2 Visual Touch

Ekphrasis and Interactive Art Installations

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An investigation of ekphrasis in this sense also reveals some of the energies that dwell within the texts that, to us, are black words lying still on the white page but which, to the ancient reader, were alive with rich visual and emotional effects.

– Ruth Webb

Visitors become part of the interactive installation Text Rain (1999) by Camille Utterback and Romy Achituv as their silhouettes are projected onto the screen and letters start to rain down on them. The letters stop falling the moment they come in contact with their (projected) bodies, but moving the body sets the letters in motion again. When the projected participator has gathered enough letters, a word or even a phrase might be formed. Thus “[r]eadings the phrases in the Text Rain installation becomes a physical as well as a cerebral endeavor,” as Utterback and Achituv write. Jay Bolter and Diane Gromala, commenting on Text Rain, observe that: “Visual art and design have never been pure, abstract, or removed from the physical. For many designers, the senses of sight and touch always go together, so that the world is seen and felt at the same time. This has been true in earlier media, including print, and it remains true in new media.” Text Rain explores this interaction between the physical and the virtual, the body and technology, and reaffirms the fact that reading has always been an embodied and multisensory experience.

1 R. Webb, Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 5.
4 M. Hansen has written extensively about media installations and embodied meanings. See Hansen, New Philosophy for New Media (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004); and Bodies in Code: Interfaces with Digital Media (New York: Routledge, 2006). For a discussion on body and embodiment, see also N. Hayles, How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).
A similar interaction between physical involvement and imagination arises in *Interactive Plant Growing*, developed by Laurent Mignonneau and Christa Sommerer. It was first shown at *Ars Electronica* in 1992 and some ten years later another version, *Eau de Jardin*, was developed for the House-of-Shiseido in Tokyo. The interface consisting of living plants sets up a connection between a user and a 3D rendering of virtual plants that are projected on a large screen. The living plants that send electronic signals to the corresponding and similar looking virtual 3D plants on a projection screen “interpret” the user’s touch and movements. The user can manipulate the virtual plants to move in different directions by changing the distance between her hand and the living plant. She may for example rotate, twist, change, and develop new groupings of virtual plants, which creates complex and ongoing transformations that depend on the user’s interaction.5 The user’s physical engagement with organic material has an immediate effect, thus constantly creating and re-creating the artwork.

This emphasis on tactility contradicts “the tactiloclasm” that permeates aesthetic theories that take works of art to be “untouchable” and are concerned with ocular scrutiny only.6 How are we to account for artistic expressions that require spectators to participate in the work with both their body and mind? A fruitful way to think about this question is by examining the concept of *ekphrasis*. This concept addresses the special relation between descriptions and visual and emotional experiences, as the epigraph to this chapter asserts.

In what follows I will first elaborate on the concept of ekphrasis and focus on its origin in rhetoric and its defining features: orality, immediacy, vividness (*enargeia*), and tactility. This allows me to discuss the relevance of ekphrasis in connection to the interactive art installation *Screen*. By paying attention to rhetorical ekphrasis, I aim to bring out a digital ekphrasis in which the primary focus is not on the description of art and artefacts, but on the process of visualization. Ekphrasis, as it turns out, enables us to gain a better understanding of interactive installation art and our digital culture.

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Ekphrasis: Ancient and Modern

Ekphrasis is both a technical device and a literary genre. As a literary genre, ekphrasis is frequently used in Greek and Latin literature, at least since Homer. As a technical term within the study and practice of rhetoric, the origin of ekphrasis is documented in the first centuries AD where it occurs in the progyrnasmata, which are exercises in compositional prose and rhetoric used in Hellenistic schools. The progyrnasmata consists of four treatises attributed to Theon (first or fifth century), Hermogenes (second century), Aphthonios (fourth century) and Nikolaos (fifth century). Theon defines ekphrasis as “descriptive language, bringing what is portrayed clearly before the sight.” Hermogenes describes ekphrasis as an expression that brings about sight through sound: “Virtues (aretaï) of an ecphrasis are, most of all, clarity (saphêneia) and vividness (enargeia); for the expression should almost create seeing through hearing.” Etymologically, ekphrasis stems from the Greek ek (out) phrazein (to explicate, declare) and meant originally “to tell in full.” In her important Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice, Ruth Webb defines ekphrasis thus: “Ekphrasis is a descriptive [periēgēmatikos] speech which brings (literally ‘leads’) the thing shown vividly (enargōs) before the eyes.”

The established definition of ekphrasis as “the verbal description of a visual representation” is a rather modern modification of the ancient concept which, according to James Heffernan, “springs from the museum, the shrine where all poets worship in a secular age.” This type of ekphrasis is used to refer to printed words that describe visual works of art – a well-known ekphrastic poem, for example, is John Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” 1820. I will hereafter call this type of ekphrasis the “modern ekphrasis.” Hewlett Koelb claims that “this new ekphrasis with its emphasis on obviously mediated subject matter is not just narrower but

8 Progyrnasmata: 86.
9 Webb, Ekphrasis, 51.
11 Heffernan, Museum of Words, 138.
12 Throughout this chapter I use Webb’s distinction between the modern and ancient ekphrasis, see Webb, Ekphrasis. Several scholars have noted the modern tendency to associate ekphrasis with art only, see for example H. Maguire, Art and Eloquence in Byzantium (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); and J. Hewlett Koelb, The Poetics of Description: Imagined Places in European Literature (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).
in its most basic character exactly the opposite of ancient Greek ekphrasis, whose aim is immediacy.”13 Indeed, the rhetorical practice of ekphrasis assumes a live audience and emphasizes immediacy and the impact of the ekphrasis on the listener. Webb summarizes the distinction between the rhetorical and the modern ekphrasis thus: “[I]n the ancient definition the referent is only of secondary importance; what matters ... is the impact on the listener.” Crucial for an effective ekphrasis was the underlying quality of enargeia, that is, vividness. An event or place is to be depicted so vividly that it comes to life in the listener’s mind or eye.15 The effect of enargeia is immediate and defers interpretation and assessment of the credibility of the evoked image to a later moment in time. The ancient ekphrasis not only includes vivid descriptions of works of art, as the modern ekphrasis does, but all vivid descriptions of artefacts, nature, events, situations, or persons.

Theorists who accept the modern definition of enargeia are often content with establishing that it is an effect that makes the reader envision what is being described. But enargeia does not first and foremost refer to a way of mimicking an object, scene, or person with words; it rather refers to the effect of seeing an object or event. It thus concerns the process of visualization.16 The Roman rhetorician Quintilian states in his *Institutio Oratoria* at the end of the first century AD that it is not necessary for speech to contain enargeia markers (evidentia, in Latin) to be ekphrastic (for example, detailed descriptions and the use of symbols); what matters is the metamorphosis of the listener into a spectator.17 He writes:

> It is a great gift to be able to set forth the facts on which we are speaking clearly and vividly. For oratory fails of its full effect, and does not assert itself as it should, if its appeal is merely to the hearing, and if the judge merely feels that the facts on which he has to give his decision are being narrated to him, and not displayed in their living truth to the eyes of the mind.18

18 Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, 8.2.62.
As Webb has noted, Quintilian suggests that ekphrasis penetrates the listener more deeply, creating a distinction between words that stay, as it were, on the surface of the body, and those that penetrate it and reach the mind’s eyes. This distinction is also made in Greek sources. Nikolaos, for example, writes about the difference between descriptive speech and ekphrasis, where the latter “tries to make the hearers into spectators.” Quintilian describes language as close to a physical force affecting the listener’s body. He also writes about how visual impressions evoked by enargeia “make us seem not so much to narrate as to exhibit the actual scene while our emotions will be no less actively stirred than if we were present at the actual occurrence.”

Ekphrasis and enargeia are difficult to define independently from each other. To better understand these concepts, it is helpful to relate the concepts of enargeia and ekphrasis to the concept of phantasia. Phantasia denotes the orator’s internal image that he communicates to the listener. In doing so he activates images that were latently stored in the listener’s mind. Interestingly, the orator should practice foreseeing what mental pictures would be required to make the ekphrasis vivid and thus successful. According to Webb, this creates a “simulacrum of perception itself. It is the act of seeing that is imitated, not the object itself, by the creation of a phantasia that is like the result of direct perception.” Webb continues:

The ancient theory of enargeia thus sidesteps the problem of how to represent the visual through the non-visual medium of language because of the connection that is assumed between words and mental images. Words do not directly represent their subjects, but are attached to a mental representation of that subject.

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21 Webb, *Ekphrasis*, 98. Webb writes about how Quintilian in his *Institutio Oratoria* compares the simple description of fact with the ekphrastic description and how differently they influence the listener on a physical plane: “The plain statement reaches only the ears while the vivid version, the equivalent of ekphrasis, ‘displays the subject to the eyes of the mind.’” Webb, *Ekphrasis*, 98. On the same page, Webb furthermore emphasizes that “The Latin distinguishes between inner and outer senses of sight, where our Greek sources do not.”
22 Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, 6.2.32.
23 For a difference between poetic and rhetorical phantasia, see Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, 6.2.29–32.
In the modern practice of ekphrasis, the focus is on the visual object referred to, whereas the ancient rhetoricians emphasized the process of visualization and the effect it had on the listener. The significance of the body and the emphasis on bodily senses in the rhetorical situation were thus crucial. Orality, immediacy, vividness, and tactility are all central to interactive media installations. I will substantiate this claim by analyzing the interactive installation *Screen*.

**Screen**

A visual setting where the images could be said to set in motion a variety of imaginative, emotional, and rational reactions, even before a voice starts to speak, characterizes the interactive installation *Screen* (2003). *Screen* raises questions about memory, and it does so through the orchestration of an aesthetic that brings attention to oral, print, and digital communication strategies. The user can listen to words, read words, and touch words. Words are read out loud, they are displayed in temporal sequence on a page-like wall, but they also move around in a three-dimensional space. In an interview, Noah Wardrip Fruin comments on the difference between the stable, temporal, and printed text, and the fluidity of the digital text: “The word-by-word reading of peeling and striking, and the reading of the word flocks, creates new experiences of the same text – and changes the once normal, stable, page-like wall text into progressively-altered collages.” *Screen* is created and can be viewed in a CAVE environment, typically a room with four surfaces that includes three walls and a floor display. Text and graphics can be projected onto the walls as well as onto the floor. When the visitor enters the cave wearing goggles and gloves, a text is displayed on one of the walls as well as read out loud by a male speaker.

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25 For example, ps.-Longinos is interested in the effect on the listener rather than in the ontological status of the subject of the visions. See Webb, *Ekphrasis*, 118.

26 This has also been emphasized by Mary Carruthers: “Enargeia addresses not just the eyes, but all the senses. It is easy to forget this when we read rhetoric texts, because the emphasis is so much on the visual sense. But the visual leads on to and is accompanied by an engagement of all the other senses in a meticulously crafted fiction.” See M. Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400-1200* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 132.

27 By Noah Wardrip Fruin, together with Josh Carroll, Robert Coover, Shawn Greenlee, Andre McLain, and Benjamin Shine. *Screen* was first shown in 2003. A later version was made for SIGGRAPH in 2007.

In a world of illusions, we hold ourselves in place by memories. Though they may be but dreams of a dream, they seem at times more there than the there we daily inhabit, fixed and meaningful texts in the indecipherable flux of the world’s words, so vivid at times that we feel we can almost reach out and touch them. But memories have a way of coming apart on us, losing their certainty, and when they start to peel away, we do what we can to push them, bit by bit, back in place, fearful of losing our very selves if we lose the stories of ourselves. But these are only minds that hold them, fragile data, softly banked. Increasingly, they rip apart, blur and tangle with one another, and swarm mockingly about us, threatening us with absence.29

This opening text is followed by three other short poetic descriptions of the oscillation between dreaming and being awake. The description of memories as being “so vivid at times that we feel we can almost reach out and touch them” may not only be interpreted as a description of enargeia: it is also literally enacted the moment the words start to peel away from the walls and float freely into the space surrounding the visitor. The visitor can try to put them back into place with the data glove, but that becomes increasingly difficult when the words are detaching themselves faster and faster. This could be compared to the description of ekphrasis as words being a force acting on a listener, which we discussed above. The immediacy of the experience is evident. Eventually, when too many words are floating around the visitor, the texts collapses. Finally, a male voice reads the following text aloud:

We stare into the white void of lost memories, a loose scatter about us of what fragments remain: no sense but nonsense to be found there. If memories define us, what defines us when they’re gone? An unbearable prospect. We retrieve what we can and try again.30

As Roberto Simanowski points out, Screen raises questions about memory and place: “What … defines memory. Is it what is stored in an external medium or what one carries around in the mind?”31 The installation brings the close connection between visualization and memory to the fore by

29 http://collection.eliterature.org/2/works/wardrip-fruin_screen.html
30 http://collection.eliterature.org/2/works/wardrip-fruin_screen.html
means of the visitor’s bodily and imaginative interaction with the words that peel off and are put back in place. The overlap with the ekphrastic situation is striking. Webb: “The audience (whether readers, listeners, viewers or spectators) combine a state of imaginative and emotional involvement in the worlds represented with an awareness that these worlds are not real.”

Without simply identifying the orator’s situation and interactive installations, it is illuminating to bring to mind the orator’s task to involve and interact with the audience. As Webb writes: “To emphasize the rhetorical nature of ekphrasis is also to draw attention to the vestigial orality of the phenomenon, the way in which the discussions of both ekphrasis and enargeia assume a live interaction between speaker and audience, with language passing like an electrical charge between them.”

Ekphrasis, we saw, brings about sight through sound; it creates “seeing through hearing,” in the words of Hermogenes. The auditory dimension of ekphrasis has been lost in the modern definition but was of course central to the rhetorical situation and oral poetry. The male voice in Screen can be seen as a guide showing his visitor around, giving her a tour. The spoken words direct the visitor’s attention towards the text, and the speaker leads the visitor through the work. Ekphrasis as a descriptive speech “which brings (literally ‘leads’) the thing shown vividly (enargōs) before the eyes” also identifies the speaker with a guide who shows its audience around.

Therefore Webb’s description of the rhetorical situation as both a theater and an exhibition is highly appropriate in the context of installation art: “Drawn as they are from different domains, these metaphors all suggest slightly different relationships between speaker, addressee and referent: the subject matter may be ‘brought’ into the presence of the audience (speaker as theatrical producer), or the audience may be ‘led around’ the subject (speaker as tour guide).”

33 Webb, Ekphrasis, 129.
34 Webb, Ekphrasis, 51, 54. This could be compared to the rhetorical concept of ductus that: “analyse the experience of artistic form as an ongoing, dynamic process rather than as the examination of a static or completed object. Ductus is the way by which a work leads someone through itself.” See M. Carruthers, “The Concept of Ductus, Or Journeying through a Work of Art, “ in Rhetoric Beyond Words: Delight and Persuasion in the Arts of the Middle Ages, ed. Carruthers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 190-213 (190).
35 Webb, Ekphrasis, 54-55.
Conclusion: Digital Ekphrasis

Recently there has been a substantial critique of the hegemony of vision in our Western culture. Indeed, sight has always been considered to be the noblest of senses. In *The Senses of Touch*, Mark Paterson shows how Greek geometry was multisensory and dependent on the body too. He writes:

> Before it becomes an abstracted, visual set of symbols on a surface, at one stage geometry involved the actual bodily process of measuring space. In the measuring process the hands, feet, eyes and body are all involved in spatial apprehension and perception. Spatial relations mediated through the body become represented in abstract form through a set of visual symbols. As we know, such visual symbols become part of a whole system of representation, geometry, which is subtracted from the original, embodied measuring process.

The development of geometry into an abstract concept also meant an active forgetting of the senses which implies a move from “the variability of the senses and sensory experience to the static invariability of a desensualized, abstract space.” This development is, according to Paterson, symptomatic of how the body has been erased in Western history in favor of the visual sense. The development of geometry into an abstract concept provides an interesting parallel to the distinction we have made between ancient and modern ekphrasis. In the modern definition of ekphrasis, the description of a work of art too becomes part of a representational system, a literary genre, with the consequence that the embodied meaning is subtracted from the ancient term. *Text Rain, Interactive Plant Growing, and Screen* show that the body is vital to contemporary digital installations and digital ekphrasis – with its emphasis on orality, immediacy, vividness, and tactility, which, as we have seen, are all integral aspects of these artworks. As Simanowski

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writes: "Interactive art restores the intrinsic link of affect and the body: ‘one is seeing with the body’ ... and one is ‘seeing through the hand.’" It in other words conveys an aesthetic of tactility.

Ekphrasis is an overlooked concept in discussions about interactive installations. Some authors have even denied the usefulness of ekphrasis as a critical tool, but they are only able to argue their case if they make use of the modern concept of ekphrasis and disregard its ancient meaning. As this chapter showed, it is fruitful to reinterpret the concept of rhetorical ekphrasis in the context of interactive installations. Orality, vividness, immediacy, and tactility direct us to the heart of both installation art and rhetoric, for as Mary Carruthers contends, “the heart of rhetoric, as of all art, lies in its performance: it proffers both visual spectacle and verbal dance to an audience which is not passive but an actor in the whole experience, like the chorus in drama.”

Rhetoric may serve as a conceptual foundation for digital installations, as for example the recently finished *Imitatio Marie* project about medieval material culture shows. The combination of rhetoric and interaction technology suggests new modes of critique and a novel understanding of the ways in which our culture always finds itself in a continuous process of re-formulation, re-interpretation, and re-purposing of our cultural heritage.

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39 Simanowski, *Digital Art and Meaning*, 125.