

Jörg H. Gleiter*

ARCHITECTURE AND PHILOSOPHY: THE FAILURE OF TRANSLATION

ABSTRACT: In the connection between architecture and philosophy, the “and” connects and separates at the same time. In classical rhetoric, the concept and technique of ekphrasis stands for this. Ekphrasis means transfer from the medium of sensual experience into the medium of language and back into the realm of sensual imagination. As will be shown here, however, the “and” unfolds its full functionality only in the failure of ekphrasis. Only in failure does the “and” become the medium of intellectuality and sensuality, that is, when the “and” no longer designates a center and a place of symmetry, but when it describes a marginal condition, when it shifts the discourse toward the margins, when it clears the space and gives freedom a place. An example of the creative failure of ekphrasis is the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin by Peter Eisenman. In the failed translation of sensory and cognitive experience, Eisenman forces architecture and philosophy into a unity that cannot be resolved into a dialectical third. Thus, the memorial creates a void in the center of Berlin that becomes a trigger of sensual and intellectual imagination for the unimaginable of the Holocaust.

KEYWORDS: ekphrasis, *enargeia*, architecture, Holocaust, philosophy, memorial, Eisenman

* Jörg H. Gleiter: Technische Universität Berlin; joerg.gleiter@tu-berlin.de.

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“And” is both a necessity and an impossibility. It is always more than conjunction and translation. In the connection between architecture and philosophy, the “and” is simultaneously connecting and dividing. Or should we say that the “and” keeps two things at a distance, both of which vie for the same thing, namely the way man is in the world.

In this sense, the “and” signifies a certain gain for both sides: the material practice of architecture gains its conceptual extension, while the thinking of philosophy receives its necessary orientation in everyday life. With one reservation: this transfer can never transpire fully and completely. It can only succeed when both architecture and philosophy refuse to engage in mimesis of their counterpart medium, striving instead to find the gap and problematize the in-between.

The gap is the gain. This shows that the “and” is a dynamizing medium, which sets both architecture and philosophy in motion, at the same time preventing them from being absorbed in each other. The “and” keeps the processes open, it marks the place of the difference. In fact, it is only in the failure of translation that the “and” as conjunction can unfurl its full function, when it calls, strives and yearns for a translation, without actually reaching it.

However, architecture enters the equation with philosophy as a process at the conceptually-theoretical, constructively-material and performatively-sensual level. Thus, architecture manifests itself at three levels: thinking, producing and acting. Each of these levels relates to philosophy in its own way and presents its own “and.”

In classical rhetoric, the “and” is expressed through the concept and the method of ekphrasis. Ekphrasis means transference from the medium of sensual experience into the medium of language, which does not exhaust itself at reaching the latter, but attempts to evoke in the listener a vivid representation of what is being described. In ekphrasis, the language becomes the “and.” It only becomes the medium of the new when the transmission process has failed, when “and” no more describes a center and a place of symmetry but instead a marginal condition, when it displaces the discourse towards its edges, when it clears the space and gives place to freedom. How does, then, the “and” function in failure? The function of the “and” is to enable creativity in architecture and philosophy.

Such a place of creativity in the failure of ekphrasis is the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin by the architect Peter Eisenman. In the failing translation from sensual to cognitive experience,

Eisenman forces architecture and philosophy into a new kind of unity which cannot be resolved in a dialectical third stage. The memorial's refusal of representation creates an emptiness in the center of Berlin, which triggers a sensual and intellectual imagination for the unimaginable of the Holocaust.

This text will first attempt to clarify the concept and the act of ekphrasis (*ἐκφρασις*), extending it by the concepts of *enargeia* (*ἐνάργεια*) and *energeia* (*ἐνέργεια*), followed by an introduction to the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, on the basis of which, it will explain the failure of ekphrasis as catalyst for consciousness processes.

ENARGELA AND ENERGEIA

The term “ekphrasis” generally describes the process of transferring visual into conceptual experience. This presupposes switching from the medium of image to the medium of language. This happens whenever we speak of architecture and describe our experiences therewith. However, defining it simply as transferring visual into linguistic representations does not do justice to the cultural significance of ekphrasis. Aelius Theon, a Greek rhetorician from the first century CE, writes: “Ekphrasis is a descriptive speech which vividly brings the subject shown before the eyes.”¹ The emphasis here is on visual demonstration. Cicero also writes of *illustratio* or “bringing into the light” as well as *evidentia* or “being before the eyes.”² According to these, ekphrasis is transferring images into words, in order to make the description less abstract and to stimulate the listener's imagination by causing images and visions in their mind.

An examination of ekphrasis, which means describing architecture in word or writing, implies that ekphrasis is not a neutral action, and therefore fundamentally differs from factual and scientific reports. The mental images it causes are no simple pictures, they have already passed through two media and are therefore the result of a double translation. This process inscribes itself in the images and leaves a trace in them. The resulting images are tinged by the patterns of conceptual thinking, without fully adopting its logical structure.

¹ Quoted from R. Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice*, Ashgate, Farnham, 2009, p. 197.

² For more on this, see F. Graf, “Ekphrasis: Die Entstehung der Gattung in der Antike,” in G. Böhm, H. Pfothenhauer (eds.), *Beschreibungskunst – Kunstbeschreibung: Ekphrasis von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*, Fink Verlag, München, 1995, p. 145.

Moreover, ekphrasis always transcends describing only visible things. In the sense of classical rhetoric, ekphrasis is always paired with *enargeia* and *energeia*, the power of producing images and sentiments. “The vivid aspects (*enargeia*) of a description put what is discussed before the eyes of the audience by using words that signify motion or actuality (*energeia*),”³ as Caroline van Eck puts it. The paradoxical constellation of ekphrasis manifests in its striving to transcend the verbal by using words.

Ekphrasis is the vivid description, the *energeia*, of an image or an architectonic situation, which induces in the listener an effect, *enargeia*. Architectonic perception always being more than visual experience gives ekphrasis a special position in architecture. If it based its transference only on the visible, it would fall short of architecture’s complexity, the latter ekphrasis being experienced with the totality of our senses – balance, sight, smell, hearing or corporeality, to name a few.

By demanding a way of “thinking in visible and tangible procedures,”⁴ as Friedrich Nietzsche calls it, not abstract but in images, ekphrasis appears as a cultural technique which is the very foundation of thinking. In his work *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense* Nietzsche writes about the peril of concepts becoming rigid⁵ (*Hart- und Starr-Werden*), and about the threat that the loss of sensually-aesthetic content of concepts poses for the faculties of cognition and perception. Every thinking is deficient if it stays abstract and trapped in ossified concepts that do not allow for free association of images and sensual experience, thus suppressing its imaginative dimension that is the very guarantee of the concepts’ humanity and vitality.

But we can also go further back behind Nietzsche to Immanuel Kant. With him, the process of ekphrasis becomes understandable as the free play of imagination and understanding, in which the linking of image and language is a prerequisite for the images to “let one think more than one can express in a concept determined by words.”⁶

Mediated through language, images become thought images. Thus, by means of ekphrasis, reflection enters architecture, as critical reflection

³ C. van Eck, *Art, Agency and Living Presence: From the Animated Image to the Excessive Object*, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin / München / Boston, 2015, p. 31.

⁴ F. Nietzsche, “[11 = U II 9. Mp XIII 4, 6-8. 47. Sommer 1875],” *Sämtliche Werke, Nachlass 1875–1879*, vol. 8, Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, München, 1999, p. 203

⁵ F. Nietzsche, *Ueber Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinne*, *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 1, Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, München, 1999, p. 883.

⁶ I. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000, p. 193 (§ 49).

when the insights gained through the process of ekphrasis get applied to the images which had initiated it. In this sense the designing architect works critically-reflexively, imagining the future architecture by means of a process of ekphratic mediations between the image processes of sketch, drawing and model.

In architecture, we can distinguish between two procedures of ekphrasis: first as a mode of communicating architectural experience to others, through speech, literature, itineraries and articles in scientific journals, but also in tourist brochures, blogs and tweets; second as a mode of reflecting on architecture which, by freely combining play and understanding, breaks through the automated and unconscious perception in everyday life. This is the case whenever the beholder surpasses the mere form and its utility by asking in which way the building or building complex relates to the general cultural force field, or, to speak with Ernst Cassirer, what is its significance as a symbolic form.

Through ekphrasis, architecture becomes eloquent and an intellectual and artistic medium. It liberates architecture from the realm of unconscious, ritual practices, whether in the religious and mythical, or in the everyday sense. Architecture, which as a material practice is bound to the experience of presence, gains access to the other, particularly the absent. Wherever it refuses to stop at the dry concept and aims at imagination, ekphrasis pushes perception beyond the mere identification of things and opens architecture up to poetics.

THE BIG INVISIBLE FORCE

The significance of ekphrasis for architecture especially becomes clear when it fails, when the transfer into language and further into images meets resistance, that is when architecture cannot be reduced to concepts. Then the beholder becomes the center of an active, searching process of transferring the irritating experience into language and comprehensible images. Peter Eisenman's Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin is such architecture, which deliberately prevents simple conceptualizations and thereby initiates a complex process of reflection. The monument is not comparable to known architectural experiences, it cannot be subsumed under established concepts and imagery.

The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe consists of 2700 concrete cubes, called stelae, arranged in a gridiron pattern. The stelae are identical in base but differ in height. The latter changes continuously

from one stela to the next, creating a dynamic, wavelike surface seen from a distance, intensified by the ground between the stelae also undulating. While stelae at the edges are at ground level, towards the center one can dive deep into the concrete canyons between them. Furthermore, additional tension is created by the fact that each stela has a slight and unique slant to it. This creates the impression that the whole field is being moved by a big, invisible force.

The irritation with this arrangement is exacerbated by the fact that there is no hint to the purpose of this football field sized memorial. But even if one knows its dedication, even then it remains mysterious what the concrete blocks of different heights have to do with it. They elude any explicit explanation, the field remains oddly empty. It could be said that this is architecture at the zero-point of aesthetics. Yet, it goes beyond irritation, for everything that is unknown and incomprehensible not only causes unease as an affect, but also triggers a process of reflection and active searching for conceptual and visual analogies, in order to recognize the unknown, to give it a meaningful place in the total framework of culture's symbolic forms.

Due to its muteness, the memorial, which was inaugurated in 2005 after long debates, two competitions and several revisions, has been controversial from day one. Critics bemoaned its abstractness, which could easily have served to commemorate any other historic event. For example, in Hans-Ernst Mittag's provocative words, "the demise of Hitler's sixth army at Stalingrad."⁷ More generally, many doubted the very possibility of artistically and architecturally expressing such an event as the Holocaust. How would one go about representing the unrepresentable which transcends human imagination. James E. Young has therefore introduced the concept of "Antimemorial."⁸ Gerhard Schweppenhäuser spoke of aesthetic and ethical *aporiae*⁹ which the monument is bound to create. This articulates the difficulties in searching for concepts and images to describe the indescribable of the Holocaust.

⁷ H.-E. Mittag, *Gegen das Holocaustdenkmal der Berliner Republik*, Kramer, Berlin, 2005, p. 52.

⁸ J. E. Young, "The Counter-Monument: Memory against Itself in Germany Today," *Critical Inquiry*, XVIII, 2, 1992, pp. 267–296.

⁹ Comp. G. Schweppenhäuser, "Das Denkmal-Dilemma," G. Schweppenhäuser, J. H. Gleiter (eds.), *Wegschauen? Weiterdenken! Zur Berliner Mahnmal-Debatte*, Universitätsverlag, Weimar, 1999, pp. 20–27.

The peculiarity of the memorial consists in the productive failure of ekphrasis, this is program and essential part of the concept of the memorial. This failure addresses the impossibility of representing the unrepresentable Holocaust and the extermination of the European Jews. The concrete field does not depict anything, which means that it refuses to transfer the Holocaust to the visual level of architecture. It rejects visual reproduction and therefore the iconography of the Holocaust. This sets it apart from other monuments, like Alfred Hrdlicka's Memorial against War and Fascism (1988) in Vienna, Nathan Rapaport's Monument for the Fallen of the Jewish Ghetto Uprising (1948) in Warsaw or Memorial for the Deportations (1985) in Berlin by Jürgen Wenzel, Theseus Bappert and Peter Herbrich. These memorials utilize drastic imagery of tortured bodies which aims to cause empathy, thus limiting the memory of the Holocaust to a specific phase, keeping it within narrow boundaries of interpretation.

PRODUCTIVE FAILURE

The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe approaches the issue differently, using the very difficulties of achieving ekphrasis to instigate reflection. What is notable is that ekphrasis can very well serve to associate metaphors and images; these however are deficient, for only providing weak a relation to the Holocaust. They are weak metaphors. For instance, the slanted stelae, reminiscent of tombstones in old Jewish cemeteries, the deep corridors evoking canyons in a rocky and barren landscape; if one observes the memorial's rectangular, gridiron shape, images of Nazi marches at the Nuremberg Reichsparteitag come to mind. Eisenman himself allowed even for far removed associations, for instance of a heaving cornfield.

However, the so induced images and visual associations are weak, they only loosely or partially connect to the Holocaust, which is predominantly associated with pictures of concentration camps and crematoriums, heaps of bodies and scared people at the selection ramps in Auschwitz, or simply with the publicly worn yellow stars of David, with which it all began. The memorial eludes the known descriptions and visual associations and redirects the ekphratic image emission to peripheral themes, only indirectly pertaining to the Holocaust, like cemetery, desert, ruins and cornfields. The failure of translation keeps throwing the beholder back to a pre-linguistic position.



Figure 1. Peter Eisenman, Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, Berlin, 2005.



Figure 2. Peter Eisenman, Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, Berlin, 2005.

The open nature of the memorial calls for continuous work on the ekphrasis. Eisenman's monument does not in fact reject images, on the contrary, it develops a procedure of visualizing even the unrepresentable, but moving from the edges of visual memory inwards. Each beholder can individually venture this journey, according to their intellectual and emotional capacities, with the chance to introduce personal, familial and national traumas, experiences and thoughts into the reflection of genocide and the Holocaust. The documentation center situated underneath the memorial provides the option of focus on the subject of Holocaust itself.

The case of the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe illustrates the productive failure of ekphrasis, whereby the aspect of productivity is not limited to reflection alone, it also includes the acting force of *enargeia*. The search for concepts and images is a vitalizing act, not only mentally but also emotionally. This relates the memorial to the affective-aesthetical notion of the sublime (*das Erhabene*), which is not unproblematic if we accept Kant's strict definition of the term in his *Critique of the Power of Judgment*.¹⁰ According to Kant, the sublime is solely an aesthetic category of experiencing nature, it does not appear in man-made environment. However, the use of this term has a place in the context of the memorial, as the heavy concrete blocks give the impression that they are being moved by an invisible and uncanny force, whose source and cause remain a mystery. This force can however be intuitively discerned and given historical and social context in the process of reflecting upon the murdered Jews of Europe.

The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe binds ekphrasis and *enargeia*, verbal reflection and emotional experience in a close relation, that cannot be resolved on either side. It sets in motion dynamic processes of questioning and scrutiny, without allowing these processes to ever be completed. The memorial keeps the connection between ekphrasis and *enargeia* open, thus not allowing for an end point or a conclusion to historical memory.

¹⁰ For more on this, consult the elaborations in J. H. Gleiter, "Ästhetik am Nullpunkt," *Urgeschichte der Moderne: Theorie der Geschichte der Architektur*, Transcript Verlag, Bielefeld, 2010, pp. 87–104.

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