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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/21167>

DOI: 10.4000/critiquedart.21167

ISBN: 2265-9404

ISSN: 2265-9404

Publisher

Groupe d'intérêt scientifique (GIS) Archives de la critique d'art

Printed version

Date of publication: 20 May 2016

ISBN: 1246-8258

ISSN: 1246-8258

Electronic reference

Riccardo Venturi, « *Technical Images and their Medium. How to Display Vilém Flusser's Thinking* », *Critique d'art* [Online], 46 | Printemps/Été 2016, Online since 20 May 2017, connection on 21 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/21167> ; DOI : 10.4000/critiquedart.21167

This text was automatically generated on 21 April 2019.

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Flusseriana: An Intellectual Toolbox, Minneapolis: Univocal; Karlsruhe: ZKM Centre for Art and Media; Berlin: Vilém Flusser Archive, 2015. Sous la dir. de Peter Weibel, Siegfried Zielinski avec la collaboration de Daniel Irrgang

Vilém Flusser, *Les Gestes*, Paris : Al Dante ; Bruxelles : Aka, 2014, (Cahiers du Midi)

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Vilém Flusser, *Post-History*, Minneapolis: Univocal, 2013

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- 1 How are we to re-think the relations between the Czech philosopher Vilém Flusser (1920-1991) and contemporary artists and visual arts, and his influence on them? The recent publication of several books by and about Flusser may help us to reconsider these links as a whole in a new light. First and foremost, the American publisher Univocal has brought out several writings by Flusser in English—*Natural: Mind* (2013), *History of the Devil* (2014), *On Doubt* (2014), and *Into Immaterial Culture* (2015)—coming from the archives held at the Universität der Künste in Berlin, a collection which still largely remains to be explored. In the Vilém Flusser bibliography from 1960 to 2000, i.e. “a total of 406 titles in German, 352 titles in Portuguese, 90 titles in English and 60 in French, among other languages”,¹ “only thirty percent has been published and mainly in Portuguese and German”.² Most of the writings available in English and French have been translated from the German. Likewise, although Flusser lived in France from 1973 on, his thinking is not well known here. In the meantime, the magazine *Artforum*³ has rediscovered the articles

he published over seven years (1986-1992) in "Curies' Children", the only column written by a philosopher in that contemporary art magazine, which was founded in 1962.

- 2 But the major event is still *Bodenlos – Vilém Flusser und die Künste*, the exhibition at the ZKM (Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie, 14 August-18 October 2015) in Karlsruhe, and at the Akademie der Künste in Berlin (19 November 2015-10 January 2016), accompanied by *Flusseriana: An Intellectual Toolbox*. This book is not so much the exhibition catalogue as a selective dictionary with more than 200 entries, written in the three languages (English, German and Portuguese) fluently used by Flusser, who in fact never wrote in Czech, his mother tongue. This glossary covering the conceptual Flusserian galaxy is the best critical tool available to us today for grasping the scope, complexity and wealth of his thinking. Using a non-academic style, free from bibliographical references, Flusser sidesteps the disciplines and coherence of any system. This eclecticism is not so much the result of his writings (lectures and courses for students, contributions to the non-specialized press) as of a precise strategy to avoid being confined and pigeonholed in one field, albeit that of the 'media studies' with which he is frequently associated. Vilém Flusser rarely in fact uses the word medium or the notion of medium; and his inclusion in this discipline was a posthumous operation.⁴ In the manner in which his thinking is transposed by writing, we can detect a Nietzschean tendency, as is suggested by Siegfried Zielinski and Peter Weibel in their introduction to *Flusseriana* ("Nietzsche's favored forms of style and text: the short essay, autobiographical notes, thought-provoking aphorisms, and specific games with fictional genres"). In other words, "nomadology instead of ontology, was Flusser's maxim".⁵
- 3 His interest in contemporary artists and visual arts was also nomadic, episodic, scattered and non-systematic, even if in *Flusseriana* it is suggested that Flusser likens the figure of the artist to John Cage, Wolf Vostell and Joseph Beuys.⁶ If there are parallels with the neo-avant-garde, his interest in art was in reality dictated by what he called "communicology", an interdisciplinary approach which, according to Michael Hanke, hybridizes "physiology, sociology, gestalt and social psychology, game theory, cybernetics, information theory, art and literary criticism, logic, and economics", and studies "the process by which acquired information is stored, processed, and passed on".⁷ "Communicology" focuses on the programme, a key notion which occupied the place that progress had in the 19th century. Vilém Flusser broached works of art with a keen eye on their capacity to inform the public, and not from the angle of art history, taste and aesthetics. So he did not recognize any feature specific to art praxis in relation to other *technes*, and was far more interested in artistic thinking than in the artefact in itself.
- 4 The fact remains that the relation between artwork and medium is anything but resolved, because the artist has a dialectical relation with the trappings of communication. Artists "should not comply with the programs, they must rewrite the programs"⁸ using works and practices endowed with a subversive potential. These works appropriate a medium in order to show how it works and deconstruct, from within, its dominant "techno-imaginary".⁹ Faced with the technical images which hallmark the post-historical (*Nachgeschichte*) consciousness, it is now suitable to play on the same turf, by developing a "technical imagination" capable of deciphering them. This approach has to do with works as much as exhibition arrangements. The exhibition is a form of inhibition which renders spectators passive, as was pointed out by Flusser, who at the same time advocated the exhibition's end in relation to the São Paulo Biennial.¹⁰ To this effect, he suggested turning the exhibition not into a "discursive medium" but into a "dialogic medium",

transmitting a coded message to several people instead of from one transmitter to one receiver: “In dialogued communication, the information results in a way from the process of communication”¹¹—meaning that it is created and not simply transmitted. In keeping with this, the ZKM did not exhibit any printed archival documents in display cabinets, as had already been done in the past by exhibitions dealing with the relations between thinkers and the visual sphere (Michel Foucault in 2002, Jean Baudrillard in 2004, Paul Virilio in 2006, Max Bense in 2010)—“Flusser’s thinking was not enclosed in glass boxes [or display cabinets]”.¹² His thinking was reconstructed and exhibited through the works themselves, from the Brazilian painter Mira Schendel (in the 1960s) to the photographer Joan Fontcuberta (in the 1980s), by way of the zoosystematician Louis Bec, at the heart of the conception of his *Vampyroteuthis infernalis*. If the end result of Vilém Flusser’s interest in art praxis here goes beyond the intent and scope of this exhibition, two examples will help us to better understand the challenges.

- 5 In 1972, Vilém Flusser was in charge of the Communication section of the São Paulo Biennial, and, by way of the art critic René Berger, he met Fred Forest. At that same moment, this latter had embarked on the purchase of 150 sq.cm. of the daily newspaper *Le Monde*, had the empty insert published, and invited readers to appropriate that space for themselves. For Fred Forest, Vilém Flusser wrote, “The mass media are not his medium, but his object”.¹³ Two years later, Fred Forest undertook a series of experiments with video, a less traditional medium than newspapers, and developed the habit of filming his exchanges with Flusser with his Portapack (*Les Gestes du professeur*). Without that link between the sociological artist and the philosopher, the decipherment of the gestures that formed one of Flusser’s most successful phenomenological analyses would have taken a quite different form. Their exchanges about technical images were nothing less than a dialogue designed to put technical images to the test. Between Flusser, gesticulating as he made comments about his gestures, and Forest, moving the camera as he photographed the “professor’s gestures”, there was a sparkling brilliance, with effects that were neither deliberate nor conscious: “My hands responded to the gestures of the camera, and the alteration of their movements subtly changed my words and thoughts. And Forest moved not only in response to my movements, but also to the thoughts that I was verbally uttering”.¹⁴ Forest filmed a philosopher in action, but makes philosophy with a camera, too. This material was addressed to a public invited to react, as it was being filmed itself. The tape thus produced was made available for other forms of appropriation and commentary, in a succession of meta-dialogues. This fruitful collaboration was based on one and the same hunch: video was not a mere recording tool, but a major epistemological instrument taking part in the actual creation of the discourse, with all its restrictions (for example, the length of the tape, which in those days was 20 minutes). According to Flusser, “video has virtual properties which are absent in other media: it is an audio-visual and space-time continuum. It is involved in the phenomenon which it shows. It can be immediately projected without having to be ‘edited’. It is open to the dialogic process. It summarizes certain aspects of the printed word, and film; and the lecture”.¹⁵
- 6 This is exactly what comes about in the video *Schlagworte Schlagbilder. Ein Gespräch mit Vilém Flusser* (1986, 12 minutes), in which the young film-maker Harun Farocki, sitting in a Berlin café, suggested to Flusser that he should focus on the relation between front page words and pictures of the daily newspaper *Bild-Zeitung*. The two media dealt with by Fred Forest in a distinct way, newspaper and video, were this time dovetailed together by

Harun Farocki. With two pairs of glasses on his forehead, Flusser delivered a semantic analysis which went beyond the common idea which holds that the image illustrates the text or the text clarifies the image. Here, quite to the contrary, the text is a function of the image as much as the image is a function of the text: two intersecting dimensions which can no longer be told apart. As Farocki suggested, in the case of the daily paper, this conceptual overlap also worked at the graphic level. The crime report is constructed by the press by accentuating its visual power, with the article's title also functioning as imagery, for example through the chromatic reversal of the letters--white on a black ground when night is involved ("Die Blutnacht"/ "The Bloody Night"). Flusser emphasized the visual capture of the page in its entirety: the linearity of the writing was impeded by obstacles, in the same way that the framed images were criss-crossed by interferences (another image or a stage direction), or else spilled over into the space earmarked for words. In the photograph of a corpse, for example, the arm which is outside the frame touches the title of the article, or the slogan, to borrow the video's title. This graphic penetration remains on the boundary between two and three dimensions, between the two-dimensional flattening and the illusion of volume. This montage gives rise to an intentionally chaotic situation, the purpose of which is to muddle our analytical capacity and our critical spirit. According to Flusser, this facilitates consensus and the "absorption of the message with a reduced level of consciousness", by making us incapable of deciphering and properly distinguishing the iconic, textual message. Decisive in this respect is the role of the photographic shot, which is to say of the technological images which shape reality in a novel way. It is no coincidence that, as Farocki points out, on the first page we see photographs instead of drawings. For its part, the video merely adds an additional layer to their analysis of the relation between word and image. As Flusser observed, this latter is at once included in the wider, and no less problematic, frame of the video recording this exchange, and turns it into a narrative by zooming in on the two people in conversation, or on the cover of *Bild-Zeitung*. This filmed interview confronts us with a twofold visual level: the logo-iconic reading of the daily paper spread out in front of the spectator by Flusser and Farocki, and the reading of the moving images of the video, a "televisuality" for which the spectator becomes the sole responsible party.

- 7 According to Christa Blümlinger, there resided between Flusser and Farocki a "powerful elective affinity" which went beyond a mere collaboration. The theoretician and the artist shared the same *forma mentis*—a bit like in the recording of Vilém Flusser's gestures by Fred Forest. What the writing, the shift from one language to another and "the pensive power of the technical images" thus all represented for the former was the same as the montage for the latter. In a description of Vilém Flusser's book *Ins Universum der technischen Bilder* [Into the Universe of Technical Images], referred to at the beginning of the video, Harun Farocki writes: "The ideas are turned into knots, and each time he overlaps these knots with a load, a different speed, coming from a different direction. His way of proceeding is intensive, not extensive, he does not conquer foreign territories, but explores a space defined by many different paths".¹⁶ "Vilém Flusser believed that philosophy was no longer practiced in writing, but via the image [...] he knew that it was only images that could bring logic and the imagination closely together in one metalanguage."¹⁷ Such is the example of a metalanguage in the time of the telematic society for which Vilém Flusser thus laid the foundations by writing his texts on a portable Olympia AEG typewriter.

NOTES

1. Vilém Flusser. *An Introduction*, Minneapolis-London: University of Minnesota Press, 2011, p. xviii. Edited by Finger Anke, Guldin Rainer, Bernardo Gustavo
2. Maltez Novaes, Rodrigo. *Vilém Flusser: Post-History*, Minneapolis: Univocal, 2013, p. XIV
3. Cf. Rajchman, John. "Strange Trip", *Artforum*, September 2012, p. 157-58
4. "In fact, Vilém Flusser did not like the term 'media' at all—which is why it is a mistake to refer to him as a media philosopher": Onetto Muñoz, Breno. "Media", *Flusseriana*, *op. cit.*, p. 272; "Vilém Flusser placed no particular value on the concept of media in his writings, and he explicitly did not refer to himself as a media philosopher", Krtilová, Kateřina. "Media Philosophy", *Ibid.*, p. 274
5. *Flusseriana*, p. 8 and p. 7
6. Costa, Rachel. "Artist", *Flusseriana*, *op. cit.*, p. 64
7. Hanke, Michael. *Flusseriana*, *op. cit.*, p. 116
8. Marburger, Marcel René. "Artwork", *Flusseriana*, *op. cit.*, p. 66
9. The term is used by : Weibel, Peter and Zielinsky, Siegfried. "Introduction", *Flusseriana*, *op. cit.*, p. 9 ("after World War II the neo-avant-garde [...] outdid each other in criticizing and deconstructing the techno-imaginary, which was in the process of establishing itself on a massive scale").
10. Flusser, Vilém. "Proposal for the organization of future São Paulo Biennials on a communicological basis", quoted in Gottlieb, Baruch. "From Abstraction to Concretion: A Brief Overview of the Exhibition Project BODENLOS_Vilém Flusser and the Arts", in *Flusser Studies*, 20, December 2015, <http://www.flusserstudies.net/current-issue>. Cf. also Marburger, Marcel René. "Exhibition", *Flusseriana*, *op. cit.*, p. 176
11. Flusser, Vilém. "L'espace communicant : l'expérience de Fred Forest", in *Communication et langages*, no18, 1973, p. 80-92, *cit.* p. 88
12. Gottlieb, Baruch. "From Abstraction to Concretion: A Brief Overview of the Exhibition Project BODENLOS_Vilém Flusser and the Arts", *op. cit.*
13. Cf. Flusser, Vilém. "L'espace communicant : l'expérience de Fred Forest", *op. cit.*, p. 91
14. Flusser, Vilém. "L'art sociologique et la vidéo à travers la démarche de Fred Forest", Forest, Fred. *Art sociologique. Vidéo*, Paris : U.G.E, 10/18, 1977, p. 357-431, *cit.* p. 361
15. Flusser, Vilém, "Vidéo-phénoménologie", 1974, *cit.* in Isabelle Lassignardie, *Fred Forest: Catalogue raisonné (1963-2008), tome 1 : œuvres 1963-1976*, Amiens : Université de Picardie – Jules Verne, Doctorat Histoire de l'art, 2010, p. 236. See also Fecht, Tom. "Mirror" and Röller, Nils. "Video Philosophy", *Flusseriana*, *op. cit.*, p. 284 and p. 436
16. Farocki, Harun. "Vilém Flusser: Das Universum der technischen Bilder", in *Zelluloid*, no.25, Summer 1987, p. 77-80, *cit.* p. 80, *cit.* in Blümlinger, Christa. "L'éclaireur des images", in *Les Cahiers du Cinéma*, no703, September 2014, p. 56-57. On *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, see Venturi, Riccardo. "Memories, Images, and the End of Writing", in *Art Journal*, 72/1, Spring 2013, p. 104-107
17. Bec, Louis. "Image" (1992), in *Flusseriana*, *op. cit.*, p. 228