

Ekphrastic Dialogues: When Poetry Meets Painting in the Postmodern Era

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Abstract

Ekphrasis, the ancient practice of representing one art form within another, undergoes a radical transformation in the postmodern era. Moving beyond the Romantic ideal of harmonious synthesis or the modernist fascination with formal parallels, postmodern ekphrastic dialogues between poetry and painting embrace fragmentation, intertextuality, skepticism towards representation, and a critical interrogation of power structures embedded in both arts. This paper argues that postmodern ekphrasis is characterized by a dynamic, often destabilizing, *dialogue* that foregrounds the gap between word and image, challenges notions of artistic authority and authenticity, explores the materiality of both media, and frequently engages in socio-political critique. Analyzing key examples from poets like John Ashbery, Adrienne Rich, Lyn Hejinian, and Alice Notley alongside postmodern paintings, this study reveals how these encounters become sites of profound philosophical inquiry and cultural commentary, redefining the relationship between the sister arts for a fragmented age.

Keywords

Postmodern ekphrasis, poetry and painting, fragmentation, intertextuality, representation, artistic authority, authenticity, materiality of media, socio-political critique, word and image, John Ashbery, Adrienne Rich, Lyn Hejinian, Alice Notley, philosophical inquiry, cultural commentary, sister arts, postmodernism.

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INTRODUCTION: BEYOND DESCRIPTION, TOWARDS DIALOGUE

For centuries, poets have been drawn to the silent world of paintings. Traditional ekphrasis, from Homer's shield of Achilles to Keats's Grecian Urn, often aimed for a kind of verbal translation, seeking to capture the essence, narrative, or emotional impact of the visual work through descriptive prowess, sometimes aspiring to the Horatian ideal of *ut pictura poesis* (as is painting, so is poetry). Modernism complicated this relationship, emphasizing formal correspondences and the subjective experience of the viewer/reader, as seen in Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts" or Williams's "Pictures from Brueghel." However, the advent of postmodernism, with its core tenets of skepticism towards grand narratives, suspicion of representation, embrace of fragmentation and pastiche, and focus on the constructedness of meaning and identity, fundamentally reshaped the ekphrastic encounter. This paper contends that postmodern ekphrasis is less about faithful description or harmonious synthesis and more

about initiating a complex, often contentious, *dialogue*. This dialogue interrogates the very possibility of representing one medium within another, exposes the ideologies underpinning both arts, revels in the spaces *between* word and image, and utilizes the encounter as a springboard for broader cultural and political critique.

SKEPTICISM AND THE UNBRIDGEABLE GAP: ASHBERY AND PARMIGIANINO

John Ashbery's "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" (1975), responding to Francesco Parmigianino's Mannerist painting of the same name, stands as a landmark of postmodern ekphrasis. Ashbery explicitly rejects the notion of capturing the painting's essence: "The soul establishes itself. / But how far can it swim out through the eyes / And still return safely to its nest?" (Ashbery). The poem becomes a meditation on the impossibility of stable representation – both the painter's distorted self-portrait in the convex mirror and the poet's attempt to capture the painting (and by

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extension, the self) in words. Ashbery highlights the gap: "The surface / Is what's there and nothing can exist except what's there" (Ashbery), acknowledging the painting's physical presence while simultaneously doubting the ability of language to penetrate its meaning or the artist's intention. The poem spirals through digressions, uncertainties, and provisional interpretations, mirroring postmodernism's distrust of fixed truths and its embrace of fluid subjectivity. The dialogue here is one of profound epistemological doubt, where the painting acts not as a stable object to be described, but as a catalyst for questioning perception, memory, and the nature of artistic creation itself. As W.J.T. Mitchell observed, ekphrasis often involves an inherent "ekphrastic fear" – the fear that language cannot adequately capture the visual – and Ashbery makes this fear and the resulting gap the very subject of his poem.

Deconstructing Authority and Framing Critique: Rich and Bruegel

Postmodern ekphrasis frequently turns a critical eye towards the power dynamics inherent in representation – who is represented, by whom, and for what purpose? Adrienne Rich's powerful sequence "Atlas of the Difficult World" includes "Mourning Picture," an ekphrastic response to Edwin Romanzo Elmer's sentimental Victorian painting. However, a more potent example of her critical postmodern approach is found in her engagement with Pieter Bruegel the Elder, notably in poems like "The Spirit of Place" and references elsewhere. Unlike Auden's focus on suffering's marginalization in Bruegel's "Fall of Icarus," Rich uses Bruegel's complex, populous scenes – filled with laborers, peasants, and the rhythms of communal life – as a counterpoint to dominant historical narratives that erase the marginalized. Her dialogue with Bruegel is less about describing a specific painting than invoking his *method*: his crowded frames, his attention to the mundane and the collective. In doing so, Rich challenges the authority of the singular lyric "I" and the isolated artistic masterpiece. Her poetry, dialoguing with Bruegel's visual ethos, insists on weaving the suppressed histories of women, workers, and the dispossessed back into the cultural tapestry. This reflects postmodernism's

concern with decentering authority and exposing the ideological frameworks that shape both visual and verbal representation. As Griselda Pollock argues, feminist interventions often involve re-reading visual culture, and Rich's ekphrastic strategy exemplifies this, using the historical painting as a lens to critique contemporary power structures and envision alternative, more inclusive narratives.

Materiality, Textuality, and Radical Intertextuality: Hejinian and Johns

Postmodernism brought a renewed focus on the materiality of the signifier – the physical stuff of paint and canvas, the marks on the page. Ekphrastic poetry absorbed this, moving beyond depicting the painting's *image* to engaging with its physical presence and its own status as a constructed text. Lyn Hejinian's experimental, language-centered writing exemplifies this. While not always responding to a single specific painting, her work constantly dialogues with visual art principles, particularly those of Jasper Johns. Like Johns, who used familiar, "already-seen" objects (flags, targets, numbers) rendered in encaustic with thick, tactile surfaces that draw attention to their own making, Hejinian uses language as material. Her poems, such as those in *My Life* or *The Cell*, are dense, fragmented collages of perception, memory, and linguistic play. Consider a potential "dialogue": Johns's "Gray Numbers" series, where numbers are obscured, layered, and rendered almost illegible within fields of gray, resonates with Hejinian's lines: "A pause, a rose, something on paper. / A thought is a bottomless well" (Hejinian). Both artist and poet foreground process, texture, and the resistance of their medium to transparent meaning. The ekphrastic element in such postmodern work is intertextual and procedural; it's less a poem *about* a painting and more a poem that *behaves like* certain kinds of painting – embracing opacity, surface, repetition, and the viewer/reader's active role in constructing meaning from the fragments. This embodies Roland Barthes's notion of the "writerly text," demanding active participation, and Jacques Derrida's concept of *différance*, where meaning is perpetually deferred through the play of

signifiers, a play mirrored in the layered surfaces of Johns.

Pastiche, Parody, and the Carnavalesque: Notley and Duchamp

Postmodern ekphrasis readily employs pastiche, parody, and the carnivalesque to disrupt hierarchies and canonical reverence. Alice Notley's sprawling, genre-defying epic *The Descent of Alette* offers a striking example. While not solely ekphrastic, it engages deeply with Marcel Duchamp's iconic *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)*. Notley doesn't merely describe the enigmatic mechanical allegory; she inhabits and transforms it. Her poem becomes a feminist counter-narrative, a descent into an underworld/subway system governed by oppressive patriarchal structures symbolized by "the tyrant." Duchamp's complex diagram of frustrated desire becomes a framework for Notley's own mythopoetic exploration of female agency, violence, and transformation. Her use of quotation marks around every phrase visually fragments the text, echoing Duchamp's own radical fragmentation of form and perspective within *The Large Glass*. This is not homage but a critical, irreverent dialogue. Notley parodies the mechanistic, often misogynistic undertones of Duchamp's vision, reclaiming the "bride" figure and inserting a powerful, questing female consciousness into the heart of a canonical avant-garde masterpiece. This reflects postmodernism's penchant for appropriation and Linda Hutcheon's concept of "complicitous critique," where parody is used not just to mock but to engage critically with the source, often to subvert its embedded ideologies. The dialogue becomes a carnivalesque overturning, using Duchamp's own disruptive strategies against the grain.

The Digital Horizon and Persistent Dialogue

The postmodern ekphrastic dialogue continues to evolve in the digital age. The proliferation of images online, the ease of digital reproduction and manipulation, and new hybrid forms (digital poetry, hypermedia) further complicate the word-image relationship. Contemporary poets often engage with digital art, memes, virtual spaces, and remediated versions of historical

paintings, extending postmodern skepticism about originality and aura. The core dynamics of postmodern ekphrasis – the embrace of the gap, the focus on materiality/textuality, the critical interrogation of representation and power, and the use of fragmentation, pastiche, and parody – remain potent tools for navigating this saturated visual landscape. The dialogue between poetry and painting, far from being an archaic practice, persists as a vital site for exploring the fundamental questions of perception, meaning-making, and the role of art in a fragmented, media-saturated world.

Conclusion: The Vital Interstice

The postmodern era transformed ekphrasis from a descriptive or harmonious endeavor into a dynamic, often destabilizing dialogue. Poets like Ashbery, Rich, Hejinian, and Notley engage with paintings not to capture their essence but to interrogate the very processes of representation, to expose the ideologies framing both visual and verbal arts, and to explore the fertile, unresolved space *between* word and image. This dialogue embraces fragmentation, skepticism, intertextuality, and materiality, reflecting core postmodern concerns. It utilizes strategies like pastiche, parody, and critical appropriation to challenge artistic authority and canonical narratives, often serving as a vehicle for potent socio-political critique. Far from declaring the "sister arts" divorced, postmodern ekphrasis reveals their relationship as more vital and complex than ever: a continuous, questioning conversation conducted in the interstice, where the limitations and possibilities of each medium are laid bare, generating new forms of meaning and resistance. This ongoing dialogue underscores the enduring power of art to speak to art, not in unison, but in a challenging, necessary, and ever-evolving counterpoint that defines our contemporary cultural moment.

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