

Ekphrasis, after Gerrit Joost de Jonge — The Art of Drawing with Water

In his *Philosophical Investigations*, Ludwig Wittgenstein noted that in most verbal communications, “the meaning of a word is its use in the language.”¹ The effort to understand what has been said involves a continuing series of paraphrases that re-proposition the original statement into parallel but never quite identical alternatives. In constructive activities like visual art, however, meaning is inseparable from form and crafting. No paraphrase is feasible. Against any verbal description stands the mute object insisting on its tactile reality. Of course, people must talk about their reactions to an exhibition, a film, or a performance in order to organize a recollection of the experience worth retaining for the future. Nonetheless, no matter how much or in what contexts a work is discussed, its objectivity eludes all of its verbal approximations. A work finds and holds onto a public precisely because it offers an experience that slips away from words and the ready-to-hand categories they provide. We turn to the visual and performing arts because these modes of expression capture aspects of experience and feeling that elude words. In one of his most famous aphorisms, Wittgenstein asserted, “What *can* be shown *cannot* be said.”² In this case, the philosopher was contrasting the distinction between mathematical formula and everyday descriptive language, but the claim has struck most as pertinent to art objects as well.

If, as Charles Sanders Peirce argued, “all thought operates through the medium of signs,³ a work of art is a sign that evokes a response that circulates as it is thrown off into words. In the circuit of subjectivity, verbal approximations are always tenta-

All images reproduced in this essay are by the author.

1 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967), §43.

2 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 4.1212.

3 Charles Sanders Peirce, “Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man,” in *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, vol. 1 (1867-1893), ed. Nathan Houser and Christian Kloesel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 11-27.



tive; they generate responses that add on top of, often covering over, previous remarks. The verbal circuits even if prolix preserve the centrality and the purity of the object, which standing mute, is important to the degree that it provokes continuing efforts to recapture the experience it offers in other expressive forms. Since an object is not limited to the particular signs that are observed in any particular set of social relationships, the art object retains its inherent mystery. Its "quality," in terms of its position in circuits of exchange, is its continuing ability to generate new efforts to explore a wider range of meanings that can be imputed to the sensations the object produces. It is axiomatic that meaning does not lie inherently or solely in perception as an individual relation to the object, but in the sequence/exchange of interpretations that follow interaction. An object, in Peirce's semiotic universe, does not directly cause ideas to form; objects present puzzles that cause observers to consult the archive of previous experience and formulated knowledge to offer an interpretation, that if actionable becomes an experience contributing to new knowledge of the world. In a utilitarian object, the sequence of interpretations is short, and other than idiosyncratic responses, culminates in precise, limited understanding of what it is for. With an art object, the sequence of interpretations may not be infinite but its power as an object for thought is seen through an unfolding chain of interpretations. As Arthur Danto has expressed it, all objects are sensuous, but art objects generate a process of "interpretive seeing (...)" which in effect means framing interpretive hypotheses as to meaning."⁴ Each individual statement keeps in motion propositions

⁴ Quote from Arthur Danto, "The End of Art: A Philosophical Defense," *History and Theory* 37 (1998), 133. See also Arthur Danto, "The End of Art," in Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York: 1986), 81-115.



that may reaffirm, may expand, or may challenge the repertory available for "saying" this is who I am in relation to different people, objects, events, processes, for articulating a *reaction* that is the focal point of meaning. Whatever is put forward is tentative, waiting for the next relay in the circuit.

If a work of art has no fixed meaning inherent to its object status, it is only as interesting as the responses that it generates; it is only as interesting as the people who enter the circuit emanating from a work. The community of viewers, not the artist, transforms an object into a work of art through the words that respondents use to speak of themselves. The problem of ekphrasis, then, its fundamental tragedy, is that the object purportedly being described disappears, replaced by a potentially narcissistic loop.

I see an object. What I feel transposes into an urgent message affirming my own powers. I can speak! I will speak! There lies the nub and the essence of the problem. A reduction must take place whenever we boil the richness of lived experience down to a handful of words that can make sense to another person. Our lives are in fact infinitely tiny. My world may be just a small speck of the universe, not even big enough to fill a corner. Even so, it fits me just fine. It's been big enough for me and the people I love. Maybe that's why even though we speak to each other all the time, we need song, dance, and pictures to say the things we feel that words refuse to provide us. But then we need to talk about it all and throw it back into words!

Given that we communicate through relatively limited systems, any given expression has a high likelihood of falling short in conveying what a speaker hopes to communicate. Another variation is tried, an effort to short-circuit the limitations inherent to all forms of expression, whether speech, images, gestures. The plastic arts have remained important because they escape the particular



limitations of verbal languages to convey more direct sensory experiences that, if successful, stimulate further efforts to throw off the experience into words, that themselves, however deficient or limited, might miraculously bring into focus aspects of contemporary life otherwise stuck in the realm of ineffable feelings.

What tricks are there to discover how to express what cannot be said but must be shown? We want responses that speak not only of how we felt, but return us to the objectivity of the original encounter. The strategy I have developed is to turn to photographs and other visual forms to propose to myself a parallel experience that stimulates but also resists words. In the end though, I must return to writing, which has been my way to achieve a more objective view of whatever topic I've undertaken, a view that reveals something so new that what I discovered could not have possibly already existed inside me. Reconfiguration may be a better word than discovery. To let appear forms that seem more accurate than the impressions my experience has left me. As I move through the world, I have a lot of thoughts about a lot of things, and for the most part, those thoughts are a jumbled, chaotic ball of buzzing energy. Writing allows me to discover what I "really" think as I start to escape the confusion that seems to define my most immediate relation with the world. Maybe a better way of putting it is that writing allows me to form a picture in my mind that could be called "thought." At least a form has taken shape inside my mind. If I preserve it, the thought can be shared and may generate other thoughts.

All a gamble. The process of discovering meaning in the ineffable I see as equivalent to drawing with water. Images, the beautiful ones no less than the ugly and banal, start fading away before they are finished.

–Richard Cándida Smith

A Boat Unloads

A boat unloads
A boyfriend buys a new jacket
A door opens onto another universe
A leap into the light
A young girl who enjoyed a good time

And
Another slate wiped clean
Another person ready to roam

Arithmetic
For a moment of light
As arid as a desert
Coming at you fast
Far away
Broken by love for the real

Birds carry them up to the gods in their heaven
As fast as they can
Eyes filled with hunger
Diving into the bodies of the faithful
Filling them with pleasure
But where you will all be
Dead without even knowing it

Geometry
Going back to the source
Her eyes closed when she made love
I followed the wind
Her head sinks into the pillow
I open my body to the sun's heat

Her breasts pretty and warm
Like sumptuous summer thunderheads

Men with their sporty clothes

Midnight

Oh

Pretty breasts

The breath of desire

To brighten their way wherever they go

While everybody else listens to their iPods

The fullness of life bursting against the barriers

The gods nod in approval and take the plunge

She has nice legs

The sky comes falling

On the moon

When walls tumble

The whole world sings

They wish for the water of life

The world comes in

