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Kinetic Images, Static Words

The Reciprocal Relationship of Modern Ekphrasis

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AMES HEFFERNAN’S 1993 BOOK, *MUSEUM OF WORDS: THE POETICS of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery*, offers us what is, by all appearances, a thoroughly modernized theory of poetry that responds to visual art. Heffernan characterizes previous theories of this ekphrastic poetry as either “too broad” or “too polarized” (3), and in the process he proposes a theory that is deceptively simple: he argues that the ekphrastic relationship is, at heart, “the verbal representation of visual representation” (2). While such a definition seems hardly debatable, Heffernan claims this relationship gives rise to a “paragonal energy” (6) between the two forms of art. What Heffernan terms “paragonal energy” can be understood as the tension produced when one form of representation attempts to apprehend another, resulting in a “contest between rival modes of representation” (6). The ekphrastic poem, he writes, “evokes the power of the silent image even as it subjects that power to the rival authority of language” (1). Heffernan frames the tension in terms of a “static” image that is put into action by language that is “dynamic” (5). In other words, where the image is “fixed” and “silent,” capable of depicting only a “single moment” (4), words maintain an “obstetric” function, able to “animate … stimulate … [and] deliver” what he describes as a “narrative of successive actions” (4-5). Heffernan suggests that this paragonal energy has allowed the practice of ekphrastic poetry to endure as a legitimate literary form from its inception in the era of Homer to its prolific use in modern times.

Yusef Komunyakaa’s ekphrastic poem “Facing It” presents an opportunity to examine how Heffernan’s dichotomy of “rival modes of representation” (6) pertains to a modern work of visual art that is essentially kinetic rather than static. “Facing It” explores the interaction of the poet with the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall. Constructed of solid granite, the Wall may at first appear to be the epitome of immobility. However, its black surface reflects a nearly perfect image of its surroundings, providing a mirror in which Komunyakaa observes himself, other visitors, the sky and the long National Mall of Washington, DC. In the poem, Komunyakaa meditates upon his memories of the war by contrasting the dynamic movement of these reflections with the motionlessness of the names that have been engraved into its surface: he comes across the name of someone he once knew and is launched into a dynamic memory of the horrors of war; he encounters “a white vet’s image” (25) whose reflection “lo[ses] his right arm / inside the stone” (28-29); he mistakes a woman “brushing a boy’s hair” (31) as trying to erase the names of the fallen soldiers. At stake here is how the fragmented reflections on the memorial’s surface evoke a sense of phantasmal memory through their material uncertainty. By considering the parallels between reflections of intangible events like memories and reflections of tangible objects, the centrality of the kinetic vision to our reading of the memorial becomes more apparent. If dynamism is understood to be essentially inherent in this visual work of art, how are we to read Heffernan’s theory? How is the poem’s response to a work of art altered when the function of the ekphrastic poem is no longer, as Heffernan describes, the “animat[ion] of fixed figures” (4)?

Komunyakaa’s poem therefore gives us insight into contemporary ekphrastic poetry that is wrestling with dynamic works of art. Due to the increasing prevalence of kinetic works of art and contemporary poems that respond to them, it might be time to revisit, as Heffernan did in 1993, the current state of this genre. In his argument, Heffernan does not claim previous notions of ekphrasis are misguided; rather, he contests how these prior theories conceptualize the relationship between poetry and visual art. This paper likewise will not attempt to argue against the concept of “ekphrasis” nor to discount Heffernan’s theory*.* However, in examining the relationship between these forms of representation, it is important to note that Heffernan’s claim of “rival authority” between the “static” image and the “dynamic” (1) word is based upon an analysis of strictly stationary works of visual art. We will question Heffernan’s theory as it might apply to contemporary works of poetry and visual art. Put otherwise, to modernize Heffernan’s theory of ekphrasis, we must extend our analysis to include contemporary ekphrastic pairs in which the visual image is no less dynamic than its verbal counterpart. When considering the Wall in this context, the essential interplay between the static, engraved names and the dynamic, shifting reflections would seem to reverse Heffernan’s characterizations. It would also help us question the paragonal nature Heffernan identifies as critical to modern ekphrasis.

By examining a kinetic work of art, and particularly one in which the interplay between word and image so easily get lost in one another, we come to see that there is an inherently verbal quality to the art as much as there is an inherently visual quality to the words. Such a mutually inherent erasure of the lines dividing the verbal and the visual allows us to develop a theory of ekphrasis based on a reciprocal relationship between the two. When considered in the context of art and poetry that responds to violence or tragedy, such a reciprocal relationship between the visual and the verbal may prove valuable in helping us see that neither form possesses authority over the other, as Heffernan describes. Rather, the context of this work of art as a memorial to tragedy helps us see that both forms are struggling to represent the violence of war. Developing a theory of reciprocal relationship between these varied modes of representation becomes a necessary function of modern ekphrasis that tries to apprehend the repercussions and realities of tragedies like the Vietnam War. Given the number of unspeakable horrors of the twentieth century (as well as the number of memorials, works of art, and poems constructed in response to such unspeakable horror), looking more closely at Komunyakaa’s poem and the Vietnam War Memorial Wall gives us insight into how ekphrasis has evolved in the twentieth century.

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ut what, exactly, makes Hefferanan’s theory seem so thoroughly modern in the first place? He focuses a good deal of his book on quintessentially modern poets like W.H. Auden, Wiliam Carlos Williams and John Ashbery, and he sketches out the recent “boom” (137) in this literature’s anthologies. But he also modernizes the theory of ekphrasis by making two claims: first, that “the ekphrastic poetry of our time” (137) is no longer just a few lines within a larger epic but is a “free-standing literary work” (137); and second, that “twentieth-century ekphrasis springs from the museum” (138). Heffernan’s stated intent here “is to show how the experience of the museum and the apparatus of institutionalized art in our time … has informed the writing of ekphrastic poetry” (138). These are certainly arguable claims to begin modernizing the theory of ekphrasis, but a more careful review of Heffernan’s evidence reveals a potential disruption: because he focuses on works set within traditional museums, the ekphrastic poetry he looks at is responding to what could be described as non-modern works of art. Auden and Williams, for example, both address works by the Flemish Renaissance painter Pieter Breughel; and Ashbery’s “Self-portrait in a Convex Mirror” is in response to a 1524 painting of the same name. Heffernan’s theory of ekphrasis, and particularly its line of argument that addresses the paragonal relationship between the image and word, holds true for such poems that address static images. So, while Heffernan’s characterizations of visual art appearing in *Mueseum of Words* may befit the immobile paintings and sculptures they describe, in what ways is the ekphrastic relationship altered when a poet responds to a work of visual art that is not “static” at all? Kinetic art, or pieces that rely upon the internal or external movement of a viewer to produce an image or effect, have become increasingly pervasive in today’s art. If an artwork is just as dynamic as the poem that responds to it, will their interaction still generate paragonal energy?

Let us take a closer look at Heffernan’s evidence so we can see how Komunyakaa’s “Facing It” might introduce an ekphrastic relationship that does not generate a paragonal struggle. Heffernan analyzes the ekphrastic poetry of prominent figures such as Homer, Keats, Auden and Ashbery as they respond to visual images of an Achilles shield, a Grecian urn, Brughel’s *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, and Parmigianino’s *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,* respectively. Such works of art are all arguably non-modern, and in some instances, such as in the work of Homer and Keats, we likewise see poems that are not modern; in fact, Heffernan rightly characterizes much of this work as “notional ekphrasis (7), in which authors like Homer and Keats respond to an image existing only in their minds. As they strive to give a material voice to a notional image, paragonal energy develops between the physical poem and the immaterial image it seeks to represent. And in work by the likes of Auden and Ashbery, Heffernan sees paragonal energy generated as the authors struggle to represent work originally created in bygone eras. There, we confront the inevitable tension of modern voices making sense of early modern sensibilities; the paragonal relationship lives. However, it is important to recognize that Heffernan does not look at a modern poem responding to a modern work of art. This in no way suggests that his characterizations of the ekphrastic relationships are misguided, but the absence of a such a relationship in *Museum of Words* does indicate the need to update his theory of ekphrasis to include contemporary art and poetry. By examining the interaction between an inherently kinetic work of modern art and a modern ekphrastic poem that responds to it, a new understanding of the contemporary ekphrastic relationship begins to emerge.

If paragonal energy is not necessarily fundamental in the modern ekphrastic relationship, then what is the source of conflict between the visual images and poems analyzed in Heffernan’s *Museum of Words*? In his view, the dichotomy between inherently static visual images and kinetic words provokes a contest between the two forms of representation for illustrative supremacy. To support this claim, Heffernan relies on Gerard Genette’s distinction between description and narration, with “*narration* [being] the depiction of objects or people in movement and *description* [being] the depiction of objects or people in stasis” (Heffernan 5). Heffernan claims the tension between narrative and descriptive tendencies gives rise to the “paragonal” (1) contest between the two forms of expression, an interaction that he uses to characterize the genre of ekphrasis as a whole. However, as we have seen exemplified by the relationship between the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall and Komunyakaa’s “Facing It,” not all ekphrastic poems are more dynamic then their visual counterparts.

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o examine a modern ekphrastic relationship between the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall and Komunyakaa’s poem, we must first develop a clear understanding of what each form of art is representing. We begin with the Wall. Erected in 1982 within the National Mall in Washington D.C., the Wall was designed by Maya Yin Lin as a place for remembrance. Physically, the memorial is over ten feet high, a rectangular black granite structure that measures nearly five hundred feet in length. Engraved upon its highly polished, reflective surface are the names of the 58,220 American servicemen whose lives were lost during the Vietnam War (as more veterans are identified or discovered, their names are added to the Wall). While the Wall’s black granite structure produces shifting images in its mirrorlike surface, the engraved names remain stationary. The centrality of motion to the images on the Wall and the stillness of the names engraved upon its face seem to suggest a reversal of Heffernan’s characterizations of images as static and the written word as kinetic. This reversal within the artwork itself excites the possibility that the poetic response may invert the ekphrastic relationship delineated by Heffernan.

If the ekphrastic poem, on the other hand, is understood to be a literary representation of a visual representation, “Facing It” can be interpreted as Komunyakaa’s understanding of a memorial, and more specifically of the memory of the war’s dead. He does this by exploring his own confrontations with the Wall. In this sense, rather than generating a struggle for dominance between the image and his words, Komunyakaa’s ekphrastic poem draws upon the strength of a dynamic visual art to craft a complementary verbal response. As a veteran of the Vietnam War himself, Komunyakaa’s interaction with the reflections in the wall mirrors his interaction with his own memories of the war. In the first lines of “Facing It” we read the ambiguous relationship between what is physical and what is mere reflection:

My black face fades,

hiding inside the black granite.

I said I wouldn’t,

Dammit: no tears.

I’m stone. I’m flesh. (Komunyakaa 1-5)

In these lines, Komunyakaa establishes the materiality of the Wall and hints at its mirror-like finish. The line “I’m stone. I’m flesh” articulates a conflict between the poet’s definite and indefinite physical states while also alluding to their simultaneous occurrence: as he looks at the Wall, Komunyakaa sees an image of himself reflected upon its surface, and he is at once his physical self peering into the Wall (“I am flesh”) and his reflection staring back out (“I am stone”). He describes moving inside and outside the wall, and this helps to call attention to the centrality of kinetic movement to his interaction. “Depending on the light / to make a difference” (12-13), Komunyakaa appears either as his physical self observing the Wall or as his ghostlike reflection that is captured in his memories of the war as much as in the memorial itself. Of note in these lines about the light upon the Wall is Komunyakaa’s ability to capture its fragmentation by using enjambment. The flickering reflections evoke the flitting memories of the war as represented in his encounter with the Wall. Komunyakaa uses enjambment throughout the poem for similarly strategic purposes: “the profile of night / slanted against morning” (7-8); “I’m inside / the Vietname Veterans Memorial / again” (10-12); “Brushstrokes flash, a red bird’s / wings cutting across my stare” (22-23). These instances of enjambment help to underscore, respectively, a temporal separation, a separation of spaces, and the act of cutting. In this way, we are able to experience vicariously the kinesis of the poet’s memories and experiences activated by the Wall. This vicarious experience suggests that rather than operating as “rival modes of representation” (Heffernan 6), the ekphrastic poem in this case complements its visual counterpart. It duplicates the experience of the Wall in the poetic function of enjambment.

It is important here to note that the only surfaces on the memorial that do not reflect light are the names themselves. The names themselves negate the kinesis of the Wall’s surface, and just as the reflective formal quality of the granite lends itself to dynamic movement, the unreflective quality of the engraved names demonstrates the static nature inherent to the written word – or, perhaps, the attempt to fix the names of the dead in the attempt to memorialize them. These characterizations of visual art as dynamic and written words as static, paramount as they are to our understanding of the Wall, seem to invert the central dichotomy of ekphrasis as set forth by Heffernan. In “Facing It,” Komunyakaa recounts:

I touch the name Andrew Johnson;

I see the booby trap’s white flash.

Names shimmer on a woman’s blouse

but then she walks away

the names stay on the wall. (17 – 21)

The black granite of the Wall here reflects the images of the dynamic living world surrounding it. We can even read a contest between memory and reality, between recalling what happened to the man whose name appears engraved on the Wall and observing what is happening around him in the present. The visual representations of the dead are static. Regardless of the way the light shines, the engraved names remain forever immobile on the Wall. The interplay between the kinetic images and the static words informs our reading of the Wall, but it also elucidates an inherently verbal quality of its art. In the realm of modern ekphrastic relationships, this line of reasoning leads us to question Heffernan’s assertion that verbal representation is inherently dynamic and visual representation inherently static. As our analysis of the relationship between Komunyakaa’s “Facing It” and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial raises questions regarding the applicability of Heffernan’s “perennially conflicted response” (2), the possibility of a more cooperative interaction between these forms of representation begins to develop.

We can therefore view the specific relationship between the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall and Komunyakaa’s “Facing It” as a test case for ekphrastic relationships produced wholly in the modern period. Contemporary works of art are rarely as static and fixed as the paintings examined by Heffernan in *Museum of Words*. As we have seen, the kinetic images described in “Facing It” are intrinsic to the Wall’s form, but they are also central to its function as a narrative of the memory of war. Contrarily, the visual stasis of the engraved names seems to contradict Heffernan’s assertion of the written word’s narrative, dynamic nature. Here, even the visual stasis of the names provokes a kinesis of memory in Komunyakaa and thus saves the written words from falling into mere description. Komunyakaa’s poem provides an extension of this narrative impulse, drawing upon the power of the kinetic reflections in the Wall to convey his interaction with both the memorial and his memories of the war. In this way, we see how a visual artwork and its verbal response are able to avoid being pulled into what Heffernan calls a “struggle for dominance” (6). Instead, we can see how an ekphrastic relationship can develop a modern impulse driven by the interaction’s complementary energy. When the ekphrastic poem is considered as an extension of a narrative already inherent in a visual work of art, the reciprocal ekphrastic relationship progresses as a mutually beneficial discourse between the two modes of representation. In this sense, modern ekphrasis might not quite be understood as the “envoicing of a silent object” (6), as Heffernan describes it, in which the verbal speaks “not only *about* works of art but also *to* and *for* them” (7). Instead, we come to read the ekphrastic relationship as a dialogue between the two, one that can embed the experience of the kinetic work of art in the dynamic function of poetry.

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ne final note we should consider: when the subject of an ekphrastic relationship is shrouded in the subject of war, as it is in “Facing It” and the Vietnam Veteran’s Memorial Wall, we need to acknowledge more explicitly the problem at the heart of representation. As scholars on the Holocaust and other tragic events in history would remind us, giving adequate representation to atrocity is inherently problematic. That is, both poets and visual artists are confronted with the challenge of accurately representing what is otherwise considered to be unrepresentable. Those who respond to atrocity often face the dilemma of maintaining the integrity of what many consider to be indescribable events while also endeavoring to either visually or verbally encapsulate them; alternatively, they are faced with the dilemma of staying true to history by creating a documentary or staying aesthetically honest by making a work of art. This is not to reduce the making of such art to a simplistic dichotomy, but thinking of the problems at the far ends of the spectrum helps us understand the nature of the problem itself: representing extreme violence is a fraught exercise. Both routes present problems for the artist grappling with atrocity. Under this rubric of impossibility, we begin to see that there is no ultimate authority in the ekprhastic relationship. Perhaps the most important addition to an updated theory of ekprhasis would be this: contrary to Heffernan’s claim, there can be no rival authority where authority does not exist. Both forms of art struggle to represent the atrocity of war.

In the case of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall, we can say that as a work of visual art it does not attempt to represent the violence of the war which claimed the lives of more than 58,000 serviceman; rather, it aims to memorialize the names of those men and women by having them appear in eternal stillness on the Wall. The names stand in stark contrast to the flitting images of the living reflected around them, a juxtaposition which suggests the memory of those who died in the war will never disappear even as the world continues to change. For what is a memory if not an enduring reflection? By representing those who gave their lives in the war rather than the war itself, the memorial provides a space in which we might reflect upon the price of life paid in the Vietnam War. Komunyakaa’s poem draws upon the dynamism of the flickering image and upon the stillness of the names to relay what may be an otherwise incommunicable subject: his own memories as a veteran. In the case of this modern ekphrastic relationship, the poem responds to the visual artwork to produce not a paragonal contest but a complementary representation of a narrative that both forms of art are struggling to convey.

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