Ekphrasis in Greek: *ek*, "out of," and *phrasis*, "speech" or "expression." Often translated simply as "description," most commonly, and particularly in our current understanding, a written description of a piece of art. While the term “art” can mean a multitude of things, we’re going to look closely at two very specific art forms – architecture and photography.

There are different ways you can approach ekphrasis in writing, although today we’re going to focus on two of the most common techniques you can use to write your own ekphrasis work. What makes ekphrasis work difficult is that you don’t want to rehash what the artwork is already portraying. This is a misstep ekphrastic work can easily succumb to—reiterating what the art already conveys. Your job is to reimagine the art in a new way.

So why should we care about ekphrasis? Remember that you’re trying to write to communicate. You want to write from a point of empathy and balance. Most artwork we see, that we are moved by, transcend our own personal experiences. By creating truly vivid and powerful ekphrastic work, we are attempting to make a large, complex subject tangible and visceral, specifically through the use of concrete details. It’s the concrete details that give your audience an entrance into experiences outside their own.

The first technique is **ekphrasis as an** **emotional response**. This is when the poet observes a piece of art & constructs a poem that is triggered by, you guessed it, an emotional response. The writer has a lot of different options when creating an emotional response to a piece of art. A writer can write about the experience of looking at the art. They can relate the work of art to something else it makes them think of. Or they can think about where they were at the time the art was created. This by no means is an exhaustive list, but these are the most common techniques seen in emotional response.

Now, let’s look at [Yusef Komunyakaa](http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/22)’s poem “Facing It” about the Vietnam Memorial Wall and see if we can identify devices that allow the reader to understand ekphrasis as emotional response. Think about concrete details Komunyakaa uses to create complexity and an entrance into a personal experience, in regards to the art itself.

The second technique we’re going to discuss is **ekphrasis as** **imagined presence**. This is when the poet observes a piece of art & constructs a poem that allows them to create a **persona** on the page. Can anyone remind us what **persona** means? A character assumed by an author in a written work. So, again, there a lot of different options when creating an imagined presence to a piece of art. A writer can write from the perspective of the artist themselves. What were they thinking when creating the art? They can also write from the perspective of someone or something within the art itself. What were the people/things thinking or doing in the art?

Let’s look at Ruth Awad’s poem “Karantina Massacre, 1976, East Beirut.” Again, let’s attempt to identify devices that allow the reader entrance into the art. Think about concrete details Awad uses to create complexity and an entrance into a personal experience, in regards to the art itself. We’ll look at the photograph after our discussion to see how Awad has transformed the art in a new way.

**Facing It**

by [Yusef Komunyakaa](http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/22), from his collection *Dian Cai Dau,* published in 1988.

My black face fades,

hiding inside the black granite.

I said I wouldn't,

dammit: No tears.

I'm stone. I'm flesh.

My clouded reflection eyes me

like a bird of prey, the profile of night

slanted against morning. I turn

this way--the stone lets me go.

I turn that way--I'm inside

the Vietnam Veterans Memorial

again, depending on the light

to make a difference.

I go down the 58,022 names,

half-expecting to find

my own in letters like smoke.

I touch the name Andrew Johnson;

I see the booby trap's white flash.

Names shimmer on a woman's blouse

but when she walks away

the names stay on the wall.

Brushstrokes flash, a red bird's

wings cutting across my stare.

The sky. A plane in the sky.

A white vet's image floats

closer to me, then his pale eyes

look through mine. I'm a window.

He's lost his right arm

inside the stone. In the black mirror

a woman's trying to erase names:

No, she's brushing a boy's hair.

**Karantina Massacre, 1976, East Beirut**

by Ruth Awad, first appeared in *The New Republic*, June 2012 issue.

That smell stippling down  
from the slaughterhouse, metallic,  
is Karantina burning.  
Smoke builds its honeycomb  
then shifts shapes above us—look:  
an anvil, a locust husk, the black boot  
stomping, at last, to snuff us  
as we scuttle behind the tin sheets,  
behind the mold-laced walls that slouch  
and crumble, behind the rag-shut windows.

Karantina, whose clotheslines crosshatch and loop  
around and around the single tree like spiderwebs  
—we’re all caught here. Fire or gunfire.  
Militiamen cut down the ropes, and  
tunics wave to the dirt  
like flags of an imaginary country.

When my sons come running it will be  
too late. I know this man from a dream,  
his masked face, the one-handed way  
his gloved fingers hold the rifle skyward.  
When they are through, there will be  
nothing. Not a fingerprint.

The man steps closer, boot heels  
flint against the gravel,  
and the fires bloom like a field of poppies  
slumping and nodding, petals flung  
to the ground, to the smoldering tin that once  
balanced the sky on its knife-edge.  
In the distance, the cattle low  
and shift in their chutes.

And when I hold up my hands to him,  
I see in that moment a decade of nights  
in Karantina—the tenements and runoff  
and slaughterhouse dissolving into absolute dark,  
oily dark that slicked over patched roofs  
and sloped doors, dark pinned  
up by the sharp ends of stars,  
dark you could carry,  
dark you couldn’t outrun.

“Untitled,” Couple Kisses During Vancouver Riots, 2011 by Rich Lam

**Exercise**

Remember the two different ways we discussed approaching ekphrasis work. It’ll be up to you to decide which one you’d like to write. There are some guiding questions below, but allow your imagination and your understanding of how [Komunyakaa](http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/22) and Awad create poems that allow their readers to be immersed. Not only do both poets recreate the art in a new way, through their use of both concrete details and figurative language, they allow the reader to understand complex ideas and an entrance into a personal experience.

**Writing from an emotional response**: Allow the image to trigger your emotions. Here are some suggestions to get you started. Relate the work of art to something else it makes you think of. Does it make you think of something that’s happened in your life? Write about the experience of looking at the art. How exactly does the art make you feel? Think about where you were at the time the art was created.

**Writing from an imagined presence**: Allow the image to trigger some sort of narrative, a story from a different perspective other than the writer. You can write from the perspective of the artist themselves. What were they thinking/seeing/doing when creating the art? You can write from the perspective of someone or something (the subject) within the art itself. What was the subject thinking or doing in the art? Moments before the art? After the art?

**Tips**

* Create a list of details that employ the five senses.
* Think of this as a communication. Remember, you’re not trying to retell the artwork. How can you communicate the piece of art in a new way?
* Think about doing a little bit of research! Find out more about the piece of art or the artist, the circumstances that led to the art. It might lead you down a different path.
* Don’t be limited to the “frame” of the art. You’re only limited by what you can imagine.

“La Jeune Fille a la Fleur, 1967” by Marc Riboud

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“Untitled,” A lone Jewish settler challenges Israeli security officers by Oded Balilty

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“Nighthawks, 1942” by Edward Hopper

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“The Falling Man, 2001” by Richard Drew

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“Winged Victory of Samothrace” by Unknown Greek Artist

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“Louis and Lucille Armstrong in Cairo, 1961” by Unknown Artist

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SUGGESTED READING FOR EKPHRASIS POETRY

**PAINTINGS**

“Musée des Beaux Arts” — W. H. Auden

“The Painting” — John Balaban

“Nude Descending a Staircase” — XJ Kennedy

“Pastorals in the Atrium” — Sadiqa de Meijer

“Mourning Picture” — Adrienne Rich

“The Starry Night” — Anne Sexton

“Number 1 by Jackson Pollock” — Nancy Sullivan

“Landscape with the Fall of Icarus” — William Carlos Williams

**PHOTOGRAPHS**

“War Photograph” — Kate Daniels

“The Family Photograph” — Vona Groarke

“Piss Christ” — Andrew Hudgins

“Photograph of People Dancing in France” — Leslie Adrienne Miller

“Two Photographs of Jean-Michel Basquiat, Paris” — Kevin Young

**ARCHITECTURE/SCULPTURES**

“Statue and Birds” — Louise Bogan

“The Broken Fountain” — Amy Lowell

“An Arundel Tomb” — Philip Larkin

“Archaic Torso of Apollo” — Rainer Maria Rilke

“A Baroque Wall-Fountain in the Villa Sciarra” — Richard Wilbur

*The Illiad* — Homer (the earliest use of literary ekphrasis, seen in Book 18)

**OTHER ART FORMS**

“A Form of Sexual Healing” — Terrance Hayes

“Dream of Ink Brush Calligraphy” — Karen An-Hwei Lee

“Jimi’s Blues” — Tim Seibles

“Tapestry” — Charles Simic

“Edward Hopper’s *New York Movie*” — Joseph Stanton

“Drawing for Absolute Beginners” — Monica Youn

**LITERARY MAGAZINES**

*EOAGH: A Journal of the Arts* — www.eoagh.com

*Ekphrasis: A Poetry Journal* — [www.ekphrasisjournal.com](http://www.ekphrasisjournal.com)

*The Electronic Monsoon Magazine* — [www.electronicmonsoon.com](http://www.electronicmonsoon.com)

*the light ekphrastic* — [www.thelightekphrastic.com](http://www.thelightekphrastic.com)

*Theodate* — [www.theodate.org](http://www.theodate.org)

To read more on the different conventions of ekphrasis, visit Calamity Jane’ blog: <http://calamity.wordherders.net/archives/000422.html>