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What Does Peirce’s Sign Theory Have To Say To Art History?

James Elkins

Peirce’s sign theory is in a strange position: it is much discussed by specialists, widely influential in cultural studies and anthropology, and widely cited in art history and art criticism (Iverson 1988; Baldwin 1981). At the same time there is an enormous disparity between the brief and schematic allusions to Peirce that are common in art history, and the outlandish complexity of the doctrines themselves and their elaboration in Peirce scholarship. That difference is especially significant given the prominence of art historical writing that identifies itself at least in part as semiotic, and the frequency with which that writing invokes Peirce’s name. According to a common genealogical reading, even though Peirce is the ‘father’ of semiotics, his theories have only lately been taken to be as central as Saussure’s. I do not want to challenge that situation here; there are other equally interesting oversights in the historical reception of semiotic theories, including the work of Karl Bühler, Thure von Uexküll and R. G. Collingwood (Deely, Williams, and Kruse 1986: xii). Each instance of relative neglect calls for historiographic inquiry, since it has much to tell us about what we expect our semiotics to look like. I will not be attempting that here. Instead I offer this essay as a meditation on the difficulty of applying Peirce’s doctrine: I will be arguing that contemporary art historical and critical uses of his ideas are so simple, and so distant from the original texts, that in many cases it is not necessary for art historians to invoke his name at all. At the same time I will be admiring the full extent of Peirce’s weirdness, and at the end I will propose a parallel between Peirce’s obsessions and interesting art historical writing.

I

Art history that draws on Peirce neglects or under-represents his unfinished project for a more comprehensive semiotics beyond the triad icon-index-symbol. The mere citation of the trichotomy is often taken to constitute an adequate response to his theories, even in philosophy (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 142), in part because it can be easily and independently defined (in strictest contrast to the almost bewildering later theory): all signs, Peirce says, are partly iconic (they denote by resembling their objects), indexical (they are ‘really affected’ by their objects), and symbolic (they denote ‘by virtue of a law’) (Peirce 1965: 2.247-49).

Immediately we encounter a problem finding appropriate examples, which I think is at the center of the difficult relations between Peirce’s trichotomy and the ways it is used in art historical semiotics. In art historical parlance, a reasonable example of the three modes in which signs function would be the forms in a naturalistic picture (they denote by resembling their objects), a gestural mark in the picture (it is ‘really affected’ by the sweep of the artist’s hand), and the subject of the picture, say a *Crucifixion* (it denotes by reliance on a ‘law’, in this case, ‘an association of general ideas’). But consider Peirce’s example of this same trichotomy:

Take, for instance, ‘it rains’. Here the icon is the mental composite photograph of all the rainy days the thinker has experienced. The index is all whereby he distinguishes *that day*, as it is placed in his experience. The symbol is the mental act whereby [he] stamps that day as rainy [(Peirce 1965: 2.438; Feibleman 1969: 92)].

There is a vague but pressing problem here, since it appears Peirce is thinking much more widely and abstractly than a visual theorist might. Since an iconic sign needs only to be ‘like’ or to ‘resemble’ its object, it can be non-visual, and in particular it can be non-naturalistic. That disjunction between Peirce’s ‘iconicity’ and visuality has been used both as a critique of inappropriate uses of Peirce’s theory in the visual arts (which sometimes seek to reduce the iconic to the naturalistic) and also as a justification for Peirce’s marginal position (Bal 1991: 31-32).

I call this a ‘vague’ problem since there is no *a priori* reason why a theory might not be well exemplified by narrow examples, and Peirce’s ‘iconic’ is also entirely appropriate as a code for naturalistic pictures, despite some problematic aspects of his concept of ‘representation’ (Martin 1969: 144-57; Kalaga 1986: 43-60). Yet whenever Peirce provides ‘empirical’ illustrations, he shows himself to be thinking in

unexpected ways. I take that as a warning that even on fundamentals Peirce may not have been thinking the way visual theory might hope.

My point about the ‘vague’ problem is that if we seek to delimit the conceptual or pragmatic range of Peirce’s trichotomy, we risk damaging the theory’s coherence because we have no secure sense of how the theory works together with its examples. In the course of proposing an agenda for semiotic art history, Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson acknowledge that Peirce’s semiotics is part of a ‘complex logical system, much of which is relevant only to specialists’, and it is true that ‘any identification of icon and the entire domain of the visual is wrong’ (Bal and Bryson 1991: 188–89; Bal and Bryson 1992). But then the relation of similarity that they use to define the icon is also wrong *because* it is limited: why adduce a concept if its meaning has to be so bracketed that it loses much of its syntactic and semantic power? Peirce was mostly interested in iconic signs as those that possess the character that renders them significant, and even though Bal and Bryson quote one of the texts that give that definition, they go on to use iconicity as if it were based on similarity, or—even less faithfully—on a ‘way of reading’. What reasons can justify this kind of simplification and excision? If as Bal and Bryson say, Peirce’s semiotics is a ‘complex logical system’, then definitions of essential terms cannot be altered on the presumption that the system will remain intact. By what metalogic can Bal and Bryson excise what they want from the ‘exasperating detail’ of the full theory, without needing to attend to the consequences (Bal and Bryson 1991: 189–90)? One of the consequences of their use is that ‘Peirce’s semiotic theory’ ends up signifying something that ‘helps us think about aspects of the process of art in society’: in other words, it becomes neither a ‘philosophy’ nor a ‘theory’ but a small group of associated informal notions about how signs operate (Bal and Bryson 1991: 191).

These are interesting questions, but they have more to do with the inexorable transmutation of theories than with the nature of Peirce’s theory, and so I want to leave them here. Eventually the icon becomes the naturalistic picture, and the index becomes the token, copy, or mechanical reproduction—as they already have in contemporary art criticism. Given this ongoing refraction of Peirce’s ideas, it is also useful to ask if the truncated versions of his theory prevalent in art history can do the work they are said to do. In Bal and Bryson’s case, it could be argued—and I think this would be in line with their intentions—that Peirce can serve semiotic art history

best as a kind of reminder, or a heuristic pointer to properties of signs, such as their dynamism, that are often neglected in research that is more informed by Saussure. In that case, an assessment of the cogency of their position would shift away from Peirce's doctrines and toward the use to which Bal and Bryson's formulae are put—and to that extent I would say that Peirce himself becomes increasingly irrelevant to their purpose. Aside from the conflation of the iconic sign with similarity or naturalism, two other points are commonly adduced in favor of Peirce's trichotomy: his resolution of the 'word-image' dichotomy, and his introduction of the index. The same points about distorted applications apply to both.

1. Peirce's trichotomy has been said to permit art history to get 'beyond' the polar opposition of 'word' and 'image' that still constitutes the majority of discourse on the relation of language to pictures (Bryson 1981). No matter how it is named—for instance, 'verbal' and 'visual', 'discourse' and 'figure', even 'Becoming' and 'Being'—the question of language and pictures seems to consistently resolve into a pair of complementary modes, and Peirce's trichotomy appears to show a way out of that critical impasse. But if this were to be true, we would have to also assume that the specific problems that have grown up around the 'word-image' concept in recent decades—culminating in the International Conferences on Word and Image, in journals such as *Word & Image*, *Visible Language*, and *Image and Text*, and in numerous monographs devoted to the subject—were adequately addressed, and not merely swept aside, by Peirce's trichotomy. An insuperable obstacle here is that the word-image debate entails very different problems than the symbolic and iconic in Peirce, so the polarity is not augmented but supplanted. 'Word', for example, normally means 'narrative' and 'symbolic content', while Peirce's 'symbol' also means whatever does not signify by 'really affecting' or 'resembling'.

Even apart from such issues, there is the problem of making a convincing case for the presence of all three signs in any one work. If I whisper to someone, 'Please be quiet', the tone of my voice has the qualities I want in that person's voice, and so it is iconic—but that is a fugitive and marginal use of the iconic. Likewise, a photograph will have some symbolic components, but it can prove difficult to make a strong case for their importance:

[A] photograph signifies at least in part iconically by manifesting, for example, the scalar relationships, the silhouettes and the tonal modula-

tions of its object(s). These features constitute only some of those possessed by the photograph. Other properties such as its weight, taste, smell, size, and spatial extension are not generally those which are asked to carry any signficatory responsibility... The parameters of iconicity, the selection of properties which will serve as conduits of reference is contractual... Islands of iconicity float in seas of convention...[McNeil 1985: 13].

As it stands, this kind of argument is unimpeachable, and it is reasonable to remember that 'contractual, mimetic, and continuous' signification is present in every work. Certainly photography has symbolic components; some they have been explored by writers who have looked into the conditions of its historical development, and others have to do with framing, image manipulation, and other matters of choice (Galassi 1981). But it begins to seem a little forced, a little like a Procrustean bed, when it becomes necessary to speak of all three kinds of signs as potentially or theoretically or 'originally' equal determinants of signification.

2. For its part indexicality has been proposed as a way to characterize a relation between artwork and world that occurs in various modern and postmodern works, from Abstract Expressionism through minimalist painting of the 1970's (Krauss 1985: 212 n. 2). Rosalind Krauss has proposed that Peirce's indexical relation is an apposite description of the way that some minimalist works (for example, paintings that mimic the color of the wall on which they hang) reduce the traditional pictorial relation to the world 'to the status of a mould or impression or trace'. Drawing, for example, is no longer a formal strategy for 'encoding reality' or creating internal organization, but a way of 'imprinting' 'evidence' about the world (Krauss 1985: 215; Peirce 1955: 106). Since according to Peirce photographs are 'physically forced to correspond point by point to nature', what happens in these kinds of modern art approaches the indexical relation that obtains in photography, and both are part of a conscious or unconscious resurgence of the indexical over the optical or iconic.

There are two related difficulties here. First is the problem of accurately characterizing Peirce's notion of indexicality, and that leads back toward the question of exemplification. Indexicality is certainly misinterpreted when it is explained as direct causal connection (Greenlee 1973: 85; Burks 1948-49: 679; McNeil 1985: 13 n. 12). Yet the fact that Peirce conceived causality as one mode of indexicality does not help

much, because then the remainder of the indexical field remains ill-defined (Goudge 1965: 53). Unlike other art historians who evoke indexicality, Krauss does not reduce it to a species of causality; but because she does not, it has limited efficacy for her discussion. Her single quotation from Peirce yields only the idea of 'physical connection' and 'correspondence point by point', but her analysis of artworks goes far beyond that. She explores and evokes tracing, impression, molding, physical correspondence, registration, and imprinting, each of them different from Peirce's concepts. In general art history has developed an extensive lexicon of indexical signs in paintings: in addition to the terms in Krauss's essay, there are *repoussoir* figures, figures in pictures who 'point' to the action, 'lookers' in paintings, 'painter-beholders' in pictures who mime some functions of the external beholder, mirrors and surrogates and objects of reciprocal gazes (Alberti 1972; Alpers 1985; Fried 1990; Olin 1992).

With that variety, it is not easy to see how the existence of Peirce's general category could be of help. If it were to be, it would be by virtue of its particular connections it proposes between the indexical and the iconic and symbolic. The theory might then point toward some hidden relations between the three types. But does it? The only relation Peirce specifies is the relation he calls Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness; roughly speaking, this requires that every symbolic sign involves an indexical and an iconic sign, and every indexical sign involves an iconic sign. A gestural mark in a painting will therefore also resemble an object or a figure—or to put it in general terms, it will denote the figurative. Though that has caused some misunderstanding among historians who see iconic resemblance as beside the point for the concept of indexicality (McNiel 1985: 12), the real problem is that there is not enough specificity in the theory to give it effective resonance with the art historical constructs—especially accounts that link the indexical to economic and social conditions, which are too independent to be construed as applications of the theory (plate 1).

[Ed: insert Plate 1 here]

Even though it is insufficient—and ultimately, irrelevant—to speak of a photograph such as Stieglitz's as a causal effect of machinery and light rays, it is unilluminating—or at worst, meaningless—to propose that its indexicality entails the Firstness

of the icon. Whatever the photograph is, it is not *merely* a dependent relation between those two functions.

One of the more sensible amendments to the equation between index and photograph is Richard Shiff's essay 'Phototropism (Figuring the Proper)', which proposes that painting and photography 'reconstitute' the once blended functions of classical painting, 'which was at once "ideal" and "real"' (Shiff 1989: 171). In the context of this essay, it is especially significant to note that Shiff's proposal works for painting and photography precisely by not working—by becoming dysfunctional—as a representation of Peirce. Much the same can be said of Fred Orton's thoughtful book *Figuring Jasper Johns*, which describes Johns's paintings and prints as 'simultaneously indexical or descriptive subject-matter and decorative surface-matter' (Orton 1994: 9). In the course of a long analysis, Orton weaves 'indexical' explanations (such as Johns's story about seeing his hatching-pattern on a passing car) with 'a causal or metonymic chain' of meanings, including Johns's thoughts about Picasso and Pollock (Orton 1994: 82). Orton's book, and Shiff's essay, are in the spirit of Peirce in that they mix what Nelson Goodman calls routes of reference: but their mixtures, as both authors know, are far from Peirce's own.

Firstness was first mentioned in art history in 1969, in Annette Michelson's 'Robert Morris: An Aesthetics of Transgression' (Michelson 1969: 19). Michelson used only Firstness, and not Secondness or Thirdness, and she drew parallels between Firstness and other 'non-cognitive' states of mind in religious thinking. The parallels were suggestive, but as in much subsequent writing, Peirce's trichotomous philosophy was not required to make the argument. Peirce's 'fundamental' trichotomy is a way of remembering that regimes of representation employ 'triadic regression and symbiosis', but in visual art people do not often need to think of artworks as a 'triadic mix of contractual, contiguous, and verisimilar elements' (McNeil 1985: 14). In this light Peirce's theory of trichotomous signification suffers a triple setback: it is only applied to visual art by reducing its range of examples without a clear understanding of how that reduction affects its coherence; it needs to be applied without opening the question of its relation to Peirce's wider theory; and it seems to function principally as a mnemonic or heuristic device, without the power to contact discussions of artworks at a more specific level.

II

Perhaps as a consequence of these difficulties, recent art historical writing has begun citing the unfinished project for sixty-six classes of signs. It has been said that this later theory (I am deferring for the moment the question of whether Peirce ever had such a theory) has the advantage of being able to distinguish 'definable' differences between pictures, 'diagrams, charts, graphs, words, and scores', because each has a different 'measure' of iconicity, indexicality, and symbolicity (Davis 1992: 247). If that were true, it would be of great interest to art theory and semiotics in general; among other properties it would have the capacity to directly confront Nelson Goodman's theories on those kinds of 'notation' (Goodman 1976). For that reason it is worthwhile to briefly review the evidence for the sixty-six classes of signs. This subject is another opportunity to engage the problem of examples, and I have limited myself to two structural tropes, neither of which occurs in Peirce: one, a standard elementary diagram of perspective, and the other, an arboreal metaphor for Peirce's branching genealogies. Later, returning to the issue one last time, I will suggest that those two are not so much supportive or heuristic illustrations as generative tropes. One of the reasons this material is not known outside Peirce studies is that it is written in the condensed, inhuman manner of a writer versed in logic and mathematics. It is prudent to mimic at least one aspect of that writing and proceed using numbered paragraphs.

1. To begin, in the larger theory all phenomena are classified according to three *categories*: a *First* is something in itself, a *Second* exists in dyadic relation to another thing, and a *Third* is a mean that cannot be separated from a law or a purpose (Weiss and Burks 1945; Sanders 1970; Peirce 1965: 1.295-99, 1.418-21). This proceeds from his fundamental phenomenology of immediate 'presentness' to perception, followed by successively resolved awareness of the ways representations are made to consciousness.

2. A sign is by its nature triadic, since Peirce defines it as 'something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity' (Peirce 1965: 2.228). Hence every sign has three *divisions*: 'the sign in itself, the sign as related to its object, and the sign as interpreted to represent an object'. Let me put this in terms of the rudimentary diagram of perspective that consists of the observing subject, the seen object, and the picture. Here the first division, the sign 'in itself', is the middle term

of the diagram, the second, the sign ‘as related to its object’, becomes the combination of the middle and the right of the diagram, and the third, ‘the sign as interpreted to represent an object’, corresponds to the entire diagram:

3. Each division—as in my second paragraph—exists in all three categories—as in my first paragraph—implying the arrangement in Table 1:

Trichotomies or Divisions

	(A) <i>Signs in themselves</i>	(B) <i>Signs in rela- tion to objects</i>	(C) <i>Signs in rela- tion to inter- pretant</i>
1. <i>First</i>	Qualisign	Icon	Rheme
2. <i>Second</i>	Sinsign	Index	Proposition
3. <i>Third</i>	Legisign	Symbol	Argument

Categories

Table 1

Immediately it becomes obvious how the art historical emphasis on icon, index, and symbol is limited. Paul Weiss and Arthur Burks offer the following abstract example: ‘the sign as related to its object (the second of the three divisions) may be similar to, or may be existentially connected with, or may be referred by means of a law to, its object’ (Weiss and Burks 1945: 384). This reasoning is exact, but difficult to apply to the first division. We would have to say, for example, that signs in relation to themselves may be either (1) similar, (2) existentially connected, or (3) referred to themselves by means of a law. This kind of difficulty is endemic in Peirce’s theory, where logical considerations lead him to propositions and relations that are held *a priori* to have the possibility of corresponding to true states of affairs.

4. Seconds and Thirds have ‘degenerate forms’. A genuine Secondness is ‘catered’: it splits into a weak and strong species, and the strong species may then continue to split, yielding an infinite sequence of weak branches to a strong Secondness (Peirce 1965: 1.365, 5.70-72). Thirds split into two weak and one strong species, and the less weak of the weak species may split again, in the way that Seconds split, into strong and weak. The strong species of Thirdness may then split again into three.

The Peirce scholar Gary Sanders represents this with a diagram. Ignoring the labeled arcs for the moment, the tree trunk shows strong Thirdness, splitting at every fork into degenerate Firstness (off to the left) and Secondness (to the right). Every Second may then split into strong and weak branches, with the strong continuing to emit weak species.

5. Signs can only give rise to signs that have their level of category, or lower. Hence firsts can only determine other Firsts, but Seconds can give rise to Firsts, and Thirds can give rise to Firsts, Seconds, and Thirds (Peirce 1965: 2.235). This is apparent on the diagram, where Thirds give rise to Seconds, Firsts, and an ongoing trunk of strong Thirds. In Table 1, that means that when it comes to giving the full description of a sign, and integrating the divisions, a Qualisign, being a First, cannot be associated with an Index, which is a second. By the same reasoning, however, a Legisign, which is a Third, can be associated with a Symbol, an Index, or an Icon. And the Symbol, in turn, can be associated with an Argument, a Dicisign, or a Rheme. In Table 1, if we imagine the numbers 1, 2, 3 carried across the Table in every box, the permissible combinations take the form 111, 211, 221, 222, 311, 321, 322, 331, 332, 333, for a total of ten *classes* of signs.

Table 2 realizes this schema in columnar form. Here ‘Dicent’ is an alternate word for ‘Proposition’, and redundant or inessential terms are in parentheses.

No.	Category	No.	Name	Example
1	First	111	(Rhematic Iconic) Qualisign	A feeling of ‘red’
2	Second	211	(Rhematic) Iconic Sinsign	An individual diagram
3		221	Rhematic Indexical Sinsign	A spontaneous cry

4		222	Dicent (Indexical) Sinsign	A weathercock or photograph
5	Third	311	(Rhematic) Iconic Legisign	A diagram, apart from its factual individuality
6		321	Rhematic Indexical Legisign	A demonstrative pronoun
7		322	Dicent Indexical Legisign	A street cry
8		331	Rhematic Symbol (-ic Legisign)	A common noun
9		332	Dicent Symbol (-ic Legisign)	A proposition
10		333	Argument (-ive Symbolic Legisign)	A syllogism

Table 2

Peirce gives empirical examples of each of these, but I want to defer them for the moment.

6. Table 2 presents the ten *classes* of signs. A logically prior process yields the ten *divisions* of signs shown on the left of Table 3, each distinguished into *trichotomies* (Peirce 1965: 1.471, 1.530, 1.536, 6.326; Sanders 1970: 15 n. 16). Peirce creates the ten *divisions* by breaking Table 1 into its degenerate forms: he distinguishes two objects and three interpretants (Peirce 1965: 2.265; Weiss and Burks 1945: 384). There is the object ‘as the Sign represents it’, usually called the *immediate object*, and the object as it is ‘really efficient [i.e., acts as an efficient cause in Aristotle’s sense] but not immediately present’; he usually calls this the *dynamical object*. For interpretants there are the *immediate interpretant* as ‘signified in the Sign’, the *dynamic interpretant*, ‘the effect actually produced on the mind by the Sign’, and the *normal interpretant*, ‘the effect that would be produced on the mind by the Sign after sufficient development of thought’ (Peirce 1965: 8.343).

That yields the following table of ten divisions (Weiss and Burks 1945: 387-88; Sanders 1970: 9-11). In this case I have added some of Peirce’s examples for later discussion; his examples gradually give out toward the end of the text.

<p>I. <i>The sign itself</i> ‘the Mode of Apprehension of the sign itself’; ‘different ways in which objects are present to minds’</p>	<p>1. (Potisigns) Qualisigns (tone, mark) Signs ‘in themselves as they are in themselves’; as ‘feelings’; for example, ‘At the first instant of waking from profound sleep’</p>
	<p>2. (Actisigns) Sinsigns (token, replica) ‘the sense of something opposing one’s Effort, something preventing one from opening a door slightly ajar’; ‘Signs as Experienced <i>his et nunc</i>; such as any single word in a single place in a single sentence of a single page of a single copy of a book’.</p>
	<p>3. (Famisigns) Legisigns (type) ‘that which is stored away in one’s Memory; Familiar, and as such, General’</p>
<p>II. <i>The nature of the immediate object</i> ‘the Mode of Presentation of the Immediate Object’; ‘as objects may be presented’</p>	<p>1. Descriptives, ‘such as a geometrical surface, or an absolutely definite or distinct notion’</p>
	<p>2. Designatives (Denotatives, Indicatives, Denominatives) ‘like a Demonstrative pronoun, or a pointing finger, brutally direct the mental eye-balls of the interpreter to the object’ without ‘independent reasoning’</p>
	<p>3. Copulants ‘neither describe nor denote their Objects, but merely express... logical relations’; for example ‘If—then—’; ‘—causes—’.</p>
<p>III. <i>The nature of the dynamic object</i> ‘the Mode of Being of the Dynamical Object’</p>	<p>1. Abstractive ‘such as Color, Mass, Whiteness’</p>
	<p>2. Concretive ‘such as Man, Charlemagne’</p>
	<p>3. Collective ‘such as Mankind, the Human Race’</p>

IV. <i>The relation of the sign to the dynamic object</i>	1. Icon (Likeness)
	2. Index
	3. Symbol (General Sign)
V. <i>The nature of the immediate interpretant</i>	1. Hypothetical
the Mode of Presentation of the Immediate Interpretant'; 'the Nature of the Immediate	2. Categorical (Imperative)
Interpretant'	3. Relative
VI. <i>The nature of the dynamic interpretant</i>	1. Sympathetic (Congruentive)
the Mode of Being of the Dynamical Interpretant'; 'the Nature of the Dynamic	2. Percussive (Shocking)
Interpretant'	3. Usual
VII. <i>The relation of the sign to the dynamic interpretant</i>	1. Suggestive (Ejaculative) 'Merely giving utterance to feeling'
the Manner of Appeal to the Dynamic Interpretant'; the 'nature of the Immediate	2. Imperative 'Including, of course, Interrogatives'
(or Felt?) Interpretant'	3. Indicative
VIII. <i>The nature of the normal interpretant</i>	1. Gratific
the Purpose of the Eventual Interpretant'	2. To produce action
	3. to produce self-control
IX. <i>The relation of the sign to the normal interpretant</i>	1. Rheme (Seme, Term, Sumisign) 'like a simple sign'
the Nature of the Influence of the Sign'	2. Dicisign (PHEME, Proposition) 'with antecedent and consequent'

	3. Argument (Delome, Suadisign) 'with antecedent, consequent, and principle of sequence'
X. <i>The triadic relation of the sign to its dynamic object and its normal interpretant</i>	1. Assurance of Instinct
the Nature of the Assurance of the	2. Assurance of Experience
Utterance'	3. Assurance of Form

Table 3.

7. The putative sixty-six classes of signs would then be developed from this Table, exactly as if it were an extension of Table 1. Instead of counting III, 2II, 22I, etc., we would be counting IIIIIIIII, 2IIIIIIII, 22IIIIIIII, 222IIIIIIII, 2222IIIIIIII, and so forth, all the way up to 3333333333, for a total of sixty-six classes. Plate 2 indicates the sixty-six classes as they intersect the curve labeled **X**.

[*Editor: insert Plate 2 here.*]

But Peirce never developed the sixty-six classes, and his work remained unfinished. He thought of his work as a scaffolding, and he repeatedly points to the amount of work that remains. If the ten divisions are fully independent of one another (a fact that he doubted), he would have not sixty-six but 3^{10} or 59,049 classes; at one point he says he will leave off since he may have '59,049, difficult questions to carefully consider'. Peirce's sign theory is a 'sleeping giant', and even he felt loath to disturb it (Martin 1969: 157).

III

It is an interesting question why this schema—as opposed to the incomplete and unrealized notion that there might be 66 classes—has not attracted more attention outside Peirce studies. Certainly it is riddled with assumptions that might seem inappropriate or questionable: there are the notions concerning imagination and the 'full' apprehension of signs, the doctrines of 'degenerate' forms and of Firsts, Seconds,

and Thirds, and the *a priori* logic of genealogical branching that he uses to generate his divisions and classes. There is the hopeless battle to master phenomenology by precise language, the mentalist assumptions, and the solid faith in logic (Juchem 1990). All this seems so overwhelmingly idiosyncratic, so drastically inappropriate to the discursive tone of even the most analytic semiotics, that it might tempt us, like Gary Sanders, to begin to read him as a literary critic or a psychoanalyst might, instead of trying to build on his results: to find patterns, perhaps ‘a formal structure which reappears’ in an underlying role throughout Peirce’s thought such as the branching form in the diagram (Sanders 1970: 115 n. 6). I had something along those lines in mind when I proposed the perspective diagram as the half-hidden ‘underlying’ trope for his trichotomies. In reading Peirce, it is often tempting to try to excavate the underlying patterns and tendencies of thought, since his doctrines seem to have an uneven grasp on empirica.

On the other hand, Peirce’s trichotomies and divisions are not without points of contact with ideas in art history and criticism. ‘Abstractive’ and ‘Concretive’ are bridges between those terms as they are understood in philosophy and as they occur in pictures. ‘Suggestive’, ‘Imperative’, and ‘Indicative’ have resonance with J. L. Austin’s concept of the performative and constative speech acts, which have had certain points of contact with art history. But by and large these are not distinctions that match well with art history as it is currently practiced, and certainly there is nothing here to help distinguish ‘diagrams, charts, graphs, words, and scores’, and therefore nothing of direct assistance to the ongoing semiotic problems—even those that have to do directly with ‘presentness’ and phenomenological immediacy, since they have largely been generated by the reception of Saussure, rather than Peirce (Krauss and Fried 1987).

But in terms of methodology, rather than of specific concepts, what Peirce does here is definitely attractive. He thinks hard, and he forces his way from one trichotomy to ten and then perhaps to 66 and even 59,049. He gets lost, almost, in the forests of signification, in the branching varieties of his logic and his own experience. He thinks about combinatorics and powers of ten, and then also about the ‘feelings’ of colors and of pushing against a stuck door. It is that odd mixture, I would suggest, that best mimics our own apprehension of pictures as semiotic objects. Meaning

seems infinite, but at the same time we suspect it may not be—but the rules, and the phenomenology, get entirely out of hand.

And it is here that I come to my own reading. The logic of Peirce is at once solid and watery, and its problem comes from its particular mixture of what he calls the *a priori* and the ‘empirical’. Why, to take one case, should there be three interpretants, and only two objects, and why *those* interpretants? Why must the last, ‘normal’ interpretant, be ‘the effect that would be produced on the mind by the Sign after sufficient development of thought’? There is logical reason enough, but how is it related to empirical testing? What I’m evoking here is the entire vexed question of the exact manner in which Peirce worked out his theory. Some of it is clearly *a priori*: the doctrine of Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness, or the principle of ‘degenerate forms’. Often enough he works things out on paper and then tests them. At one point he cautions that it is necessary to ‘have met with the different kinds *a posteriori*’, since ‘the *a priori* descriptions mean little; not nothing at all, but little’ (Sanders 1970: 11, 4). But he also works backwards from *a posteriori* ‘evidence’ and hunches, labeling and finding examples as he goes. There is evidence, in the form of internal contradictions and incompleteness, that he sometimes worked backwards even when the logical schemata would have him working forwards. Other times his mixture of thoughts is somewhat puzzling. Sanders remarks, regarding the ten classes of signs, that Peirce ‘is either not completely aware of the ‘order’ requirements, or he is also establishing this more or less empirically’ (Sanders 1970: 8). What is ‘more or less’ here? Speaking of the ‘nice problem’ of guessing the classification of signs, Peirce remarks, ‘if one does not locate the sign precisely, one will easily come near enough to its character for any ordinary purpose of logic’ (Peirce 1965: 2.265). What is ‘ordinary purpose’ in a text like this? It is not accidental that the final list of ten divisions is better fleshed out at the beginning than toward the end. Divisions may collapse into one another, or more may be necessary. The ten classes of signs (as opposed to the ten divisions we have just been considering) are given one example each (see Table 2; Peirce 1965: 2.254-65). How do the examples form a set? Can they be ‘apprehended’, as he says, as a completed schema? I am not competent to pursue these questions, since their answers would have to depend on close comparative readings of a number of texts. Yet it seems to me that this particular confusion, this muddling negotiation between the enforcing rigor of logic and the myriad phenomena of experience, is

Peirce's real lesson for art history and for the 'word-image' debate. In Peirce, as in no other semiotician, there is a *ruleless* dialectic between a desire for absolute, categorical order (down to the 59,049th case) and the equal, and incommensurate, interest in happy phenomenal chaos (geometrical planes, stuck doors, and the 'feeling of red'). Like Peirce, art historians encounter the unclassifiable welter of signs and the infinite 'degenerate' ramifications of the theory that would be needed to contain them. Our responses, like his, are inconsistently *a priori* and *a posteriori*. Steiglitz's photograph could be minimally described as an indexical sign entailing the necessary participation of the iconic sign, but any less cursory viewing would begin to see other kinds of signifying activity. Just to take examples from Table 3, I might name its 'assurances of form', 'assurances of experience', its 'suggestive' way of 'merely giving utterance to feeling', its blending of 'percussive' and 'sympathetic' signs, and its mingling of 'abstractive', 'concretive', and 'collective' meanings. The triad icon, index, symbol is a bit lost in this avalanche. I think a fuller, more faithfully Peircean reading of the photograph would have to include the categories under immediate, dynamic, and normal interpretants. For example, a photograph includes all three kinds of immediate interpretant (category V): it creates a hypothetical viewer standing in the snowstorm; it categorically proposes the interpretant as the photographer himself; and it also conjures relative immediate interpretant as the viewer of the photograph. In good Peircean fashion the trichotomy is irresolvable. That much would be true of most, perhaps all, photographs. If I continue down Peirce's table to the next category (numbered VI), I find that the dynamic interpretant ('the effect actually produced on the mind') can be understood in three ways: sympathetically, as I feel the cold; percussively, as I feel for the poor horse; and in terms of use, because I also think of the cab's utility. That division of three is especially overloaded in this photograph, and it's the dimension of the work that allies it with the excruciating melodramas of suffering made famous soon afterward by Charlie Chaplin. Except that in Steiglitz's photograph the thirdness gives way to secondness and firstness, rather than the other way around. So much for the nature of the immediate and dynamic interpretant: what happens 'after sufficient development of thought'—what happens to the normal interpretant (category VIII)? His or her firstness is 'gratific': the photograph gives a kind of wan aesthetic pleasure, the kind that people who are warm and happy can allow themselves when they look at the beauty of other peoples' displeasure. His or

her secondness is 'to produce action': but I doubt Stieglitz's interpretant would be impelled to go outside and feed the horse. And his or her thirdness is 'to produce self-control': and here, for the first time, I think that Peirce's schema has real bite, because the effect of the other two interpretants is to collapse into disinterested pleasure. In this case political lassitude is renamed as 'self-control': an interesting label, given the moral weakness of the firstness and secondness in this category. Peirce, to me, is a combination of sharp-edged mathematical exactitude and a very tangled or tumbled braid of recurring themes. So it does not surprise me to come to the end of Table 3 and find that the three entries under category X, which he describes as 'the Nature of the Assurance of the Utterance', reflect and repeat these same possibilities: the photograph assures me instinctively (about cold and unhappiness), and it assures me by experience (I have walked on those streets, I have seen those cabs); and it assures me by form (it is an artwork: its forms are what compel my interest).

Needless to say much more could be done along these lines: my point here is that Peirce ramifies endlessly, and he is endlessly at least minimally interesting, but that his ramifications and minimal interests just do not coincide with the more narrowly political, social, and aesthetic preoccupations of art history. Just as the carriages become indistinct in the snowy background, so the bare tree branches and divides until its twigs form an indecipherable lattice. In fact, Plates 1 and 2 are related: Peirce's ramified, potentially endless thought mirrors the inconceivable complexity of signification in even as 'simple' an image as Stieglitz's. This, I think, is what prompts art history's interest in a schema that promises strict and simple order.

But if Peirce is too Procrustean, technical, and relentless for art history, there is also a deep similarity between his ways of thinking and art historians' approaches. In art history there is the rote, sometimes inappropriate and always odd rehearsal of strict semiotic doctrine and interpretive protocol, mingled with the actual artworks that stand as examples and 'test cases', mixed with the barest, most sensual and personal descriptions... we do what Peirce did, but we do it less forcibly. Our writing is haphazardly rigorous and unevenly discursive. Peirce's is tensely and steadily logical, and poetic in flashes. But I'd like to say that the most analytically interesting moments in both cases occur when logical schemata meet intuitive responses.

When it becomes necessary to pay attention to runaway theorizing or unchecked impressionistic description, Peirce is our best guide. There is precious little

sense, I think, in trying to follow Peirce or even in bothering to cite him, especially when the citations are only to the triad icon, symbol, index. But it is tremendously helpful to keep someone as persistently strange as Peirce in mind. In trying to understand images, we need to be absolutely unafraid of pressing on to the most abstruse configurations, provided they are genuinely and permanently open to cross-cutting critiques. No one does that more oddly than Peirce. Reading him is not a good way to find supporting theories, but it is a wonderful way to see what a genuinely forceful writer can do with images, with theory, and with common sense.

List of Plates

- Plate 1 Alfred Stieglitz, *The Street (Design for a Poster)*. Photogravure. N.d., 1880-1899. Art Institute of Chicago. 1949.839.
- Plate 2 Gary Sanders, Diagram of relations between Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness. From Sanders 1970: 6. Used with permission.

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Notes