Peirce's spelling, "esthetics", rather than the now more common "aesthetics."

4. Hegel, G. W. F., *Aesthetics. Lectures of Fine Art, vol. 1*, trans. T. M. Knox, Oxford: Clarendon Press, p. 1.

5. It is possible, however, to see Peirce's late views on esthetics as a normative science as having been "prepared" by his reading of Schiller's *Aesthetische Briefe* during his freshman year at Harvard (see *W* 1: 10–12, 1857). Several scholars have considered the impact of Peirce's study of Schiller's *Letters* on his conception of the Categories, on his pragmatism, and on his late conception of the normative sciences. Schiller, of course, was deeply influenced by Kant whom he sought to better nonetheless by attempting to fill the gap of Kantian dualism. In a well-known passage from the Third *Critique*, Kant claims that beauty is a symbol of morality (see *Critique of Judgement*, translated with Introduction and Notes by J.H. Bernard (2nd ed. revised), London: Macmillan, 1914, sections §42.6–7). For Kant, esthetic judgment leads us to contemplate the suprasensible, that is, the form of finality in nature in the absence of any *knowable* finality. In so doing, the experience of the beautiful makes it possible, by analogy, to grasp the foundation of morality which rests on the union of the suprasensible and the sensible through the practical effects of the concept of freedom. In a very particular sense then, one could possibly argue that for Kant ethics (moral conduct) requires the help of esthetics (an idea we will find developed in Peirce, though in a different vein entirely). Kant, in short, conceived of our "experience" of esthetic finality as a key element in our understanding the foundation of morality and in our grasping—through analogy—the connection between the idea of freedom and its practical effects. More specifically, because good morality requires more than agreement of conduct with the Categorical Imperative, our understanding that its foundation lies in the effects of the idea of freedom on our conduct plays an important role in our ability to act morally. Schiller obviously saw this as an opportunity to use art and *Spieltrieb* to bridge Kant's dualism. Schiller revisited this dualism in psychological terms as a tension between what he calls *Formtrieb* (essentially, the intellect) and *Stofftrieb* (essentially, sensation). Beauty is what unites the two instincts in *Spieltrieb*: in beauty man finds unity, balance, and moral freedom. According to De Tienne, the young Peirce was sensitive to Schiller's "triadic" solution to the problem raised by Kant's dualism. In fact, De Tienne has shown how Schiller's

three instincts (or “impulses” as Peirce referred to them) were initially reformulated as the first of Peirce’s triads, that of I (*Formtrieb*), It (*Stofftrieb*), and Thou (*Spieltrieb*). A long process of revision of this triad eventually led Peirce to his three Categories. Now, Schiller’s three instincts can also be configured in terms of gradation: beauty or freedom (*Spieltrieb* as the unification of the two other instincts) enables morality which, in turn, enables political freedom. De Tienne shows this to be compatible with Peirce’s later classification of the normative sciences. See André De Tienne, *L’analytique de la représentation chez Peirce. La genèse de la théorie des catégories*, Bruxelles: Presses universitaires Saint-Louis, 1996. The influence of Peirce’s early contact with Schiller, with regard especially to his esthetics, has also been discussed by Jeffrey Barnouw: “Schiller’s idea of the function of feeling in the development of human knowledge, motives, and character was well understood by the young Peirce, however, and it affords such a striking anticipation of the aesthetic which Peirce outlined in the last stages of his career that it is reasonable to conclude that the influence of Schiller was active at the end as well as at the inception of Peirce’s philosophical development, spanning more than fifty years of his life” in “‘Aesthetic’ for Schiller and Peirce: A Neglected Origin of Pragmatism”, *The Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 49, no. 4, 1988, p. 607. See also Barnouw’s “The Place of Peirce’s ‘Esthetic’ in his Thought and in the Tradition of Aesthetics” in *Peirce and Value Theory. On Peircean Ethics and Aesthetics*, Herman Parret (ed.), Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Press, 1994. However, since Peirce only developed his ideas regarding esthetics late in his life it would be false to claim that he steadfastly held to Schiller’s views on esthetics (or art) for some fifty years—there seems to be no textual evidence to support such a view. Consequently, one should probably think of this ellipsis as a long process of reconciliation brought about by internal requirements within Peirce’s system of thought.

6. See Beverley Kent’s book, *Charles S. Peirce. Logic and the Classification of the Sciences*, Kingston and Montréal, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1987.

7. In the same “Categorical” spirit, Peirce explains that phaneroscopia requires the mathematical concepts of monadicity, dyadicity, and triadicity so as to apply them—through the Categories—to all that which “appears.”

8. Peirce explains that “all inhibition of action, or action upon action, involves reaction and duality. All self-control involves, and chiefly consists in, inhibition. All direction toward an end or good supposes self-control; and thus the normative sciences are thoroughly infused with duality.” In “The Basis of Pragmatism in the Normative Sciences” in *EP 2*, p. 385.

9. Vincent Colapietro has justly pointed out to me that although the *summum bonum* must initially be considered in its Firstness, its Secondness and its Thirdness are no less important in accounting for it. In its Secondness, the *summum bonum* acquires a “critical function” which, whenever it enables one to either correct or pursue a tendency in feeling, action or thought, energetically exhibits a form of alterity with regards to them. This is an inhibiting or instigating force that helps rational agents become more rational still. In its Thirdness the *summum bonum* is the habit that our habits of feeling, conduct, and thought must embody, thus ensuring mediation between feeling and conduct.

10. See “The Basis of Pragmatism in the Normative Sciences” in *EP 2*: 379, 1906.

11. This is not the Pure Chance of the Universe's origins since it is constrained by final causality and by its recursive application of the law of mind.

12. This process of "narrowing" possible hypotheses as a form of self-control is an important aspect of the rationality of abduction. Abduction, for Peirce, is *not synonymous with unbridled imagination*. As he wrote in his Carnegie Foundation application of 1902:

Of [the] three classes of reasonings Abduction is the lowest. So long as it is sincere, and if it be not, it does not deserve to be called reasoning, Abduction cannot be absolutely bad. For sincere efforts to reach the truth, no matter in how wrong a way they may be commenced, cannot fail ultimately to attain any truth that is attainable. Consequently, there is only a relative preference between different abductions; and the ground of such preference must be economical. That is to say, the better abduction is the one which is likely to lead to the truth with the lesser expenditure of time, vitality, etc." (*NEM* 4: 37–38)

The implication here is that there exists a minimal form of self-control in abduction that enables distinguishing between different hypotheses and thus explains the rationality of this form of reasoning. There is more, however, if one considers abduction from the perspective of agapastic evolution. Indeed, in the agapastic evolution of reason our guesses become *constrained*—if only infinitesimally—as chance diminishes. This means that, theoretically, abduction at the beginning of the universe should be more unbridled than abduction at the moment just prior the universe's eventual crystallization as law. In short, the tendency exhibited by the universe to grow in reasonableness and diminish the role of chance also affects abduction.

13. Douglas R. Anderson, *Creativity and the Philosophy of C. S. Peirce*, Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987.

14. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, translated with Introduction and Notes by J.H. Bernard (2nd ed. revised), London: Macmillan, 1914.

15. Reproduced below is the passage in its entirety—as we shall see, it is such as to warrant a brief commentary afterward :

In the light of the doctrine of categories I should say that an object, to be esthetically good, must have a multitude of parts so related to one another as to impart a positive simple immediate quality to their totality; and whatever does this is, in so far, esthetically good, no matter what the particular quality of the total may be. If that quality be such as to nauseate us, to scare us, or otherwise to disturb us to the point of throwing us out of the mood of esthetic enjoyment, out of the mood of simply contemplating the embodiment of the quality—just, for example, as the Alps affected the people of old times, when the state of civilization was such that an impression of great power was inseparably associated with lively apprehension and terror—then the object remains none the less esthetically good, although people in our condition are incapacitated from a calm esthetic contemplation of it.

This suggestion must go for what it may be worth, which I dare say may be very little. If it be correct, it will follow that there is no such thing as positive esthetic badness; and since by goodness we chiefly in this discussion mean merely the absence of badness, or faultlessness, there will be no such thing as esthetic goodness. All there will be will be various esthetic qualities; that is, simple qualities of totalities not capable of full embodiment in the parts, which qualities may be more decided and strong in one case than in another. But the very reduction of the intensity may be an esthetic quality; nay, it will be so; and I am seriously inclined to doubt there being any distinction of pure esthetic betterness and worseness. My



notion would be that there are innumerable varieties of esthetic quality, but no purely esthetic grade of excellence.” (*EP* 2: 201–202, 1903)

At first glance we may be struck by how this passage seems to contradict another passage, quoted earlier, where Peirce claims that “it would be the height of stupidity to say that esthetics knows no good and bad”. Since the latter quote is taken from a later essay—a 1906 manuscript for an article Peirce had planned to publish in *The Monist* entitled “The Basis of Pragmaticism in the Normative Sciences”—it might be tempting to infer that he had merely changed his mind during the intervening years. But is this really the case? Is Peirce really contradicting himself here? I don’t think so. In fact, I believe that both remarks bear to some extent on different objects. In the Harvard lecture, Peirce is still hesitant in affirming the existence of esthetics as a normative science. Of esthetics, he writes: “I am inclined to think that there is such a normative science; but I feel by no means sure even of that” (*EP* 2: 200). Yet, for one who surmises its existence, “esthetics considers those things whose ends are to *embody* qualities of feeling” (Ibid. Emphasis mine). In “The Basis of Pragmaticism in the Normative Sciences” Peirce, we saw earlier, offers more precision when he writes that esthetics is “the theory of the *deliberate* formation of [. . .] habits of feeling” (*EP* 2: 378, 1906, emphasis mine). Now, the point I wish to make is this: since, according to the categorical architectonic, *deliberate embodiment* of qualities of feeling *can only happen through the mediation of habits of feeling*, the later essay merely appears to be drawing the necessary conclusion of the views presented in the Harvard lecture three years earlier. In short: it is one thing for *qualities of feeling* to know neither good nor bad, but quite another for the *deliberate formation of habits of feeling* to know esthetic goodness or badness. For deliberateness implies some degree of self-control, and therefore Secondness (as is implied with esthetics being a normative science). That Peirce didn’t draw this conclusion in his Harvard lecture may appear surprising, yet the idea of there being no degree of esthetic excellence with regards to qualities of feeling is entirely congruent with his theory of the categories *and* with the perspective he adopts in 1906 for his projected *Monist* article.

16. See “A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God”, in *EP* 2: 435, 1908.

17. Friedrich Schelling, *Philosophy of Art*, edited, translated and introduced by Douglas W. Stott, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989: §21. In the “Law of Mind” of 1892, Peirce acknowledged a connection to Schelling with regards to cosmological essays he had published in *The Monist* in 1891 and 1892 (“The Architecture of Theories” and “The Doctrine of Necessity Examined”): “I have begun by showing that *tychism* must give birth to an evolutionary cosmology, in which all the regularities of nature and of mind are regarded as products of growth, and to a Schelling-fashioned idealism which holds matter to be mere specialized and partially deadened mind” (*CP* 6.102).

18. See “Sundry Logical Conceptions” and “Nomenclature and Divisions of Triadic Relations, As Far As They Are Determined” in *EP* 2: 267–288, 1903.

19. Kant’s notion of disinterestedness relative to his “Analytical of the Beautiful” in *The Critique of Judgment* responded to this contemplative environment as much as it helped shape it for future generations.