

Benedetta Milani

## Navigating the aesthetic network

### Abstract

*In the contemporary media landscape determined by the pervasive and ubiquitous use of computational media, the figure of ekphrasis is experiencing a moment of renewed interest, which contributes to broadening its field of action traditionally limited to literature. Following this line of interpretation, this article aims to show how precisely the concept of ekphrasis, understood in its processual and performative dimension, can be fruitfully engaged in an analysis of the aesthetic and visual experience that characterises the daily use of our digital devices.*

*By examining Juran Landt's drawing "I just want fruits on a plate", this article explores the tension between text and image in digitally inspired aesthetics. It analyses the disorienting yet productive experiences induced by Landt's artwork, which are reminiscent of our daily encounters with digital media. Finally, this article proposes that the ekphrastic process may represent a moment of unexpected rupture in the otherwise smooth and hypnotic consumption of the digital media.*

### Keywords

*Ekphrastic process, Digital aesthetic, Disorientation*

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## 1. Introduction

In the contemporary media landscape determined by the pervasive and ubiquitous use of technologies and computational media, the figure of *ekphrasis* is experiencing a moment of renewed interest, which contributes to broadening its field of action traditionally limited to literature. *Ekphrasis* originated in the context of Greek and Latin rhetoric and was canonised as “descriptive language, bringing what is portrayed clearly before the sight. There is *ekphrasis* of persons and events and places and periods of time” (Kennedy 2003: 45). As a verbal representation of something absent and invisible to the hearer, *ekphrasis* is a synaesthetic figure that “should almost create seeing through the hearing” (Kennedy 2003: 86), in this sense making the hearer a spectator of vivid and clear (mental) images (cf. Mattiacci 2013: 207). Thus, the now-standard definition of *ekphrasis* as “the literary representation of visual art” (Heffernan 1993: 1) depicts the gradual reduction of the ekphrastic figure to the relationship between artistic image and literary description alone. More recent academic debate, however, challenges this narrow reduction and instead returns to the plurality and plasticity that the ‘classical’ grant of *ekphrasis* already bore.

The academic discourse around *ekphrasis* is in fact increasingly moving away from the hermetic definition provided by Heffernan in 1991, according to which “*ekphrasis* is the verbal representation of graphic representation” (Heffernan 1991: 299), to propose new interpretations that see *ekphrasis* as a performative and creative process: as Barbetti well summarises in her book *Ekphrastic medieval visions* – “*Ekphrasis* needs to be thought of as a verb, not a noun” (Barbetti 2011: 5). What is interesting and intriguing is the inter-medial and interstitial dimension of *ekphrasis*, which by its very nature lies between different media forms and representations, typically between verbal description and visual representation, hence between word and image. In contemporary “iconomy”<sup>1</sup>, the subject is increasingly naturalised within the atmosphericity of digital media, and making clear distinctions between media and different forms of representation is not only difficult, but also obsolete. Hence, the relationship – competitive and collaborative at the same time – between

<sup>1</sup> Andrea Pinotti (2021: 10) proposes this crisis between *oikos* and *eikon* to describe the condition whereby “la nostra casa ambientale comune, l’*oikos*, è sempre più permeata dall’*eikon*, dall’immagine”.



word and image, between verballity, textuality and visuality also takes on new contours and, above all, new potentialities, so that in the research and definition of this relationship, the figure of the *ekphrasis* represents a dynamic conceptual tool. Authors such as Brosch and Verdone insist precisely on the processual and dynamic potentiality of *ekphrasis*, which thus cannot be understood merely as a rhetorical figure and a representation of a representation, but rather as “cultural agents with the power to elicit certain effects and to perform certain functions” (Brosch 2018: 226). The performative nature of the ekphrastic gesture is emphasised by Verdone, who proposes to differentiate between two moments: *ekphrasis-as-process* and *ekphrasis-as-text* (cf. Verdone 2023: 53), thus between a processual phase in which *ekphrasis* functions as a device and a phase in which it materialises into a literary product. Verdone's proposal to speak of an “ekphrastic device” (Verdone 2023: 53) is particularly interesting because it works on the idea that *ekphrasis* finds its productive and generative moment precisely in the “empty space” that the relationship between image and word leaves between itself, in the gap that always remains not only between the visual object and its textual representation but also and above all between the different perceptive experiences and fruition of image and text (Verdone 2023: 53). In the interstice left by the incommensurability between text and image, *ekphrasis* – understood in its processual moment – works generatively, interposing itself between two different media and representational forms, and succeeds in producing not a mere translation between them, but a force field that enables and solicits a hybrid, median and above all unprecedented fruition and comprehension of these media.

This ekphrastic moment holds epistemological potential beyond its two input domains: when an image arises in a text it provokes “a visual reading event,” combining Louis Marin’s (1999: 33) “reading event” and Sarah J. Paulson’s (2016: 241) ekphrastic “visual event”. The actualization of the triadic event involving text and imagined image in the reader’s mind gives rise to a “pictorial third”. (Louvel 2018: 247-8)

The ekphrastic device finds its space of action and meaning precisely in the fact that it is a medium among mediums, a position that does not reduce it to a representation of representation, but rather dynamises it in a process capable of casting a different and generative point of view on both the written word and the image. Insisting on the generativity and creativity of the ekphrastic device is not only necessary to further

emancipate this concept from the belittling idea of mimesis, but also to highlight the crucial fact that not being a faithful translation the “[e]kphrasis can create productive misreadings of visual images”, because “far from being just faithful descriptions, ekphrases exploit the ‘polysemy of images’ to become active players in the game of establishing and changing value” (Brosch 2018: 231).

It is on this central point that I will insist in order to show how the ekphrastic device can be employed not only when the image emerges from the word, but also when the word emerges from the image both as an aesthetic gesture and as a signifier. The “digital condition”<sup>2</sup> has made the relationship between text and image so intricate and ubiquitous that it has become both trivial and complex at the same time. In this context, a recalibration of this relationship becomes necessary, and the figure of the *ekphrasis* shows itself to be particularly suited to detecting, sedimenting and activating the various semantic, representational and perceptive planes that continually act in contemporary iconomy.

In my contribution, I will therefore use the ekphrastic device to present and analyse a work by the artist Juran Landt<sup>3</sup>, who brings to view with particular effectiveness the antagonistic tensions between text and image, as much as the continuous semantic bridges that the observer is led ‘naturally’ to stretch. The digital aesthetics that – as will be seen – inform Landt’s work will allow me to extend the field of analysis also to the perceptive and epistemic overload typical of the user ‘bridled’ in the daily consumption of digital devices and contents (Instagram, Tik Tok etc.). Through the presentation of the artistic practice and reflection – which works on the disorientated and alienating aesthetics of the digital – it will be shown how even in the everyday experience of viewing content on digital devices a moment of rupture can emerge, which by disturbing the otherwise frictionless fruition of such media, subverts its passivity.

<sup>2</sup> This expression was proposed by Felix Stalder in his book *The digital condition* (2018) and expresses the new condition that has become dominant with the rise of the networked computer.

<sup>3</sup> Juran Jakob Landt (1994-), is a mixed-media artist based in Bremen, Germany. He works with several different techniques and media such as painting, drawing, video installation and collage.

## 2. Ekphrasis in art: an active process of meaning-making

The artwork entitled “I just want fruits on a plate” is a drawing made with pastels on paper measuring 49 cm x 74 cm and was exhibited as part of the exhibition “Growing in a shift” organised by a group of young artists in the “Tor40” exhibition space in Bremen, Germany. In this drawing, Landt works by superimposing heterogeneous elements on a geometric and abstract structure that chaotically occupy the surface of the drawing, creating a full, almost saturated aesthetic that produces an initial sense of disorientation in the viewer whose vision struggles to find an order and coherence between the visual elements presented. The artist works by superimposing and juxtaposing multiple elements, both iconic and textual, which in the space of the drawing manage to create a field of visual and conceptual tension that the spectator is called upon to be a part of; it is therefore not a work that one has to look at, but rather navigate, passing from one point to another, transforming isolated elements into archipelagos of meaning.

The aesthetics with which Landt works is consciously related to the daily visual experience of using our digital devices where windows, advertisements, social content, etc. overlap and superimpose in a logic that Bolter and Grusin in *Remediation* (2000) defined as hyper-mediation:

In digital technology, as often in the earlier history of Western representation, hypermediacy expresses itself as multiplicity. [...] the logic of hypermediacy acknowledges multiple acts of representation and makes them visible. Where immediacy suggests a unified visual space, contemporary hypermediacy offers a heterogeneous space, in which representation is conceived of not as a window on to the world, but rather as “windowed” itself-with windows that open on to other representations or other media. (34-5)

In Landt's drawing – just like on my desktop – “windows” float on a surface that leaves no depth to the gaze: the artist does not ask that we look through the work as in the case of Alberti's window, but that we move across this surface. From the visual grid that is created, two elements emerge by breakage or disturbance that need to be focused on in order to be recognised as a sentence and a text. It is at this moment of deciphering and focusing – when the written word emerges from and between the images – that the ekphrastic process is triggered. Once having read the phrase that runs through the entire work “I just want fruits on a plate”, the viewer cannot help but recalibrate the connections

that her gaze had already made: now the fruit on the plates becomes the symbol of the banal and naive desire of the "I" in clear contrast to the brutality of the war images represented in the work.

The ekphrastic relationship between text and image is what in this artwork activates a process of interpretation, of reticular connections between images and words, but above all between collective memory and personal memory, that is, between the heterogeneous elements of the drawing and the personal grafts that contingently form between the viewer and the artwork itself. The ekphrastic process is thus that which activates a field of forces in which the single bearer of images, words and the viewer's experience enter into a dynamic exchange.

It is the written word, which in an ekphrastic relationship with the images, makes the images 'speak' and opens up their polysemous potential: the simultaneity between fruit that festively recalls summer – strawberries and oranges –, the serene scene of Cézanne's "The Bathers", in opposition to the apple and the weeping of Adam and Eve in Masaccio's "Cacciata dei progenitori dall'Eden", the iconic image of the collapse of one of the twin towers, all three powerful symbols of the end of



Fig.1 "I Just Want Fruits on a Plate" (2023), pastels on paper, 49 cm x 47. Courtesy of the Artist.

innocence and the violent and shocking rupture of the Western illusion of security, as in a sort of second expulsion from Eden. All these elements intertwine into a new constellation of meaning at the basis of the childish desire, which now becomes almost tragic for the “I” to simply want fruit on a plate. If the sentence that gives the artwork its title needs a certain perspective distance to be read, the opposite movement is required to be able – with some effort – to decipher the text that occupies the left-hand

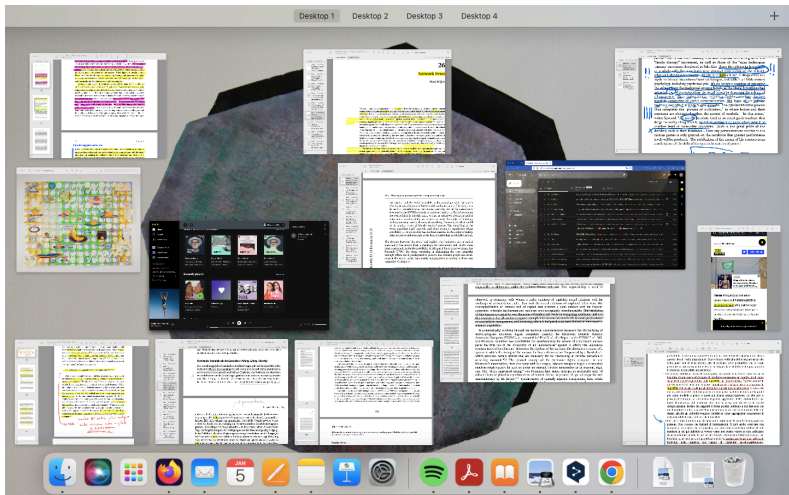


Fig.2 Screen-shot of my pc-desktop while working on the present article.

sessions of the drawing.

One has to get closer to discover that that vibrant stain is a text in German written backwards and with even more effort one can read that the text is taken from Aby Warburg's "Schlangenritual" and that it cites and thematises the very image that stands next to it, namely the statue of the "Laocoon"<sup>4</sup>.

4 "Die Erlösung von blutigen Opfer durchzieht als innerstes Reinigungsideal die religiöse Entwicklungsgeschichte vom Orient zum Okzident. Die Schlange macht diesen Sublimierungsprozeß in der Religion mit. Verhältnis zu ihr kann als Gradmesser des



Fig.3 “I Just want fruits on a plate” (2023), detail. Courtesy of the Artist.

vom Fetischismus zur reinen Erlösungsreligion sich wandelnden Glaubens angesehen werden. Sie ist im Alten Testament, wie die Ur Schlange Tiamat in Babylon, der Geist des Bösen, der Verführung. In Griechenland ist sie auch die gnadenlose unterirdische Fresserin: Die Erinny ist vom Schlangen umzuckt, und die Götter entsenden, um zu strafen, die Schlange selbst als Henker. Diese Vorstellung von der Schlange als vernichtende Unterweltsgewalt hat wohl im Mythos und in der Gruppe del Laokoon zum mächtigsten tragischen Symbol geführt. Die Rache der Götter, vollzogen an ihrem Priester und seinem beiden Söhnen durch die Schlange als Würger, führte in der bekanntesten Gruppe der Antike zur sinnfälligen Verkörperung höchsten Menschenleides. Der wahrsagende Priester, der durch eine Warnung seinem Volk wider die Tücke der Griechen zu Hilfe kommen wollte, verfällt der Rache der parteiischen Götter. So wird der Tod des Vaters und der Söhne zum Symbol der antiken Passion: Rachetod durch Dämonen ohne Gerechtigkeit und ohne Hoffnung auf Erlösung. Das ist hoffnungsloser tragischer Pessimismus der Antike” (Warburg 1995: 42-3).

It is the reading of the text, in which the tragic scene of the death of the priest Laocoon and his sons is succinctly described and contextualised, that with a glimpse brings into dialogue images that would otherwise have remained mute. In the introduction to his masterwork *Atlas Mnemosyne*, Warburg identifies the limit poles of human emotionality and expressiveness: between homicidal mania and suicidal melancholy runs the entire scale of human emotions and gestures represented in the history through images (*Bildgeschichte*) of the West. The twisted, elongated and suffering bodies plastically depicted in the “Laocoon” and the bodies peacefully abandoned on the lawn in the “Bathers” then refer precisely to the embodiment of these two extreme emotions<sup>5</sup>. Warburg's words are expressive, powerful and resonate with the violent and tragic elements that Landt inserts into his aesthetic network; at the same time, the contemplative serenity of the bathers as much as of the fruit reminds us that, as in the symbol of the snake – the protagonist of Warburg's text – opposites are not excluded, but rather are always present in each other's backgrounds<sup>6</sup>.

The ekphrastic relationship between text and images thus triggers a game of producing connections, interpretations, constellations of meaning that emerge, some immediately others more slowly, making the artwork explode in a kaleidoscope that ‘activates’ the observer. The written word expands and dynamises the visual elements of the drawing, connecting and remixing them, making possible that “productive misreadings” (Brosch 2018: 231) of the images and the artwork itself. The viewer's experience, her biographical and cultural knowledge and memory, are thus an integral part of the enjoyment and understanding of the work, and are significantly integrated into the ekphrastic process. The sense of disorder that the drawing conveys at ‘first sight’ gives way

<sup>5</sup> “Der Entdämonisierungsprozess der phobisch geprägten Eindruckserbmasse, der die ganze Skala des Ergriffenseins gebärdensprachlich umspannt, von der hilflosen Versunkenheit bis zum mörderischen Menschenfrass, verleiht der humanen Bewegungsdynamik auch in den Stadien, die zwischen den Grenzpolen des Orgasmus liegen dem Kämpfen, Gehen, Laufen, Tanzen, Greifen, jenen Prägrand unheimlichen Erlebens, das der in mittelalterliche[r] Kirchengucht aufgewachsene Gebildete der Renaissance wie ein verbotenes Gebiet, wo sich nur die Gottlosen des freigelassenen Temperaments tummeln dürfen, ansah” (Warburg 2010: 630).

<sup>6</sup> The snake is a clear example of the Greek concept of “pharmakón”, a concept that refers to the coexistence of opposites, to the possibility of being both poison and antidote. The serpent is indeed the chthonic monster that kills Laocoon and his children, but it is also the animal coiled on the staff of Asclepius, God of Health (cf. Warburg 1995: 44-6).



Fig. 4 Screen-shot taken from my smartphone on 13 October 2023

to a positive and productive sense of disorientation in which what is stimulated is precisely the instinct, almost the involuntary reflex, of the subject to seek and produce meaning.

### *3. Between screen and user: the ekphrastic process in the daily use of digital media*

The way in which Landt's work takes inspiration from the visual experience that we experience on a daily basis in our use of digital devices allows me to propose an analysis of how *ekphrasis* – understood as a process - also creeps into our reception of digital content.

However, the use of the concept of *ekphrasis* in digital iconomy is not straightforward, as famously stated by Bolter in *Ekphrasis, virtual reality, and the future of writing* (1996) the hegemony of the image over the written word that informs the so-called “pictorial turn”, i.e. the return of a cultural prevalence of image over text, actually seems to bring about a “denial of *ekphrasis*” (Bolter 1996: 265). Yet, as also mentioned in the introduction to the present article, it is precisely the contemporary digital cultural context that has rekindled interest in new re-significations and uses of the concept of *ekphrasis*. As proposed by Lindhé in “*A visual sense is born in the fingertips*”: *towards a digital ekphrasis* (2013), the *ekphrasis*, when extracted from the literary context, turns out to be an effective figure to open up new perspectives on digital multimedia, precisely in the light of the multimedia nature of *ekphrasis* itself (Lindhé 2013: 1-2). Its interstitial nature may be particularly suitable and receptive to a media



environment in which text, moving and static images, sound and touch coexist and converge in an increasingly ubiquitous manner.

Landt's artwork reproduces precisely this visual and impulse saturation to which digital devices – starting with the screen – have accustomed us. In fact, as in the artist's artwork, it is now common experience that opening one's YouTube home page, looking at Stories on Instagram or scrolling through videos on Tik Tok creates a montage of different elements – videos, photographs, captions, images, etc. – that often have no immediate relationship with each other: thus, between scenes of private life, images of war are inserted, contents of political denunciation between videos of stand-up comedy and shopping suggestions. The collision of contents in the reduced space of a device and in the very short time in which they are now consumed leads to a latent sense of disorientation, whereby this reality presented in such a fragmented and schizophrenic manner struggles to recompose itself meaningfully in the experience of the “I”, of the subject. This process of piling up different and simultaneous stimuli, contents, emotions and information renders problematic the position the subject can take in the face of this aesthetic, cognitive and perceptive clash that spectacularises and often trivialises what it represents, from the personal event to the global event.

The simultaneity and consequentiality between visual and textual elements that characterises digital media is fertile ground for the ekphrastic process, which in a way puts the tension between text-image, image-image, image-audio etc. to good use. The superimposition – as in the case of the screen-shot presented – between images and text can create a new aesthetic product that re-signifies individual elements. The juxtaposition ‘casually’ produced by algorithmic processes opens in an unexpected way to an ekphrastic moment that questions and affects the user, because it disorients and disturbs. The dissonance between the image of the green flag – politically and emotionally highly loaded – and the banality of the advertisement activates an unexpected and involuntary ekphrastic process that creates a fracture in the fruition, in the gesture that the user, in this case the writer of this article, was performing, that is, the reading of a news. As with the emergence of the text in Landt's drawing, once the pop-up window appears on the screen it is impossible to ignore the unsettling simultaneity between the frivolous individual desire (to have a firmer breast) and the brutality of history.

The ekphrastic process in this context therefore occurs unexpectedly, it is involuntary because it is not foreseen by either the machine or the user, yet it is triggered precisely in the relationship between what emerges on the surface of the screen and the subject. In *ekphrasis*, there is an addition of meaning to the digital object that disrupts its fruition, but which precisely for this reason reactivates the user into a subject engaged in the creative process of meaning-making.

#### 4. Conclusion

In the present article, therefore, *ekphrasis* was understood not as a literary rhetorical figure, but as a process that through the contact between image and text activates the formation of new images, new connections and interpretations in the subject. The ekphrastic moment functions as a rift that opens up a new perspective within the tension between visibility, verbiage and textuality and allows these elements to be aesthetically and conceptually compressed into a dynamic aesthetic product that is open to the subject, whose experience – as seen in Landt's artwork – is an integral part of the ekphrastic and interpretative process.

It is precisely Landt's aesthetic practice – which artistically remediate the visual experience of the digital world – that has made it possible to bring these reflections into the context of everyday use of digital media. In fact, I proposed that in this context, *ekphrasis* can represent an unexpected element, a process that is involuntarily and casually triggered when image and text are brought into contact and that activates in the user a personal and unexpected process of interpretation and re-signification, foreign to the original context, and that can be disorienting, disturbing but also suggestive.

My proposal is therefore to consider the moment in which the ekphrastic process wedges between the digital screen and the subject, as an unplanned event that disturbs and breaks the smooth and hypnotic consumption of the media. It is therefore not something that the user experiences all the time, on a daily basis, but precisely an unexpected and labile event that nevertheless has the capacity to reinsert a moment of contingency and individuality within computational processes that instead function by elimination and limitation of the latter. By working on the same sense of perceptive and cognitive saturation, Landt's work artistically thematises precisely this sense of disorientation and

disconcertment, however, placing the observer in the condition of being able to make sense of what she sees and thus empowering her role as interpreting subject and not consuming user.

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