

A NEW LOOK AT AN OLD TOPIC: EKPHRASIS REVISITED

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Abstract: Focusing on ekphrastic poetry, I argue that James A. W. Heffernan's succinct definition of ekphrasis as the "verbal representation of a visual representation", much cited by others and still upheld in his essay "Ekphrasis: Theory" in the 2015 *Handbook of Intermediality* (org. G. Rippl), has become even less tenable than when I criticized it in 1995. I then showed that it excluded ekphrastic descriptions of non-representational painting and sculpture as well as all architecture. I am now supported by David Kennedy's recent studies, who has shown that contemporary critical ekphrasis and the surrounding discourse have turned against the model of a *paragone* based on representation. I also demonstrate that the dominant view of seeing ekphrasis as a prime example of intermedial transposition is questionable and should be replaced by the recognition that it primarily verbalizes a viewer's encounter with (a) non-kinetic visual configuration(s).

Keywords: Ekphrasis. Intermedial transposition. Non-representational art.

■ **T**he *Handbook of Intermediality: Literature – Image – Sound – Music*, edited by Gabriele Rippl and published in 2015, is the first volume in De Gruyter's series of "Handbooks of English and American Studies" and is programmatically restricted to investigating the relations of literary texts written in English to other media but draws in its bibliographic resources on theoretical texts written in English and in German. Rippl's (2015, p. 1-23) "Introduction" is competent, up-to-date, and helpful. The 31 essays by recognized specialists in the field have been divided into three large categories: 1. text and image; 2. music, sound and performance; and 3. intermedial methodology and intersectionalities (three essays). Rippl's "Introduction" provides the general theoretical orientation for the enterprise.

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Interestingly, the first category begins with seven essays grouped under the heading “Ekphrasis”. They have a basically chronological bent, ranging from “Medieval Ekphrasis” to the “Early Modern Period” and then considering various aspects of ekphrasis in modernity: “Ekphrasis and Poetry”, “Ekphrasis and the Novel/Narrative Fiction”, “Ekphrasis in the Age of Digital Reproduction”, and “Postcolonial Ekphrasis in the Contemporary Anglophone Indian Novel”. This covers a wider perspective than most monographs or essay collections on the subject. The section is headed by the essay “Ekphrasis: Theory”, in which James A.W. Heffernan presents (again) his understanding of this concept as he had elaborated it over twenty years earlier in his *Museum of Words*, although in modified form. Interestingly, among the other contributors to this section only David Kennedy, writing about “Ekphrasis and Poetry”, engages – rather critically – with Heffernan’s view, while the other five, focusing mostly on ekphrasis in narratives, have little use for Heffernan’s theoretical considerations. This includes Rippl herself, although in her essay on postcolonial ekphrasis she does refer to Heffernan’s “widely accepted definition which claims that ekphrasis is the verbal representation of visual representation” (RIPPL, 2015, p. 129). But she makes no further reference to his theory and points to her own earlier “critique of Heffernan’s use of the term ‘representation’” (RIPPL, 2015, p. 129; cf. RIPPL, 2005, p. 97-98).

It was exactly Heffernan’s positioning of “visual representation” as the object of “verbal representation” in the catchy definition cited by Rippl that twenty years ago triggered my own questioning in response to his *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbury* (1953), which was to establish him as a leading authority in the field. Having worked on ekphrastic representations of the mature work of a Piet Mondrian and a Josef Albers (cf. CLÜVER, 1978, 1989), I saw that Heffernan’s overall definition worked well for the kinds of texts he had discussed, but not for texts dealing with the work of these artists. The term “visual representation”, as understood by Heffernan, referred to the representation of objects in the phenomenal world. Until the beginning of the twentieth century, that was all that painting and sculpture and most graphic art had been about. The visual artworks referred to by Heffernan ranged from the (fictional) shield of Achilles in Homer to van Gogh’s *Starry Night* (HEFFERNAN, 1993, p. 183) and Magritte’s surrealist *La condition humaine* (p. 56). But the new century had introduced a kind of artmaking that was not only increasingly abstract but even entirely “non-representational” or “non-figurative” or “non-objective” – terms used for what in German is perhaps more simply and unequivocally called “*gegenstandslos*”, as opposed to “*gegenständlich*”¹. Such “non-representational” artworks relied entirely on their medium’s *materials* (line, shape, color, texture, in the case of painting) and the *physical media* that had produced them and had left their traces (board, canvas; tempera, oil; brushes, fingers etc.) as well as on the *techniques* by which they had been applied and on the structures thus created and the visual programs thus executed (as in abstract expressionism, concrete art, or op art). Viewers soon realized that, besides appealing to our sensibilities, such “non-representational” artworks were meaningful in their own right even though it might be difficult to express such

1 “*Gegenstandslos*” is closest to “non-objective”, but “*gegenständliche Kunst*” does not have an English equivalent of “objective art”. A translation of Heffernan’s phrase would require a noun based on the verb “*darstellen*”, which has a range of significations only slightly narrower than “represent”.

meanings in words, because they involved aspects of visual materials and structures that rely on a non-verbal semiotics. But many could be read as configurations representing space-time relations or ambiguities of visual perception, or as signs, symbols, or visual metaphors representing abstract concepts or conditions such as movement, tension, order, harmony, conflict, chaos, narrativity, and much more, besides pointing self-referentially at themselves and the particular style, and thus also at the culture and period, they represent. Our response to the various techniques and styles of representing the material world is undoubtedly shaped by the same aspects, although ekphrastic texts may often not verbalize these. In abstract paintings and sculptures the signs referring to the extra-pictorial world are distorted and reduced, and in non-representational visual artworks they have been eliminated, even though as viewers we may tend to associate certain features with extra-pictorial objects, depending on our viewing habits. While literary representations of abstract and non-representational visual art may be relatively rare, they certainly exist, and so do verbal representations in art criticism or art history books.

To accommodate such texts under the ekphrastic label I therefore modified Heffernan's pithy definition in 1995, in a lecture entitled "Ekphrasis Revisited: On Verbal Representations of Non-verbal Texts"². My proposal read: "Ekphrasis is the verbal representation of a real or fictitious text composed in a non-verbal sign system" (cf. CLÜVER, 1997, p. 26). Heffernan (1993, p. 4) had insisted that ekphrasis "explicitly represents representation itself. What ekphrasis represents in words, therefore, must itself be *representational*", which had led him to conclude: "Because it verbally represents visual art, ekphrasis stages a contest between rival modes of representation" (p. 6). In this view, the contest is ultimately between the ways a visual artwork and a literary text can represent an object that exists in the extra-artistic phenomenal world. Architecture and much twentieth-century sculpture and painting, whatever they may represent, do not function as representations of the phenomenal world, and verbal texts that represent them therefore cannot be included in the ekphrastic "mode" as constructed by Heffernan in the 1990s. He had denied Hart Crane's poem "The Bridge" ekphrastic status because "[t]he Brooklyn Bridge may be considered a work of art and construed as a symbol of many things, but since it was not created to represent anything" (HEFFERNAN, 1993, p. 4) the poem representing the bridge could not qualify as an ekphrastic text. He relativized the bridge's status as a work of art and as a symbol (and thus not a "representation") and, along with Crane's "The Bridge", removed all verbal representations of non-representational visual art to a place outside of the ekphrastic mode.

My new definition avoided the ambiguous term "visual representation" and also opened the concept beyond Heffernan's restriction to "a literary representation of visual art" (HEFFERNAN, 1993, p. 1). It promoted the view of ekphrasis as representing a medial configuration as such, as primarily a representation of the image, not of what the image refers to in the extra-artistic world. The verbal texts would not have to be literary, and the objects represented could be "non-representational" paintings or sculptures and even architectural structures; they would have to be medial compositions but not necessarily "art".

2 Opening presentation of the International Conference on "Interarts Studies: New Perspectives" at Lunds Universitet, Sweden, May 1995 (see CLÜVER, 1997).

This reorientation removed the traditional focus on the visual and the verbal as rivaling enterprises engaged in a *paragone*.

But “text composed in a non-verbal sign system” was not a fortunate formulation. Besides using “text” misleadingly to signify a configuration in any sign system (following semiotic usage) I also made the definition too inclusive. Using the label for verbal representations of configurations in any media employing any sign system and its codes (music, dance, mime, performance arts, cinema, etc.) made it unnecessarily imprecise and impracticable. It may have been these shortcomings that overshadowed my critique of Heffernan’s restrictive view.

In a series of follow-up essays in subsequent years I further examined my definition and explored its limits. In “Quotation, Enargeia, and the Functions of Ekphrasis” (1998) I changed “verbal representation” to “verbalization” in an effort to create my own restrictions, a change that I have since recognized as vain and have undone. “The *Musikgedicht*: Notes on an Ekphrastic Genre” (1999) elaborated on the poems in Jorge de Sena’s *Arte de Música* (1968) which I had already referred to in “Ekphrasis Revisited” as backing up my expansion of the concept and its label; I would now eliminate its subtitle but otherwise still support my findings, which dealt mostly with the differences between verbally representing music and ekphrastic representations of visual configurations. “(Re)Writing Edward Hopper” (1999) covered a series of poems in English and Portuguese ranging from texts that could be read as close intersemiotic transpositions of Hopper paintings to mere intermedial references, mostly by title.

I did not return to the subject until 2013, when I was asked to contribute an essay on “Ekphrasis and Adaptation” to the *Oxford Handbook on Adaptation Studies* organized by Thomas Leitch (see CLÜVER, 2017). I used the opportunity to review, rectify, and considerably expand my earlier definition. The short version of it I now formulated as “*Ekphrasis is the verbal representation of real or fictive configurations composed in a non-kinetic visual medium*”. I added “non-kinetic” to exclude verbal representations of “configurations” (the term that I now find most applicable where I used to say “texts”) on television or in the cinema, because these are products of plurimedial media and require different approaches, terms, and techniques for verbal representation. What Heffernan now includes as “cinematic ekphrasis” and exemplifies with descriptions of films in Manuel Puig’s *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (HEFFERNAN, 2015, p. 45-48) should not be conflated with the many uses of ekphrasis in narrative fiction.

While again focusing almost exclusively on poetry and using a sonnet by John Hollander, “Edward Hopper’s Seven A. M.” (1948), as an example of an ekphrastic text that can be read as a translation of the painting because the voice we hear in the poem reacting to the image can also be heard as that of the painter reacting to the scene he supposedly observed and then depicted,³ I discussed Carlos Drummond de Andrade’s short poem “Quadro I (*Mondrian*)” and a poem by Eugen Gomringer, “außenrund”, on an entirely non-figurative concrete work by Marcel Wyss, *teilkreis-projektionen: zwölf variationen* (projections of circle segments: twelve variations, 1977), as ekphrastic texts that would not be covered by Heffernan’s definition of 1993.

3 An idea I first developed in “On Intersemiotic Transposition” (see CLÜVER, 1989, p. 66-67).

Nor would they be accommodated by his *Handbook* essay of 2015, although Heffernan there made a gesture toward including ekphrastic descriptions of post-modernist art that would not immediately be recognized as a visual representation. After reviewing the history of “ekphrasis” as a concept related to the literary description of visual art and engaging with differing views of the nature of verbal and visual representation, in particular that of Murray Krieger, Heffernan arrived at offering his reading of Lessing’s distinction between poetry as time-oriented and visual art as space-oriented and the 18th-century theorist’s admission of a potential temporal dimension in visual works of art. From there he went on to state:

If works of art “are structures in space-time” rather than either spatial or temporal, as W.J.T. Mitchell argues (1986, [p.] 103), ekphrasis must allow for both elements in the works it represents. For this reason I have defined ekphrasis as “the verbal representation of visual representation” (HEFFERNAN 1993, [p.] 3). This definition makes room for descriptions of paintings and sculptures that represent anything at all, whether someone or something in motion or a still object like Magritte’s famous pipe (HEFFERNAN, 2015, p. 38).

The purpose of the first phrase is not easy to see. It may mean that an ekphrastic representation should address temporal dimensions implied in a painting or a sculpture, or that it should deal with moving objects such as Calder’s mobiles, or with moving images on the computer, on TV, or in the cinema. It is not clear why he considers this to be the reason why his 1993 definition still works. The final statement returns to a restriction of the objects of ekphrastic description to paintings and sculptures, and in either case to visual representations of still or moving objects – supposedly connected with the phenomenal world. But the phrase “that represent anything at all” is meant to lead up to the quotation of the art critic Leo Steinberg’s ekphrastic interpretation of *Shade* (1959), “one of the works with which Jasper Johns launched Postmodernism in the late 1950s” (HEFFERNAN, 2015, p. 41). This quote appeared in Heffernan’s instructive essay “Speaking for Pictures: The Rhetoric of Art Criticism” (1999) and has been included in several of his later pieces. The essay itself was reprinted in Heffernan’s *Cultivating Picturacy* (2006). The quote also appears in his essay “Speaking for Pictures: Language and Abstract Art”, which in truncated form was also reprinted in *Picturacy*, but without the Steinberg text, which appears earlier in the volume⁴.

In all these instances Steinberg’s interpretation of Johns’s *Shade* follows a discussion of the “Modernist” art that preceded it, “an art that seem[ed] to turn its back on representation, on reference to any object or figure that we might recognize from our experience of the world outside the painting” (HEFFERNAN, 2015, p. 40). Even though puzzling, Johns’s work “returns us to the world of tangible objects that Modernism had renounced – to objects such as flags, target, and shade” (HEFFERNAN, 2015, p. 41). In 2015, Heffernan only provided a brief summary of how he read the “abstract” works of Modernism. He had developed his ideas first in the section on “Leo Steinberg and the Taciturnity of Abstract Art” of his 1999 essay, the last of his five detailed and critical exemplifications of the “rhetoric of art criticism” ranging from Philostratus⁵ to Steinberg. What

4 In *Picturacy* it has the title “Reza, Pollock, Richter: Language and Abstract Art.” I shall quote from the 2006 essay.

5 The long passage about Philostratus in the 2015 essay (p. 38-40) is largely a repetition of this early text.

Heffernan had to say about Modernism and abstract art was to a large extent inspired by W. J. T. Mitchell's *Ut Pictura Theoria: Abstract Painting and Language* (1994); it echoed several of the critical voices cited by Mitchell but did not engage with his central thesis. Instead, Heffernan (1999, p. 27) asked:

What sort of story, after all, can be told about an art that apparently turns its back on representation, on reference to any object or figure that we might recognize from our experience of the world outside the painting, and that might give us something to talk about?.

This very phrase returned in his 2015 essay (p. 40), in the paragraph that led up to his quotation of the Steinberg passage on Johns. The phrase had already made a come-back in 2006 in "Speaking for Pictures: Language and Abstract Art"⁶ (p. 26), which by its very title announced that it resumed a topic broached at the end of the 1999 essay. Here Heffernan made an effort to come to terms with "abstract" art, from Malevich and the later Kandinsky to Jackson Pollock, Robert Rauschenberg, and Ad Reinhardt as well as the post-modernist art of a Jasper Johns and a Gerhard Richter. He did not consider literary representations of such art but relied quite heavily, as in 1999, on the authority of such influential American art critics as Clement Greenberg, Rosalind Krauss, Michael Fried – by whom he quoted a lengthy description of Pollock's *Number 1* (1948), with which he disagreed – and Leo Steinberg. And (as had Mitchell) he emphasized the voices of critics that emphasized "modern art's will to silence" (KRAUSS, 1986, p. 9), which supposedly also eliminated the possibility of interpretation (SONTAG, p. 201-202).

Answering his persistent question, in 2006 Heffernan found much to talk about by developing the thesis that "abstract" art can be read as figurative and thus ultimately referential. He spent considerable space showing that, as opposed to Michael Fried's assertion that nothing in Pollock's *Number 1* (1948) "deserves to be read as a figure" (FRIED apud HEFFERNAN, 2006, p. 33), others, himself included, have indeed seen figures in Pollock's work, and that it is easy from there to associate these with objects in extra-pictorial reality (HEFFERNAN, 2006, p. 34). Which led him to insist that, "[w]ether geometric, biomorphic, or anthropomorphic, [figures] inform his paintings, which may be seen or read as veils drawn over shapes we can recognize – and specify" (p. 36). Ultimately, he saw even in paintings that most puzzled him, monochromatic canvases and their perceived "silence", a possibility to make them speak. One of the conclusions he favored in looking at Rauschenberg's white paintings was that "the surface of an abstract painting may actually be read as a veil or screen for what stands behind it" (p. 29). If lifting the veil reveals to the imagination anything figurative, even if it does not resemble anything in the "real world", we can consider the work to be a representation that is meaningful and can be interpreted:

If visual representation does not require resemblance, as Nelson Goodman insists, no essential barrier separates the kinds of signification that abstract and realistic painting can achieve; nothing thwarts their capacity to stand for something we can experience in the real world, or for something we may conceive or imagine (HEFFERNAN, 2006, p. 38).

6 It appeared as the opening essay of an important collection of essays (see HEFFERNAN, 2006, in Homem and Lambert).

For Heffernan, that “something” is still something tangible, something figurative, even if it does not resemble that which it is taken to represent. As I read his interesting essay I see him approaching “abstract” art still with the eyes and expectations of someone used to seeing in visual images references to the extra-artistic world of phenomenal reality, even though these words imply an extension of the concept of “representation” that will allow him to maintain his much quoted phrase. But while insisting on the continued validity of that phrase, in his “Theory” essay of 2015 Heffernan makes no reference to his idea that “abstract” art might permit us to discover figures in such works and to move from there to construct some kind of representation. He repeated the rhetorical question, but the paragraph it introduces ends in a generality: “So far from silencing the critic, then, abstract art provokes and demands at least as much commentary as any of its precursors” (HEFFERNAN, 2015, p. 41) – and moves from there directly to quoting again the Steinberg passage about Johns’s *Shade*, which is presented as “clearly show[ing] how much we can learn about the art of ekphrasis by studying it in what might be called its purest form – as art criticism” (HEFFERNAN, 2015, p. 42). The essay’s subsequent section on “Ekphrastic Poetry” deals only with a few canonical texts as discussed in his book of 1993. He nowhere indicates what kind of “stories” literary texts about abstract art might produce.

What is missing from the 2006 essay is any confrontation of the “abstract” art discussed by Heffernan with the “concrete” art of the Swiss painters around Max Bill or of Bill’s Brazilian disciples, the concrete or constructivist artists of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro who began developing their art and its theoretical support in the early 1950s. This was an art based on the statement and development of “ideias visíveis”, “visible ideas” executed by the manipulation of the artist’s materials without prompting the viewer to link this concrete configuration with any object or figure in the world of experience⁷ – even though viewers like Heffernan might find ways of doing just that. Concrete artists avoided guiding their viewers even by suggestive titles – another of the avenues Heffernan used to make pictures speak.

Bill had come out of the Bauhaus tradition. One of the outstanding Bauhaus artists was Josef Albers, whose work was a major inspiration for Gomringer’s concrete poetry. Paintings by Malevich, Mondrian, Albers, and others that do not suggest any representation of “figures” relating to an extra-pictorial phenomenal reality have inspired ekphrastic poems which do not suggest they do. Several of these have taken the form of what Heffernan referred to in 1993 as “iconic poetry” (p. 4) by incorporating visual references to the work represented. Gomringer’s collaboration with more than thirty non-representational artists over several decades has resulted in a number of ekphrastic poems of the kind I have illustrated by “außenrund”, poems that cannot be covered by the phrase “verbal representation of visual representation”.

But in the essay for the *Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies* where I analyzed “außenrund” I still framed my deliberations about both ekphrasis and adaptation within the context of “intermedial transpositions”, as which I had

7 For the connections between Brazilian concrete artists and poets in São Paulo see Clüver, “The Noigandres Poets and Concrete Art”, 2008. These concrete paintings and sculptures, to which Mitchell does not refer, would serve well to exemplify his thesis concerning the interdependence of “abstract” art and theory developed in his “*Ut Pictura Theoria*”.

approached ekphrasis since my earliest efforts, the essay investigating the transposition of “Painting Into Poetry” of 1978 and the essay “On Intersemiotic Transposition” of 1989. This is where theories of intermediality have usually placed these phenomena (see, e.g., RAJEWSKY, 2005).

As I resumed my work on the subject I increasingly began to question this view of ekphrastic poetry as a particular form of intermedial transposition within the field of word-and-image studies. I realized that neither Heffernan’s view, following a lengthy tradition, of ekphrasis as basically engaged in a rivalry between two modes of representation, and the equally lengthy tradition of looking at ekphrasis as a transfer between two media, paid sufficient attention to what John Hollander would call, quoting P. B. Shelley, “the gazer’s spirit” (HOLLANDER, 1995). David Kennedy’s *The Ekphrastic Encounter in Contemporary British Poetry and Elsewhere* (2012) suggested in its title that ekphrastic texts, here again in poetry, may suggest a different critical approach and emphasis, one that is also indicated in the title of a new collection of essays still in press which he and Richard Meek have organized, *Ekphrastic Encounters: New Interdisciplinary Essays on Literature and the Visual Arts*. My own contribution to that volume, “On Gazer’s Encounters with Visual Art: Ekphrasis, Readers, Iconotexts”, approaches Drummond’s poem (again) as well as a poem by Pedro Tamen about a “representational” painting by Manuel Amado and a poem by Gomringer accompanying seven “non-representational” aquatint prints by Heinz-Günter Prager, *sieben begehren* (seven desires, 2010), as records of an encounter. It furthermore broaches the question of how such records position the reader of the text, which becomes more complex in narrative fiction where a (frequently fictive) visual artwork may be described by an extradiegetic narrator or as perceived by an intradiegetic character in a specified situation, and where readers have to consider the particular functions such ekphrastic moments have in the overall narrative as they understand it.

Interpreting Drummond’s three-line poem “QUADRO I (*Mondrian*)”, the only one about an abstract work among thirty-two short ekphrastic poems collected as “Arte em exposição” (Art on Exhibit)⁸, I concluded that its generic title and its sparse and succinct form convey a reading of Mondrian’s mature paintings as highly abstract representations of the artist’s view of the universe without permitting us to identify a specific work, and that this reading is as much expressed by the poem’s form as by its words. But this form is not exceptional: Ten of these short records of encounters with canonical paintings have only three lines, eight have only two, and the longest among these thirty-two poems has just six. Usually Drummond zoomed in on a specific detail or quality of a work or its effect, as when he highlighted the color in “Odalisca vermelha (*Matisse*)” by rolling l’s and r’s (“A indolência da odalisca em rosa rubra / respira paz de lânguido fervor”), ending with a short fourth line: “pura cor” (p. 31), or when he encapsulated the reaction to “nature screaming” in “O Grito (*Munch*)” in the line: “Doem os ouvidos, doi o quadro” (p. 30). These are not transpositions of the images but expressions of a viewer’s personal reaction that nevertheless impress the poem’s reader as penetrating to a work’s core. The latter can be said

⁸ According to the verso of the title page of Drummond’s *Farewell*, “os poemas de ARTE EM EXPOSIÇÃO foram publicados em 1990 pela Ed. Salamandra/Record” (*Farewell*, p. 4). In *Farewell*, the 32 poems about individual paintings grouped under the title “Arte em exposição” appear on p. 29-37, “QUADRO I (*Mondrian*)” on p. 35.

of the Mondrian poem as well, except that it may refer to almost any of the painter's later works and that it reflects at least as much of the poet's knowledge of Mondrian's world view as it does of his reaction to the work. Given the formal affinity, the poem can be seen as a verbal equivalent, and therefore as a transposition, of Mondrian's manner of representation, contrary to the other short poems and their relation to the particular painting evoked.

Figure 1: Heinz-Günter Prager (b. 1944), *sieben begehren*. 2010, aquatint on hand-made paper, portfolio with 8 sheets, 77 x 55.5 cm each. Edition of 7. Rehau: institut für konstruktive kunst und konkrete poesie. Images 5 and 6. Rpt. in GILBERT (Org.), *nichts für schnell-betrachter*, p. 210. Photos: László Tóth. © 2016 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York /VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.



As I interpret it, Tamen's much longer poem, which is printed side by side with a copy of Amado's painting, does not transpose anything from the image but instead enacts a reading of it as an abstraction of the scene represented, which makes the painting in the end appear as a "Mondrian recheado" (Mondrian filled in; TAMEN, p. 60). Tamen entitled this volume of his ekphrastic poems *Depois de Ver* (After Looking). That title might also cover the following poem by Eugen Gomringer:

*the game of circles
(by twos, by threes, by fours)*

*the seven ways
to meet one another*

*the seven ways
to touch one another*

*the seven ways
to desire one another*

*the seven ways
to circle apart*

*the seven ways
to let go of each other*

*the seven ways
to make it like prager*

*the seven ways
to see it like gomringer (trans. Claus Clüwer)⁹*

Gomringer's text presents itself self-referentially as a particular way of seeing what another produces, setting the act of interpretation against the act of creation with its own intentions and motivations. The text is included in the portfolio with Prager's prints as the first leaf of a total of eight and, like Tamen's, depends entirely on this juxtaposition. But also like Tamen's, it cannot be read as a transposition of the visual objects. The seven prints are non-representational, each showing from two to four loosely sketched oval shapes that can be read as tilted circles, and one or two sharply defined rectangles, all in white against a black background (see Figure 1). Since in the text there are only five verbs referring to these seven untitled images there seems to be no correspondence between verbs and images; moreover, "the seven ways" makes every verb apply to each of the seven prints with their elliptical forms that the text refers to as "circles". Nevertheless, the order of the verbs suggests a sequence from encounter to separation, with "to desire one another" representing a climax; but the fixed sequence of the non-figurative images does not follow such narrative logic. "seeing it like gomringer" provided the title "seven desires" on the cover of the folder, which, along with the poem, may direct the viewer's response. But the final line with the impersonal, objectifying "gomringer" also distances us from this view and invites us to find our own way of looking at Prager's work. We may even disagree with the idea of inferring slightly anthropomorphic actions into the forms created by the artist – which raises the question of how to interpret non-representational images and how to verbalize such interpretations.

David Kennedy's "Ekphrasis and Poetry" in Rippl's *Handbook* begins by presenting itself as a continuation and expansion of the theory of ekphrastic poetry as offered by Heffernan in the same volume. Kennedy even takes up the canonical examples used by Heffernan to demonstrate differences between poetry and art criticism. But he presents them as approached in the context of what he calls "critical ekphrasis", an approach taken by modern poets as well as by critics that "conceiv[es] of the ekphrastic art object as foreign or other" (KENNEDY, 2015, p. 84). His most interesting example is a project I know only from Kennedy's description, Maggie O'Sullivan's *Tonetreks*, a sequence of eleven ekphrastic poems composed in 1975-77 but not published until 2006 as part of a larger book, *Body of Work*. Among the works represented are paintings by Malevich and Rothko, and several of the texts apparently visually imitate aspects of the works to which they refer. Kennedy describes and interprets many details of O'Sullivan's varied procedures. There is one passage he quotes, which he views as

⁹ Printed with permission of the poet.

not only crucial to the ekphrastic sequence as a whole but also, crucially, to understanding how ekphrasis works. Verse three appears to quote the painter [Arshile Gorky] directly:

You said,

Permit me my making, there is no meaning here.

Meaning is the spectator's privilege.

The fetish

to invent a camouflage (O'SULLIVAN, 2006, p. 23).

The passage is so clear that it requires little in the way of critical gloss. What we can say is that it speaks to how ekphrasis is founded on the need to interpret. The search for meaning is presented here as something that gets in the way of the actual activities of making art which may in fact have little to do with making meaning. It also suggests that the artist may have little conception of what the meaning of a specific work might be (KENNEDY, 2015, p. 88).

Interestingly, while Kennedy's selection and interpretation of the lines from the poem about Gorky emphasizes the self-assumed task of contemporary critical ekphrasis to provide interpretation, his summary of O'Sullivan's sequence highlights her apparent refusal to interpret and her tendency to explore the materials of the works represented and to find verbal (and visual) equivalents in her poetry. To this he adds the observation that her poems reveal "the importance of the body in conveying the ekphrastic meaning of an individual poem" (KENNEDY, 2015, p. 89). This leads him to conclude, after considering the work of other poets as well, that "a new focus on the body in ekphrastic poetry is one way of introducing a new 'turn' in critical responses to ekphrasis"; but another, equally important, is "the idea of the encounter" (KENNEDY, 2015, p. 90). He sees this primarily in the encounter, like the one staged by O'Sullivan, between text and image and between visual and textual cultures.

Kennedy's essay exemplifies what he meant by claiming in his book *The Ekphrastic Encounter* (2012) that "a revision of some aspects of the dominant representational model of ekphrasis is long overdue" (p. 1). His book focuses on contemporary British ekphrastic poems, but does not include any discussion of O'Sullivan's work. There is no explicit discussion of what exactly "encounter" signifies here. It definitely implies an encounter of viewers with a work of art and their verbalization of their responses, compelled by "the need to 'complete' the image's perfection". Before he outlines his ideas about "Ekphrasis Beyond Representation" in the introduction to his book Kennedy suggests that modern viewers experience "works of art [as] stand[ing] literally apart from us and our daily lives [...], untouchable in [their] apparently perfected form", while we are "intimately involved" with the language we use in our response, which

[at] some level [...] reminds us of the contingent nature of ourselves and our lives. [...]

So ekphrasis is not, as James A. W. Heffernan has argued, so much a matter of a paragonal struggle between word and image [...] as an attempt to bring art into the realm of our contingencies (KENNEDY, 2012, p. 6).

Kennedy's later observation that "contemporary British ekphrastic poetry offers significant challenges to established criticism founded on the idea of representation" (p. 11) implies that these developments question the concept both of verbal and of visual representation. This means, among other things, that Steinberg's passage about Johns's *Shade*, Heffernan's favorite quotation, loses any implied claim to an exemplary status except as an impressive example of the art criticism of its time. It also prompts me to reconsider my latest mini-definition of ekphrasis, which still contains the phrase "verbal representation" (see p. XX above).

But as I have already indicated, my deliberations developed in my most recent essay, "On Gazers' Encounters with Visual Art", further prompted by reflections on Kennedy's work, have led me to conclude that our understanding of ekphrasis is no longer well served by being approached within either of the traditional modes: not as a struggle between two kinds of representation, and not as a prime example of intermedial transposition within the discourse on basic types of intermediality. Our understanding is also not helped by one-line definitions. Here I reproduce, in slightly altered form, the definition with which I concluded my essay:

Ekphrasis verbalizes a real or fictive viewer's perceptions of, or reactions to, characteristic features of non-kinetic visual configurations. It deals with configurations that actually exist, or suggests the perceived existence of such configurations in virtual, or fictive, reality. Its materials are purely verbal, but may involve the exploitation of visual aspects of the verbal medium. It produces a mental image of configurations in a non-kinetic visual medium, making them anschaulich without literally showing anything. It implies a viewer's gaze at these objects; if they are the product of an encounter with the phenomenal world, it suggests the producer's way of representing that world according to the semiotic and cultural conventions of the age. Ekphrasis is a parallel procedure to verbal representations of configurations in other than non-kinetic visual media, including such a kinetic visual medium as film. Many but by no means all instances of ekphrasis can be read as intermedial transpositions. As literary texts, ekphrases can be free-standing or integrated as ekphrastic passages in other texts, including plays, libretti, and filmscripts. There are many kinds of markers that compel the attentive reader to receive certain verbal texts as ekphrastic — depending on the concept of ekphrasis accepted in the respective interpretive community. The present definition may persuade those who read it now, but as a cultural construct it is bound to change.

UM NOVO OLHAR SOBRE UM VELHO TEMA: ÉCFRASE REVISITADA

Resumo: Focalizando na poesia ecfástica, argumento que a definição sucinta de écfrase de James A.W. Heffernan – "representação verbal de uma representação visual" – amplamente citada por outros e ainda defendida em seu ensaio "Ekphrasis: theory" no livro *Handbook of Intermediality*, 2015, de G. Rippl, torna-se ainda menos defensável agora do que quando a critiquei em 1995. Naquela época, mostrei que a definição excluía descrições ecfásticas de pinturas e esculturas não representacionais como também da arquitetura. Agora

tenho o apoio dos recentes estudos de David Kennedy, que demonstram que a éfrase crítica contemporânea e o discurso circundante se voltaram contra o modelo de um *paragone* baseado na representação. Além disso, argumento que a visão dominante que considera a éfrase um exemplo primário de transposição intermediática é questionável e deveria ser substituída pelo reconhecimento de que ela verbaliza, primeiramente, o encontro de um espectador com configurações visuais não cinéticas.

Palavras-chave: Éfrase. Transformação intermediática. Arte não figurativa.

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