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Ekphrasis, poetry and emplacement: 'writing with' visual art

Abstract:

The practice of *ekphrasis* has traditionally focused on the verbal representation, focusing on description, of real or imagined art works in poetry. But of course verbal description is never separate from its form, language and the creative, and technical dynamics of poetic composition. From a practice-based perspective, the process of writing poetry in response to visual art, and visual response itself, includes cognitive, affective and associative elements within the creative-writing process. These responses have an immediacy and depth that begs for investigation. The research of this paper is integral to my creative-writing practice, but rather than being descriptive of it, the practice has been the stimulus for a research exploration into implications of the visual response for creativity, memory and the language and form of poetry, especially as the significations of artworks convey the aesthetic and affective marks of their creators. This paper aims to unpack and expand upon the possibilities of visual response and its related visual imaginings, for poetic composition. This process is generated within local and emplaced contexts, promoting new, affective and creative formations in language and form. It does this within the context of a poetic practice driven by the immediacy of lived and embodied displacements. The process also suggests that the context of this compositional practice (writing initially in the presence of the material artwork) itself instigates tensions of fragmentedness, alterity and deferral within and against motivations of identity, and even story, in poetry. Conscious of the potential for appropriation of others' artworks in this process, I argue that it is the *dialogue with* the creative work of others that energises and facilitates my work. This dialogue is a necessary part of engagement with alterity in the exploration towards recognising an individual and wide-ranging, poetics.

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Keywords:

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This paper brings a creative writing approach to ekphrasis, examining the *writing* of ekphrastic poetry as praxis, from the perspective of the writer or maker of a poem. My personal practice of ekphrasis has been generated for several years now with my work with the group *DiVerse*, poets who write poetry based on artworks or museum exhibits, performing the poems in the exhibition spaces. In these settings, the poetry creates a dialogue between the visual artworks and the poems, which is how the audience experiences them, but my concern here is to consider the creative-writing process of a contemporary ekphrastic practice and to suggest how the context of this writing might effect the development of my own poetics.

Most scholarly discussions of ekphrasis engage with *reading* the poem that has already been produced, that is, the critical interpretation of a poem which is itself an ‘interpretation’ of another work of art. Such criticism has regarded ekphrasis mainly in a limited way as ‘the verbal representation of visual representation’ (Heffernan 3), focusing on the effects of description and content rather than the impact upon the poetry of the textual materiality and form of the artwork.¹ At the heart of this critical focus, where the relationship between visual and verbal texts is seen as combative, was the New Critical approach marked by Murray Krieger’s influential essay ‘The Ekphrastic Principle and the Still Movement of Poetry; or *Laokoön* Revisited’ (1967). Krieger argues that when applied to artworks, the poetic language of ekphrasis creates a poetry of ‘stillness’ which shores against the ‘temporality’ of language. This privileging of the ‘temporality’ of poetry against the ‘spatiality’ of the visual perception of art becomes untenable when both are considered as texts.² Analysing the ekphrastic ‘painter poems’ of O’Hara and Ashbery, Michael Davidson (1983) argues:

...a painting serves to trigger a series of reflections, the working-out of which depends upon the semiotic and stylistic factors within the canvas. One of the things that this working-out discovers is the uneasy status of the painting regarded as an object. In order to render the instability of this artifact, *the poet becomes a reader of the painter’s activity of signifying*. This act of reading is never passive, never recuperative since its function is to produce a new text, not to re-capture the original in another medium. The poet who reads another work of art transforms his hermeneutic into performance, just as the reader of the poem participates among the various codes of the text to generate his own readings.’ (Davidson 77; my italics)

Krieger’s hierarchical tension between poetry and visual art, and the focus of ekphrasis as descriptive or verbal ‘representation’, falls away. Rather, the poems are ‘writerly readings’ of artworks and for this reason I maintain the use of the term ekphrasis (one art medium reading another in its making).

My interest is in what occurs in the juxtaposition of writing and the visual response of ‘seeing’ – the components of situatedness and subjective gaze. The place of the encounter is significant: usually a work of art is in a gallery or some other public space and its installation, and the positioning of the viewer, contributes to the work’s meaning and to the generated response and poem. Australian ekphrastic poet Peter Steele alludes to the significance of the quiet galleries of the National Gallery of Victoria for his poems generated by works in that institution, with the claim that these

paintings and sculptures have been ‘perceived by poets and other writers as bidding for language, as if they...were murmuring or whispering themselves into verbal consciousness’ (11), yet the sense of secure (and institutional) placement conveyed by Steele can also be disrupted in ekphrastic composition in the context of displacement. For example, Fay Zwicky’s poem ‘The Caller’ (24) (on ‘Der Rufer’ by Gerhard Marck) responds to the bronze sculpture installed in the forecourt of the State Art Gallery of Western Australia. The poem’s sense of a ‘European’ displacement demonstrates the effect of the European work’s situatedness – in Perth, ‘back turned to towers of chrome and glass/ far from the lost homeland’: the poem’s persona addresses the figure of ‘the caller’ – ‘Your homeless stance prophetic yet your words/ remain unspoken mouthing pain of a God unsighted’ (24). George Raitt notes that another cast of this sculpture was installed in Berlin before the Brandenburg Gate in 1989 (133), thus adding to its accrued meanings, and that its European origin, expressionist style and theme of displacement feature in Zwicky’s poem. Raitt also argues that in ekphrasis ‘the process of representation is unstable, introducing “differences”’, based on ‘Heidegger’s concept of the *preserver* who restrains usual knowing and looking to allow meaning to emerge from the work of art’ (134). Raitt proposes that ‘*ekphrasis* contributes to the field of difference in which the viewer/reader encounters the art work, and that these “differences” influence the production of meaning from the art work informed by the poem’ (134). Raitt’s argument is to emphasise the extent to which meanings inferred in both texts are brought into play in ekphrasis, but also that meaning ‘emerges’ from the artwork’s materiality, its form and the contexts of its making and placement(s).

The process of writing a poem in response to an artwork is complex: it engages in the relationship of its own creative practice of making/writing and the creative work of another artist. Poets who write in response to visual art have grappled with this relationship with their ‘other’ texts. Poet Cole Swensen’s essay ‘To Writewithize’ (2000) discusses the visual and ekphrastic characteristics of three contemporary North American poets. Swensen, who works extensively with ekphrasis, identifies several innovative strategies, one being the strategy of ‘living with’, walking alongside the art – which Swensen terms to ‘writewithize’. Her essay’s title is followed by words that include ‘as in “to hybridize”’ and an epigraph from Gertrude Stein: ‘I write entirely with my eyes’ (69). Swensen writes: ‘the principle difference here is not in the verb, but in the preposition. A side-by-side, a walking-along-*with*, replaces the face-to-face relationship – the two, poem and artwork, are presumed to be going in the same direction and at the same speed; they are fellow travelers sharing a context’ (70).

Swensen’s concept links with my own process, but it is almost impossible to accurately account for the impulse and impetus that generates the poem while I am literally situated ‘along with’ a painting. This is best done through reference to the ideas of others, and only later, retrospectively, after the writing has been done. John Armstrong’s philosophical approach identifies the spectator experience and thought processes it elicits as ‘reverie’ (Armstrong 60–80). Allowing for the role of association (in the Freudian sense) as ‘screen memory’ (67), ‘we gain access to further thought or feeling. The screen is, as it were, the bearer of a second and ultimately more important thought – though a more elusive one. Tracing associations

from the picture, teasing out their common themes and relating them back to the picture is a perpetual motion (67). In reverie 'liasons between moments of wandering thought are loose and inexplicit; it's hard for us to see where the reverie is going. We have ... to deal ... with intractable and delicate material to which we have to give order' (68).

Armstrong's reaching for explanation of aesthetic experience allows for the more complex process of thought and feeling that occurs in a sustained viewing of an artwork, but he does not attempt to discover what elicits the emotion, the drive to 'give order' which occurs also in the act of *writing*. Susan Stewart (1993) locates the need to write as being central to our sense of existence; a means of 'inscribing' space with language and repeating the process. She begins with the absence of signification:

Our terror of the unmarked grave is a terror of the insignificance of a world without writing. The metaphor of the unmarked grave is one which joins the mute and the ambivalent; without the mark there is no boundary, no point at which to begin the repetition. Writing gives us a device for inscribing space, for inscribing nature: the lovers' names carved in bark, the slogans on the bridge... Writing serves to caption the world, defining and commenting upon the configurations we choose to textualize. (31)

As Stewart implies, no aspect of viewing a work of art and writing a poem can be disassociated from the context of the experience.

The act of 'reverie' as Armstrong describes it, is essentially one of aesthetic appreciation, of 'reading', not writing, and it does not take account of context, place or space other than being in front of a painting where one views, absorbs, constructs. This withdrawal is in fact necessary for ekphrastic writing: a sense of being at-one with the activity is an intrinsic part of writing a poem drafted in situ. Raitt's discussion of the '*preserver*', mentioned above, suggests that the artwork 'gives' its meaning(s) to the viewer – yet the viewer is not passive. The viewer-writer's participatory emotion, attached to the associations evoked in the seeing/reverie, is tied strongly to the act of writing. Stewart's 'terror' of absence, of nullity, is likely to be repressed; it is unacknowledged when one writes, simply because one is actively engaged in *making*, in signifying, in creating form. At the same time one is fully present, alive to the otherness of the artwork and its materiality and form. This becomes a dialogue with the signification of the 'other': its medium – charcoal on paper, paint (oil, acrylic, tempera, watercolour), or stone, granite, bronze, wood or other materials, and its content. In making marks upon the world, the plastic arts function as signification; as they actively signify, it is the viewer's role to read them. Verbal language too is a series of signs until the signs are formulated, which in this case, is into a poem, a patterning of language in engagement with an-other. The ekphrasis is a 'reaching towards a sameness' with the other and at the same time it is an encounter with the ineluctable difference of/from the other.

In this encounter, the subjective gaze includes associative leaps (Armstrong's 'perpetual motion' (67)) of the mind when attentively viewing an artwork. These may veer away from the image towards other associations and subjective meanings, or they are prompted by nonvisual sensory responses to the work's materiality and the

dynamic energies of its form. Subjective perception is *affective* and emotive. Even before it begins to be rendered in language, the visual response is initially one of affect because initially we do not articulate or consciously register feelings associated with seeing (Shouse 2005 n.p.). Our affective state is experienced *in the body* and has a profound bearing on the trajectory and feeling conveyed in the poem, indeed on the motivation of its creation.³ Silvan Tomkins (Demos 1995) locates the body's 'affect mechanism' as a significant motivating mechanism of human action; the body's affective responses to its environment are intensities which act as 'analogue amplifiers', alerting the person to the impact the experience has upon them and triggering motivation for action. These correlated responses involve 'the facial muscles, the viscera, the respiratory system, the skeleton, autonomic blood flow changes, and vocalizations that act together to produce an analogue of the particular gradient or intensity of stimulation impinging on the organism' (Demos 1995: 19). Importantly, 'these correlated responses *are the affect, not an expression of something else*' (1995: 19, my italics). Affect responses triggered by 'seeing' in any instance are subjective, differentiated and specific to the moment of the response – here seeing an artwork (bringing to this action everything else going on in the writer writing) and responding to its content, form, energy, colour and materiality. The body's affects contribute to what we *experience* as emotion and without this emotive response, the desire to write the poem and to create the form would not occur. The affect responses in the body and the emotions that flow on influence and generate both content and textual features of the poem – such as pacing, fragmentation, sound and rhythm and the imaginative 'visual' associations that occur. They also may determine the appearance of the poem on the page and its language choices.

If seeing involves a subjective 'choice' (Berger 1969: 8), this choice is not necessarily a matter of volition – rather, as I argue here, it is affective and emotive, and only then is it conscious and intellectual. There is 'something about' a particular visual model that draws me to it and causes me to choose to explore its connotations and associations further; to want to 'live with' and 'write with' it: something like Barthes' concept of *punctum* in *Camera Lucida* (1982) – the piercing or pricking of perception, or the self, by some element of, in his case, a photograph. This response is not sought out, but rather Barthes says, it is 'an element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me'; it is a 'point of disturbance in a photograph...that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)' (26–27). The emotive response to the *punctum* resonates with the kinds of choices I make in writing on a visual artwork/image. Furthermore, the experience of the *punctum* may not be immediate: it can be latent within the perception and associated with the emotive associations of memory. Barthes illustrates the power of this experience in reading a photograph by James Van der Zee:

Reading Van der Zee's photograph ['Family Portrait' 1926], I thought I had discerned what moved me: the strapped pumps of the black woman in her Sunday best; but this photograph has *worked* within me, and later on I realized that the real *punctum* was the necklace she was wearing; for (no doubt) it was this same necklace (a slender ribbon of braided gold) which I had seen worn by someone in my own family, and which, once she died, remained shut up in a family box of old jewelry (this sister of

my father never married, lived with her mother as an old maid, and I had always been saddened whenever I thought of her dreary life). I had just realized that however immediate and incisive it was, the *punctum* could include a certain latency (but never any scrutiny). (53)

Here we see how association can work, and the initial adoption of the ‘screen memory’ (the strapped pumps he thought had moved him) before the underlying emotion is revealed through its associated image of the necklace – the (significantly, layered and bracketed) sadness of his aunt, the loneliness of her life as an ‘old maid’. The first *punctum* opens a particular kind of response that incorporates other associations, memories – and there is more to the experience, it loops around again: ‘once there is a *punctum*, a blind field is created (is divined): on account of her necklace the black woman in her Sunday best has had, for me, a whole life external to her portrait’ (57). One might comment on Barthes’ (subjective) culturally coded construction of the aunt’s life as ‘dreary’, but my focus here is on the way the concept of *punctum* of an image works – its emotive triggering; its layering of temporalities; the evocation of an alterity, and how an aspect of the image then develops a further ‘life external’ to itself. The elements come together in an ongoing process of responding that desires to give the experience shape or form.

This form is driven by *feeling*, the affective state of the *body* in writing and of experiencing associations of memory and emotion. In my ekphrastic practice, writing involves a sense of ‘song’, of sound or music within the body, its rhythms and inner listening. I illustrate this process by recounting the writing of one of my own poems, ‘In Forster (Sand up the coast)’⁴ which was part of a *DiVerse* project for an exhibition of paintings by Nicholas Harding in February 2010. The poem is a response to a large painting of a pandanus plant growing on a clifflike beach on the coast of northern New South Wales. Also influential was an ink drawing of pandanus, its powerful scoring in parts almost tearing through the paper.⁵

In Forster (Sand up the coast)

Pelicans motionless
 against a blue sky
mirrored in lagoons,
 or high up,
 their wings
held by the constant wind –
a place so windblown, strange
to an immigrant: I stood
 on the beach
 as if I’d left
 my other wing
in another place –

not here, where the wind forces
the trees to lean
 downwards
and pandanus rough in the sand
has roots like legs pushed in
 against the sliding –

and I think of Eliza Fraser
 in her fringe of leaves
on an island of sand –
alien, harsh as salt
 and beautiful
the pools of water filtered clean
 through the grains –

how she had no choosing,
had to find in the straps
of the leaf bracts
 learning – to seek out
the toughness

and her feet scratched and bare
were pushing down,
 sucked into sand
 as the wind blew
 her green and leathery.

Viewing Harding's *Minnie Water pandanus 2006* I was initially struck by its painterly materiality, the paint laid on in thick smears with a palette knife, yet standing back, I had a real sense of the dimensionality of the plant silhouetted against the sky, its roots gripping the dry eroding sandhills. The image evoked the bleakness of the dry coastal environment and the persistence of the plant, its tenacious hold on the sloping ground; and the bright light triggered associations of the smell of sea and the power of the wind on the coast. I remembered a trip taken a few years after my arrival in Australia (1981), up the New South Wales coast to the Myall Lakes and Forster. I was trying to

acquaint myself with Australian culture by reading my first Patrick White novel *A fringe of leaves*, based on the castaway Eliza Fraser. In Forster we stayed in a cottage on the hill and the wind howled constantly, the Hills Hoist squeaking day and night. My children played in the sloping garden, which had no trees. The only trees I recall were the wind-buffeted coastal plants and bushes leaning over but holding on, all along the coastline. The figure of Eliza Fraser remained with me; a few years later another holiday, this time to Queensland, took us to Fraser Island, where I swam in the sand-filtered clear water of the lagoons. This memory came into my response, making a composite of the two holidays.

Overall though, there was a haunting sense of aloneness, of being in another country. Harding's image brought the feeling right to the surface, I felt it in my body as an anxiety, a tightness, and I began to seek patterns of stability against an instability, a sense of falling, of vertigo, and an identification with the plant in the image. The poem, generated there and then, formed like a scaffold around this feeling in a tension of 'holding' and 'falling' or sliding – an experienced of 'reverie'; the memory had a sense of sliding off this continent, so fragile was my hold on it. Did I experience this then, or did the painting create it in me? I cannot tell, but against this, was the resilience of the pandanus plant in the painting – and the materiality, in paint, of its leaf-bracts, those very tough green blade-like leaves, which mirrored the identification I made with Eliza Fraser and her strange survival. I was effectively situated (and cast, or emplaced) within a space of difference between the painting, the other, and my own subjectivity – yet, at the same time, the act of 'writing with' created a sense of 'living alongside' the creative work of another. The thick paint, the intense scoring of the painting's surface, the textures and roughness, impacted upon me. These gestures of the painter, the marks of painterly materiality, were the first *punctum* that touched me and led me to relive the memory, yet on seeing the painting, the *initial* association was not the *punctum*; rather, it was a 'screen memory', an image, quite benign, of pelicans against the blue sky and lagoons (the sharp shape of their wings echoed the pandanus bracts and branches of the painting) which very quickly led to these deeper memories and associations.

What is clear with 'In Forster (Sand up the coast)' is that the ekphrastic response is not description nor representation of a place or scene, but rather an association with a scenic image, an individualistic 'reading' of it. In researching this paper, I found an unexpected affinity with my own story in a comment by Nicholas Harding on his painting *Pandanus 2012*, which won the 2012 Wynne Prize at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. This painting, one of the larger series, resembles the image I had responded to in its subject, energies and painterliness. Harding's statement on this work appears in 2012, two years after my ekphrastic and 'painterly' dialogue with his *Minnie Waters Pandanus 2006* and the poem's publication in 2010:

Immigrating to Australia as a boy, I initially experienced a sense of displacement and sought ways of engaging with my new domicile's landscape. Through my three-decade-long relationship with my wife Lynne (whose maternal grandfather surveyed for the coastal river village of Woolli in 1923) I have found an emotively resonant engagement with the Yuraygir coastal region of northern New South Wales.

The pandanus have become emblematic of this affinity. Pandanus stand scattered along the coastline's stretches of sand and gravel. This particular pandanus clings to a shallow eroding cliff, mostly sheltered from the southerlies, a tangled flurry of light standing as a sentinel presence. (Harding 2102)

Earlier in this paper I examined how ekphrasis criticism has considered it as a one-way process of 'phrasing'/description, an appropriation of the visual representation into poetry or as an intellectual/aesthetic response, rather than the very active, dialogic and emotive encounter I have outlined here. It is this aspect of dialogic engagement through feeling, the effect of the *punctum*, I think, which accounts for the creative force of visual responses to *non-figurative* artworks and those that assert their materiality, and which have the capacity to enlist powerful associations in the viewer/writer. The poems I've written speak to the incommensurability of the image's visual meanings, yet they also attest to the positioning of the act of vision. The poems are therefore unstable within the dialogic relationship of writing and visual image. At the same time they attest to a desire to 'mean' – to construct meaning in language and form – as an affirmation of emplacement.

Endnotes

1. Approaches to ekphrastic writing, as writing-craft exercises, use examples of ekphrasis that tend not to take into account 'poems that purposefully move beyond description' (Kaplan 2009 n.p.).
2. '... if literature and painting are no longer held in a hierarchical reflection ... why maintain them any longer as objects at once united and separate, in short, *classed together*? Why not wipe out the difference between them (purely one of substance).' Cited in Davidson 1983, from Barthes' *S/Z* (1970). No page number provided.
3. See Freiman, M 2009.
4. Published in 2010 in slightly different form in the *TEXT* Special Issue Website Series No 7, including an ERA Research statement.
5. Nicholas Harding, *Minnie Water pandanus 2006* oil on Belgian linen 190x168 cm and *Angourie pandanus 2008* ink on paper 163 x 152 cm, Nicholas Harding, *Drawn to paint*, Sydney: SH Ervine Gallery, February 2010.

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