

# imprints

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## Abstract

This set of poems, “imprints,” emerges from arts-based research into specific artworks and the process of art-making more generally. The hybrid artist’s statement/article explores the concept of *ekphrasis*, the form of transmediation that produces written work based on visual representations. This poetic inquiry, turned toward art-work as data source, provides opportunities to reconsider how we sustain engagement with texts in order to develop richer, more complex meanings. It also reflects the more embodied and emotional aspects of research, art-making, and meaning-making. Artists and works referenced in these poems include Richard Avedon’s (1983) “Clarence Lippard, Drifter, Interstate 80, Sparks, Nevada, August 29, 1983,” Hiroshi Sugimoto’s (1992) “Regency, San Francisco,” and Bill Viola’s (2002) “Going Forth By Day (The Deluge)”

**Key Words:** ekphrasis; poetic inquiry; arts-based research; transmediation; poetry about art; translating images into text; non-traditional qualitative inquiry

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The following set of poems emerges from the intersections of art, text, translation, and art-making as research and meaning-making. They were all written during my doctoral program in art education. Several result directly from a class field trip with art educator Terry Barrett to the Columbus Museum of Art. Others result from experiences in Sydney Walker's seminars, reflecting and remembering and considering the significance of art-making poetically, using physical processes as metaphors and generators for multi-layered meaning-making.

The title of this collection, "imprints," operates on multiple levels. There is the imprint of the text itself, the prints of the photos, the fictional prints and printmaking referenced, the mental images burned into memory, the lasting impressions. There is something magical about trying to translate evanescent ideas, unformed understandings, and ephemeral moments into something more, something lasting, something to keep, something to hold in the absence.

The technical term for creative writing based on artworks is *ekphrasis*, what W.J.T. Mitchell (1994) calls "the verbal representation of visual representations" (§ 1), perhaps the most famous example in Western literature being John Keats' (1820) "Ode on a Grecian Urn." Ekphrasis is an attempt to translate the visual into the verbal in hopes of re-presenting the object, re-activating attentiveness to the image, re-stimulating the sensory "reception of the reader" (Mitchell, 1994, § 35). Primarily, ekphrasis is a process of prolonged critical-creative engagement with an artistic text. Mitchell proposes this process triply inscribes meanings, reinforcing relations "of self and other, text and image" (§ 35) in a written attempt to bridge the impossibilities of translations, to occupy the "othernesses" (§ 35). Using ekphrasis explicitly as a research and meaning-making tool opens spaces for prolonged immersion, creating more connections and generating additional meanings.

Ekphrasis is research - a deliberate attempt to pause, to extend engagement, to investigate, to contemplate in slower cadence, to ponder the surfeit of signs and possible translations. It is attempt to notice, to echo, to immerse, to connect. Writing can be a vital component of arts-based research, facilitating critical-creative meaning-making, constructing "dynamic relational spaces" that allow for alternative "efforts to render the world visible for self and others," through words in addition to images and objects (Daiello, 2010, p. 86). Here, writing as research embodies the attentiveness and aesthetic focus of poetic translation, moving into an active in-between place of re-interpreting and re-rendering works through re-searching them repeatedly, re-viewing, re-visualizing.

Art-making and research are the investigation into and translating of information and meaning from one form to another, across multiple media - attempts to understand, to communicate, and to build shared understanding. Ekphrasis requires placing a bit of

ourselves – our ideas, our lives – within the context of the art, and exploring what results. It is an embodied translation in many ways, where the translator becomes the medium, the vessel, for interpreting and sharing the information and data in meaningful, engaging ways. It can be a point where social research intersects with creative arts (Chilton & Leavy, 2014), where critical-creative thinking meets academic research.

Using art-making as a means of research and meaning-making operates at multiple levels simultaneously. First, art-making as research has the potential to reach a much broader and more diverse audience than traditional research disseminated through the traditional scholarly means – academic research journals, conference proceedings, textbooks (Denzin, 1997; Leavy, 2009). It can provide multiple entry points for multiple people. Art-making as research can provide the potential for presenting research in “emotionally evocative,” “visceral,” “embodied” engaging, and aesthetically powerful ways (Leavy, 2009, p. 407; see also Barone & Eisner, 2012). It provides a meditation on the immeasurable qualities recognized, engaged, and experienced by interacting with a work of art in a sustained, focused way. In this way, art-making and the artworks produced have the power to provoke dialogue and reflection, within oneself, and between and among people, and to promote understanding (Chilton & Leavy, 2014; Leavy, 2010, 2009).

Poetry can be a particularly powerful research medium, a non-traditional way to analyze data. Poetry is a process of finding larger concepts and patterns and grounding them in specific detail, condensing meaning and distilling it carefully, craftily into something that captures an essence, a key idea, a strong feeling, a desire (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Leavy, 2010). In contrast to quantitative researchers, each poet-researcher conducts this process differently, with different goals, different languages (Faulkner, 2009).

The following set of poems is an intimately personal product of my own extended critical-creative engagement and attempts to translate, to condense the “data” generated from this “research,” into poetry. They result from self-reflection instigated by encounters with art (Leavy, 2010). The poetry, the research, is an attempt to capture and fix some stable meaning in the face of an otherwise overwhelming sea of information, stimulation, and infinite possibilities. They provide another perspective. Hopefully, like good research, they add to an ongoing conversation. Perhaps they will encourage readers to try this research process themselves: attending intently to a work, sustaining focus over time, and interpreting and translating these works, and their own responses, into poetry (Leavy, 2010). There is much to see and learn in the movements, open spaces, and meaning-making potential between images, objects, and words.

## mercurial

transitional metal transfusions  
of talisman, totems  
tangible                      essences

*shim*  
*shim*  
*shimmering*

molten              magic alchemy

*liquid*  
    *as*  
    *vapor*  
    *as*  
    *heat*

excessive metal spirit spilling

*shim*  
*shim*  
*shimmering*

dangerous delicate volatile  
mystifying mesmerizing transfixed  
amalgam

rivers liquid silver flicker swollen

whispered words              promises

*slip*  
*slip*  
*slippery*  
    dissolving  
            in silvery grey hues  
    reflecting  
            sky-thrown blackness and blues



Bill Viola

“The Deluge”

Panel 3 of 5 panels from Going Forth By Day (2002)

Video/sound installation

High-Definition color video projected onto wall in dark room; four channels of spatial quadraphonic sound

Projected image size: 12 x 16 ft (3.7 x 4.88 m)

36:00 minutes

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Commissioned by Deutsche Bank AG in consultation with the Solomon R. Guggenheim

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<https://www.yousendit.com/download/bXBaK2VyTERqY3F2eE1UQw>

**[that piece by bill viola \(going forth by day: the deluge\)](#)**

maybeyouaretoomuchformeatonce  
leaving me dizzyovercome  
a surprisingflush of desire  
caught up in a fire  
rushing of now  
drowning

moments  
before,  
a  
slower  
flow  
ing  
people mov-  
ing and  
go-  
ing

34 minutes (x) 60 seconds  
plus  
100s  
of extras  
= 7 ft tall  
crescendo-  
ing  
frescoes  
in slow motion

who isn't overcome  
by 96,000 gallons of water

f. i. r. s. t.  
d. r. i. p. p. i. n. g.  
s. l. o. w. l. y.

then a flood suddenly erupts surge rain filled river a torrent driving cataclysmic burst

after  
*so much silence so much plinkplink pitterpatter*  
*wanderlusting chatter*  
*splash*

what if  
instead of flooding, slowing?  
floating?

synthesizing/the/tension/suspension/s

drop.by.drop

fill

ing  
years  
with  
a million many moments

recognition.  
yearning.  
knowing.



Hiroshi Sugimoto  
“Regency, San Francisco,” (1992) (Photograph)  
© Hiroshi Sugimoto, provided courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco

[insecurity](#) (on seeing Hiroshi Sugimoto’s *Regency San Francisco*)

darkness frames a burning blank screen  
its emptiness violently bare  
the glare illuminates the gaping void  
the slow revelation of nobodies  
(not) come to see the nothingness inside  
chandeliers dangle lifeless  
ornate scrolls fixed along the woodwork

the chairs screwed into perfect order  
curving rows reaching back and back  
disappearing shiny into the black  
a lack filled only by longing  
waiting

for even a flicker

these moments alone a fixated crisis of befores and afters  
suspended infinite hesitation  
heavy like the rafters hanging

[Clarence Lippard, drifter](#) (on seeing Richard Avedon's photographs)

subject only partially to the laws of physics  
his body in motion stays always in motion  
nonstop  
can't stop  
f-stop  
everything contains the blur of time

he is a dusty shadow  
moving faster than light  
each glance a fleeting chance for happiness  
each laugh a whiskey-soaked hello  
each salute and squinty wink a too-quick goodbye

now is only ever passing through  
here or gone  
a sleight-of-hand  
unnecessary details  
like the button that disappears and reappears at will

the frame filled even as the figure escapes

'79  
365 days  
condensed  
into 2 shaky moments

i could say he paced this land desperately  
seeking rest  
chasing happiness

lonesome and grizzled

but in truth  
he loved the motions  
the emotions  
the to-ing and fro-ing  
of coming and going  
and gone

## **printmaking**

i told you a wish  
where i put images words pictures  
magically  
down

metal plates letter by letter cut images  
repeating  
ink outlining fingers  
black-lined fingerprints linger  
maybe too long  
maybe longer  
layers building touch after touch

i dreamed of walking door to door  
scavenging  
begging for paper  
sheets, scraps  
the daily news dried, raggedy  
tucked greedily gratefully  
in hidden pockets and sacks slung tattered

stealing bits from round the edges  
out of alleys  
pulling strips surgically reverently from under dust dull silvery cans

a third grade errand for finishing early, fidgeting  
carrying tests to mrs riskus' car for home later grading  
caught up in a quick spring georgia gust  
a burst of white leaves, doves erupting  
freed  
flying

desperate gathering again  
white white wings in fragments

a lack an absence

messages repeating mirroring  
words (spoken) become  
words  
become  
images

with paper we can carve them into air  
catch for a moment  
what dissolves eventually into memory  
eventually into poetry  
imagery  
internal rhyme  
jagged lines  
tracing faces  
prophecies

fibers ink paint fix a plea for celebration, forgiveness  
rebirth  
the first gasp at the surface  
desperate, urgent

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## **Appendix Artworks Included in Paper**

Artworks referenced in the poems are accessible at the following web addresses, as of the original publication of this piece.

### **Richard Avedon**

Clarence Lippard, Drifter, Interstate 80, Sparks, Nevada, August 29, 1983

<http://www.theavedonfoundation.net/index.php#mi=2&pt=1&pi=10000&s=16&p=7&a=0&at=0>

### **Hiroshi Sugimoto (b. 1948), “Regency, San Francisco” (1992)**

<http://www.christies.com/lotfinder/ZoomImage.aspx?image=http://www.christies.com/lotfinderimages/d58714/d5871460&IntObjectID=5871460&lid=1>

<http://www.artnet.com/artists/hiroshi-sugimoto/regency-san-francisco-aZWhvZHrbaZAI9qiEa1aDw2>

### **Bill Viola**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=07nY5dywIEI> (excerpt)

[http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x1cr7ez\\_bill-viola-au-grand-palais-the-deluge-teaser\\_creation](http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x1cr7ez_bill-viola-au-grand-palais-the-deluge-teaser_creation) (excerpt/teaser for exhibit)