

—Richard Cándida Smith

Introduction

The painter's products stand before us as though they were alive, but if you question them, they maintain a most majestic silence. It is the same with written words; they seem to talk to you as if they were intelligent, but if you ask them anything about what they say, from a desire to be instructed, they go on telling you just the same thing forever.

—Plato, *Phaedrus* 275d

In the classical world, ekphrasis offered a set of rhetorical devices to keep thought in motion. By saying what one saw in a picture, the orator broke the “majestic silence” that Plato ascribed to finished work. Perfect in itself, as much a part of nature as the landscape a painting might represent, the work needs a speaker to insert spirit into the picture. Words themselves, however, also turn static and difficult to recall once they leave the mouth to settle on paper (or onscreen!). To keep them alive, words must be within a body in motion. Simonides of Ceos advised that rhetoricians practicing to give a speech might start by imagining they were entering a building. Visualizing movement through this space provides a sequence that can trigger recollection of what the orator wants to say. Each of the rooms should arise clearly in the mind's eye, decorated in a manner appropriate to the subject under recall. The texts themselves are to be marked by striking icons, the contemplation of which stimulates the hidden words to flood into and animate the speaker's body.¹

This conception of thought saw every expression as inadequate, at best provisional, if it did not stimulate a fusion of the sens-

¹ Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London: Pimlico Press, 1992), 17.

es. In and of itself, language is too slippery to hold onto with confidence. Vision provides, within this scheme, more precise sensations, so words need to be covered with forms that the eye can master. Images, however, do not appear unless the body first puts itself in motion through space. A search for visual cues serves as prelude to an effective performance making the recalled word present in every part of the body. Tongue, eye, feet, hands, hips, chest are all equally engaged in and equally necessary to the machinery of recall and response. As Plato suggested in his dialogue *Phaedrus*, the notation of words on paper had proved a useful tool for reminding people of things they had forgotten. For precisely that reason, however, writing invited amnesia as it disengaged humanity from a deep, embodied connection with experience. A turn to more physical arts is needed to reignite the spirit trying to understand its place in the universe.²

In the neo-Platonist tradition, what connected all types of expressions was their status as projections from the world of forms. When language or art acted as if it was a self-sufficient, independent reality, it declined into shadows, ephemeral and therefore seemingly novel and exciting – an illusion because any return reveals how dead most supposedly creative work becomes after the initial thrill is gone. By triangulating between language, vision, song, and dance, the lover of truth might move beyond the fragmentary world of appearances to glimpse the bright world of ideas, the natural home of the soul.

The magic of the professional artist is an ability to reproduce a sense of shared space outside of immediate face-to-face encounters. An art object connects the viewer to the artist through a

² Plato, *Phaedrus*, 274c-275b.

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shared set of physical responses that become stronger and stronger the more the viewer explores the work. An art object connects viewers as well without them having to speak to each other. Yet people enjoy talking about work they have seen, particularly when it elicits a strong physical response. What do words add that are so important that an artwork is in danger of disappearing without their presence? Francis Ponge thought that the semantic thickness of words restores and replenishes the material thickness of things by “increasing the quantity of our qualities.”³ Every verbal account introduces new types of words that play against each other simultaneously as communities grasp to feel possibilities for connection. A verbal kaleidoscope reveals alternative modes of relating, some but not all incompatible. Gesture devolves into negotiation over preferred meanings and how unexpected responses might transform the nature of the contact. From this transfigured sense of connection should flow a future with room for broader ranges of difference. Ponge invokes a familiar, haunting dream of integration achieved through expressive gestures transcending the here and now with intimations of a previously unthinkable fullness of contact that, curiously, words convey most strongly.

When Gerrit Joost de Jonge contacted me about the second installment of his exploration of ekphrasis, he emphasized that he wanted unpredictable, open-ended exchange between people from different backgrounds: “I wish to offer you the selection of one of the paintings of which I have enclosed images below. If you like to join in, please let me know which work you’d like to receive & where I may send it! :-) You would be free to write as you like, and approach the realm of the ekphrastic from your own field, your

³ Francis Ponge, “Introduction au galet,” in Ponge, Tome premier (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1965), 197.

own professional practice, though at least in part refer to the artwork of your choice; what its workings are for you, emotional, coloristic, formal." He offered a formidable challenge, sweetened by the opportunity to think about issues of importance to those who agreed to join him in his project. The contributors to this volume do not propose a program for the exchange of text and image. We do hope that the conversations captured in this publication will carry on as readers respond in their own way to the images, ideas, and emotions set in motion in the pages that follow.