

## *Alt Text, Ekphrasis, and the Placeholder Nature in the Interpretation of Art Images*

In this presentation, I examine how alt text and ekphrasis, two distinct modes of verbalising images, shape the interpretation of art images and construct a work's "place" in relation to its original physical object. My approach is artistic and practice-based, demonstrating how these textual practices both open and delimit interpretative possibilities.

I explore ekphrasis as a verbal description of a visual representation (Mitchell 1994, 152; Heffernan 2004, 3), considering its connections with and distinctions from alt text. Ekphrasis brings forward details, atmosphere, and cultural references that the visual image may not explicitly disclose. Alt text, by contrast, is an accessibility-oriented textual form intended to provide a brief and as-neutral-as-possible description of what the image depicts, conveying essential information for users who cannot see the image, such as screen-reader users (Accessive 2025).

My interest lies in how the requirement of neutrality in alt text encounters the inherently ambiguous and subjective nature of artworks, a tension further intensified by recent algorithmic captioning systems. Research shows that automated captioning can fail to capture the contextual richness of artworks, highlighting the limitations of alt text as a surrogate or placeholder for complex visual content (Kreiss et al., 2022). This tension exposes key aspects of the relationship between language and image, especially when alt text and ekphrasis refer to a physical original while being presented digitally or in other contexts.

Current accessibility directives require images to include alt text so that visually impaired users can access essential information. Alt text thus functions as a metatext, mediating the image for particular user groups. Its brevity and task-oriented character give it a placeholder-like nature: it signals the presence of an image while offering a reduced structural sketch of its content. This quality becomes particularly evident in automatically generated alt text, where models foreground features that their training data deem salient, even when these features may not belong to the artwork's core meaning. Alt text therefore reveals what the model considers significant, while other aspects remain unarticulated. As a result, the specific qualities of a work may receive less attention, and the image becomes part of a substitutable, classifiable structure.

Art images, paintings, photographs, prints, and their numerous digital versions, circulate widely online. Digitisation creates new variants whose value is not subordinate to the physical original; they can act as independent representations or parallel experiences. Digital surrogates, together with alt text, shape how a work is encountered and influence what viewers ultimately perceive as meaningful. Alt text anchors a concise description to the physical object, whereas ekphrasis aims to restore detail, depth, and experiential nuance.

Ekphrasis enables descriptions of atmosphere, spatial and luminous relationships, material qualities, and cultural resonances. It does not replace the image but recreates it linguistically. At the same time, ekphrasis is interpretative and subjective: the writer's choices and emphases shape the reader's experience. Alt text, by contrast, is concise and task-bound; its neutrality restricts interpretative expansion but facilitates quick and accessible entry into the image. Used together,

these forms demonstrate that a work's "place" within physical and digital environments is constructed through both descriptive mediation and interpretative reformulation.

In my experimental practice, I produce multiple alt texts—both manually and automatically generated—and several ekphrastic descriptions for the same artworks. I situate these texts in different environments: for screen reader use, in online galleries, as annotations for machine-learning datasets, and in exhibition contexts where text and image are shown side by side. This allows me to analyse how textual forms shape reception and determine what viewers consider essential in a work.

I argue that alt text directs viewers to think of a work primarily through categories such as portrait, landscape, or abstraction. Ekphrasis, in contrast, opens up details, atmospheres, and contextual connections, while also anchoring the work in the writer's perspective. Both forms operate as interpretative tools; they highlight different aspects, yet both shape the viewer's experience of the original physical work.

The concept of the placeholder helps to articulate this dynamic. More broadly, a placeholder can be seen as a symbol of transition: it marks something forthcoming, introduces delay and anticipation, and embodies a tension between past and present. The placeholder image provides a means to examine relationships between digital and physical images, where the surrogate is not merely functional but also meaning bearing. Alt text operates as a placeholder: it fills a gap without providing visual content. Ekphrasis is not a placeholder in the technical sense, but it offers one perspective that may simultaneously exclude others. The use of both raises the question of when interpretative description begins to shape a work's meaning so strongly that it becomes part of the work's surrounding infrastructure.

In conclusion, examining alt text and ekphrasis in relation to the physical original opens new perspectives on image interpretation and on the role of digital media in presenting art. These textual forms maintain a connection to the originating work while generating parallel interpretations. This perspective allows us to consider how the place of images is constructed in digital environments, how meaning is conveyed, and how placeholder and interpretative texts influence what is ultimately understood and valued in a work.

**Keywords:** alt text, ekphrasis, art images, interpretative description, placeholders, digital surrogates

**Reference:**

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