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# *Ekphrasis*

## **ABSTRACT**

*This article presents a mixed-media installation titled Ekphrasis, consisting of close-up videos of a heavily scarred body projected onto an elastic screen. The screen has one string attached to its centre, which in turn is attached to a stepper motor. The motor pulls the screen in a controlled random pattern, stretching it and letting go, sometimes carefully, sometimes violently. The piece explores the relationship between the digital representation of the body and its corporeality, recreating the trauma that generated the scars on the medium itself, and proposing a new layer of abstraction that sustains the reflection on the significance of the human body.*

## **KEYWORDS**

installation  
body  
flexible screens  
projection  
scar  
death

## **INTRODUCTION**

*Ekphrasis* (elastic screen, servomotor, string, metallic frame, wooden structure, Arduino microcontroller, custom software, projector) is a mixed-media installation consisting of close-up videos of a heavily scarred body projected onto an elastic screen. The screen has one string attached to its centre, which in turn is attached to a stepper motor. The motor pulls the screen in a controlled random pattern, stretching it and letting go, sometimes carefully, sometimes violently. The rectangular screen is framed by a custom metallic frame, which resonates with the black and white projected videos. A wooden structure supports the stepper motor hiding the electronics and the projector in its base.

## ***Ekphrasis***

The piece proposes a reflection on the representation of the human body, from the representation itself, in addition to reflecting on the philosophical significance of the body. The work explores the relationship between the digital representation of the body and its corporeity.

Western culture thinks of mankind as the ‘articulation and conjunction of a body and a soul, of a living thing and a logos, of a natural (or animal) element and a supernatural or social or divine element’ (Agamben 2004: 16). This mind–body dualism is constructed under the assumption of a representation of the mind that is simultaneously different from and belonging to the body. The installation partially reclaims the role of the body in the vital experience: we construct our understanding of what the life is from a body that itself is changed by the living process. Using the most extreme changes that a body can suffer (scars resulting from a violent event, an accident) the installation reflects on what we understand by living as humans and how its technological representation and re-enactment can contribute.

Death can be thought of as the ultimate postmodern taboo. We live lives constantly sparkled, seasoned by fantasies of immortality, and yet systematically determined by the assumption of mortality. In this context, the body unfolds in a contradictory fetishism: the idolization of the perfect body coexists with the stigmatization of the imperfect one, and the most imperfect body is the scarred one, a body that is marked, representing a life not lived properly.

The installation aims at escaping this dichotomy. A heavily scarred body is shown, not as a reminder of mortality, but only as a body: the body as a metaphor of the body itself. The most human body is the non-human body: technologically mediated perception as objectification. Bolter and Grusin identify, in new media art, a systematic ekphrasis, which they call ‘remediation’ – the representation of one medium in another – and argue that it constitutes ‘a defining characteristic of the new digital media’ (2000: 45). Together with remediation, new media art has systematically attempted to achieve immediacy by ignoring or denying both the presence of the medium and the unavoidable act of mediation.

In *Ekphrasis*, however, the medium and its remediation are made explicit by the seemingly external manipulation of its physicality. It is the installation itself that deforms the projection screen, simultaneously representing the internal state of the body and the external forces acting on it. Instead (or, better, in addition) of a remediation, the piece proposes an ontological side-step where the acknowledgement of the medium becomes a relevant part of the piece.

Particularly relevant are the dialogue between representation, object and time, and the piece’s unfolding on these dual-antagonistic roles. Subject and object, recipient and actor, witness and accident, occur simultaneously. A body with scars that compresses its past and present is represented in the deformable screen that reflects on its own role of sustaining this representation.

In the same sense, a body with scars presents itself in a dual time. Scars constitute simultaneously an artificial representation of a past event and a natural occurrence. In *Difference and Repetition*, Gilles Deleuze states:

A scar is the sign not of a past wound but of ‘the present fact of having been wounded’: we can say that it is the contemplation of the wound,

that it contracts all the instants which separate us from it into a living present. Or, rather, that we find here the true meaning of the distinction between natural and artificial: natural signs are signs founded upon passive synthesis; they are signs of the present, referring to the present in which they signify. Artificial signs, by contrast, are those which refer to the past or the future as distinct dimensions of the present, dimensions on which the present might in turn depend. Artificial signs imply active synthesis – that is to say, the passage from spontaneous imagination to the active faculties of reflective representation, memory and intelligence. [...] There is a self wherever a furtive contemplation has been established, whenever a contracting machine capable of drawing a difference from repetition functions somewhere. The self does not undergo modifications, it is itself a modification – this term designating precisely the difference drawn. Finally, one is only what one has: here, being is formed or the passive self is, by having.

(1968: 77)

If being is having and if we can only truly possess what is inside our skin, the skin becomes not a metaphor of the being, but its very definition. However, for this *definition* of the self to work, an external observation is needed, a vantage point from which the skin-border is defined. The skin as an articulator of possession only makes sense under the assumption of an objective otherness; it requires something that testifies that the outside-of-the-skin exists, a meta-representation of the skin-container, where representation itself explicitly modifies the representation apparatus.

This unattainable illusion of objectiveness requires repetition. Nothing can be objective if not predictable. A machine, an applied scientific knowledge is required. Machine-like precision constitutes the language that allows to articulate the desired externality. The language of machines permits the exterior to be tangible only because of the possibility of predictable repetition. We can think of the inside, of the self, because the exterior is predictable, because the exterior is designed.

Thus, the self exists not in the present but in the concretization of the past, that is, the present is the representation of the past. In this sense, the scarred skin not only encodes the trauma but makes it real, technologically mediated perception acting as an objectification force. Remediation converts a medium into a 'metamedium' and the represented body becomes a metabody (understanding metabody not in the Foucaultian sense but in a direct one, a body that exists on a higher level of abstraction than what proprioception allows for). A scarred body not only presents a past trauma, but re-enacts it.

In Baudrillard's terms, the Accident becomes 'a strategic reorganization of life beyond the perspective of death' (Baudrillard and Evans 1991: 315). The non-fatality of the Accident allows us to *enter into* a relationship with death. If, as Jones put it, the self-portrait constitutes a 'technology of embodiment' in which technology 'not only mediates but produces subjectivities' (2002: 950), *Ekphrasis* again unfolds in contradictory axes. A technology of embodiment that simultaneously situates the viewer outside of the representation: in *Ekphrasis*, the projection screen is also the skin of the installation. *Ekphrasis* offers a new remediation, skin projected on skin, scars represented on a stressed, attacked surface. In this context, the mechanical stretching re-enacts the external action of

the Accident. The Accident becomes performance, while, again, also being a commentary of itself.

This commentary is aesthetically relevant. The screen stretches and echoes pain. It is let loose and reverberates, a relief that is nothing but the antechamber of more pain. But the re-enactment is reversible, a reversible process commenting on an irreversible one.

## CONCLUSION

The Accident is an aesthetic subject that mortally wounds the taboo. In Deleuze and Guattari's words 'not at all for ideological reasons but because the literary machine alone is determined to fill the conditions of a collective enunciation that is lacking elsewhere' (Deleuze et al. 1983: 18). Moreover, even if 'ultimately, every object is about its own materiality, which informs the ways in which it creates meaning' (Paul 2003: 70) and if ignoring or denying the presence of the medium and the act of mediation has been a goal of new media and new media art, this piece makes the remediation explicit, a representation of representation.

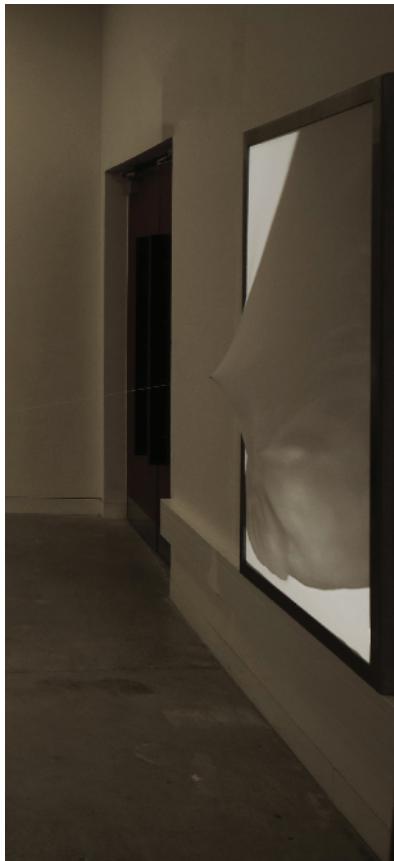


Figure 1: Tomas Laurenzo, *Ekphrasis*, 2017.  
Installation. School of Creative Media, Hong Kong.  
Courtesy of the author/artist.



Figure 2: Tomas Laurenzo, *Ekphrasis*, 2017.  
Installation. School of Creative Media, Hong Kong.  
Courtesy of the author/artist.



Figure 3: Tomas Laurenzo, *Ekphrasis*, 2017.  
Installation. School of Creative Media, Hong Kong.  
Courtesy of the author/artist.

Representation, mediation, artistic communication also becomes the main subject of the work; if every work talks about itself, *Ekphrasis* also talks about talking about itself.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The work described in this paper was fully supported by a grant from the Research Grants Council of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, China (Project No. CityU 11674416).

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## SUGGESTED CITATION

Laurenzo, T. (2017), 'Ekphrasis', *Technoetic Arts: A Journal of Speculative Research*, 15:2, pp. 215–19, doi: [10.1386/tear.15.2.215\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/tear.15.2.215_1)

## CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Tomás Laurenzo is an artist and academic who works with both physical and digital media, exploring the artistic construction of meaning and its relation with power and politics. With a background in both computer science and art, Laurenzo's work spans across different practices and interests, including new media art, human-computer interaction, artificial intelligence and virtual reality. His artistic production is also diverse and includes installations, interactive art, music, live cinema and digital lutherie. His artworks and performances have been shown in the US, South America, Europe, Asia and Oceania. Since 2014, he has been assistant professor at the School of Creative Media at the City University of Hong Kong.

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thinking

## Journal of Arts & Communities

3 issues per volume | First published in 2009  
ISSN 1757-1936 | Online ISSN 1757-1944



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