VII coMcult
VII INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS ON COMMUNICATION AND CULTURE
FLUSSER 101

ABOUT PHOTOGRAPHERS

PHOTOGRAPHY CRITICISM BY FLUSSER: THEORY AND PRAXIS [1]

Marc Lenot[2]

Resumo

Os conceitos de Flussers sobre fotografia, expostos em *Filosofia da Caixa Preta*, são bastante conhecidos. Seu interesse crítico pela fotografia e por alguns fotógrafos é menos conhecido. Ele tinha cerca de 120 livros sobre fotografia em sua Biblioteca de viagens, desenvolveu uma amizade estreita com alguns fotógrafos e escreveu textos críticos sobre cerca de vinte fotógrafos, na revista de fotografia europeia e em vários livros. Seus textos sobre o trabalho desses fotógrafos eram tanto ensaios filosóficos quanto críticas. Além de aplicar e expandir os conceitos-chave de seu livro, ele também explorou novos espaços, como objetividade ou privacidade. Esta análise oferece a primeira oportunidade para confrontar seus escritos teóricos e sua práxis crítica.

Palavras-chave: Flusser. Fotografia. Aparelho. Crítica.

Abstract

Flusser's concepts about photography, as exposed in *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, are well known. His critical interest in photography and in some photographers is less known. He had about 120 books on photography in his Travel Library, he developed close friendships with a few photographers, and he wrote critical texts on about twenty photographers, in the magazine *European Photography* and in various books. His texts about these photographers' work were as much philosophical essays as they were critiques. Besides applying and expanding the key concepts of his book, he also explored new venues, such as objectivity or privacy. This analysis provides the first opportunity to confront his theoretical writings and his critical praxis.

Keywords: Flusser. Photography. Apparatus. Criticism.

---

[2] Ph.D. in Art History (Paris Sorbonne U.), independent researcher, lenot.marc@gmail.com

Joan Fontcuberta, *Giliandria escoliforcia*, Herbarium, 1984, ©Fontcuberta.

To many people, Vilém Flusser is known mainly as the author of *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (Flusser, 1983a, 1984a & 1985), the book he wrote in German in 1983, in English in 1984 and rewrote in Portuguese (with a different title) in 1985. This book was extremely successful and has been translated in more than twenty languages[3]; in some countries, it is the only book by Flusser available in the local language. In his book, Flusser defines the concepts of apparatus, programs, functionaries and information, which are well known by this audience and don't need to be developed here. In *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, written in German in 1985 (while he was rewriting the Portuguese version of *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*), Flusser continues expanding these concepts. It has often been said that photography was just a pretext for Flusser allowing him to explain his philosophy of the apparatus. In a letter to Felix Phillip Ingold on July 30, 1983, a few months after the book's release in German, he had already written: "The aim of this photographic essay was for the most part to define the apparatus and the program. Photography has only served as a pretext, even if I tried to stay true to the phenomenon of photography[4]". The

---

[3] For an analysis of the various editions and translations, see Lenot, 2020b.
[4] Vilém Flusser Archive (VFA), Correspondance file C97, page 40. In the same letter, Flusser wrote that he was more interested in video than in photography, finding video with "more dialogical potentialities as an apparatus operating model".

concept of the apparatus first appeared in Flusser's writing almost twenty years earlier, in his 1965 article "Do Funcionário" (Flusser 1965). When he rewrote his book in Portuguese in 1985, he changed the title to *Filosofia da Caixa Preta* (Philosophy of the Black Box), thus affirming clearly that photography was not the main object of the book, but rather the most effective tool to analyze the functioning of the apparatus as a black box, and he wrote in the new preface: "The intention of this essay is to contribute to a philosophical dialogue on the apparatus, in relation to our contemporaries, using the theme of photography as a pretext" (Flusser, 1985a, p. 4), a word that had been absent from the German and English versions.

Was photography only a pretext for Flusser? What was his interest in photography proper? This essay will attempt to demonstrate that, besides his theoretical writings, Flusser had a keen interest in the actual works of photographers, developed close relationships with some of them, and wrote articles about more than twenty contemporary photographers. This analysis will provide a rare opportunity to confront theory and practice, or, more precisely, to compare Flusser's definition of theoretical concepts in *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, and his concrete writings in direct contact with photographic reality. His texts about photographers have so far not been studied thoroughly[5], unlike, for example, his essays in ArtForum (Schwendener, 2017). This paper will attempt to cover this gap.

Flusser's interest in art was generally expressed in the context of his work on media and communications. The German art historian Marcel René Marburger studied some 2,400 manuscripts and typescripts held in the Vilém Flusser Archives for his 2011 book *Flusser und die Kunst* (Marburger 2011, pp. 10, 154, 159): only seventy of them concern art, only 13 concern individual artists, works or exhibitions, and according to him, all were written from a communicological perspective: "What interests Flusser particularly about artworks are their communicative qualities, and to a lesser extent their aesthetic ones" (Marburger, 2015).

---

[5] These essays are not studied specifically in most books or theses about Flusser and photography or technical images (such as Bozzi 2007, da Silva 2012, Arrouye & Guérin 2013, Campanelli 2015). Only a book by Marburger (2011, pp. 76-94 & 154-168) and two theses by Schwendener (2016, pp. 275-283) and, in more detail by Pedroso (2020, pp. 417-463 & 579-602) analyzed Flusser's texts on Müller-Pohle and Fontcuberta only. The catalogue of the Bodenlos exhibition (Zielinski & Irrgang, 2015) includes a very short summary of the "Reflections" essays, titled "Eine kommunikologische Kunstkritik" (pp. 68-69).

Flusser never pretended to be a professional art critic, but he pursued his own theoretical interests in the field of art, in particular the questioning of the apparatus.

To start with, one should analyze Flusser's Travel Library, which is conserved at the Vilém Flusser Archive in Berlin[6]. Out of a total of 1383 books, we have identified 119 of them concerning photography, that is 8.6%. The great majority of these books are catalogues of shows of a single photographer; some of them (about 15) are collective catalogues (for example of the Rencontres d'Arles) and only five of them are theoretical books about photography. Most of the photographers mentioned in this essay are present in his library.

We will focus here on 15 photographers, including the nine he wrote a critic of in *European Photography*, under the general title "Reflections". Four others occupied an important place in his writings and, to some extent in his life: Andreas Müller-Pohle, Joan Fontcuberta, Gottfried Jäger and Peter Dimke[7]. We have not analyzed here his critics of photography books, since they often deal more with the subject of the book (e.g. the Shoah) than with the photographic practice of the author; for further research, we have listed them in a separate section of the bibliography.

Andreas Müller Pohle, *Transformance 3590*, 1980, ©Müller-Pohle

German artist and publisher **Andreas Müller-Pohle**[8] (born 1951) met Flusser in February 1981 at the photography symposium organized by photographer Erika Kiffl at Schloβ Mickeln in Düsseldorf. Müller-Pohle became Flusser's publisher and close friend, and

---

[6] Online:
https://arena-attachments.s3.amazonaws.com/185811/81ba2234aae3864e896fc055a5d8dcfa.pdf?1389358868
[7] An earlier version of the paragraphs on Müller-Pohle and Fontcuberta appeared in Lenot 2017b.
[8] See his website: http://muellerpohle.net/

his role in publishing and promoting Flusser's books was (and still is) essential. In parallel, his own work became strongly influenced by Flusser's theories on photography. In 1983, in his introduction (Flusser, 1983b) to Müller-Pohle's first photography monograph, *Transformance*[9], Flusser was able, perhaps for the first time, to apply the theories developed in *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (published in the original German edition the same year) to a photographic work, using the concepts of apparatus and of program in his critique[10]. Flusser began his text by referring to the typical sequence imposed on the photographer by the apparatus: "It [the camera] dictates that the photographer first see, then act; that he first look in the camera and through it at the world, then press the button". Then he went on to wonder: "What would happen if I [the photographer] didn't follow that prescribed sequence; what would happen if I acted first, and only looked after having acted? Wouldn't the resulting images be evidence that one can also photograph without following the photoprogram?" Flusser continued by explaining that, in principle, a "normal" photographer hesitates before pressing the button, since he must decide at that very moment which specific possibility he will realize, which future he will make present, which photograph he will take. On the contrary, Müller-Pohle does not hesitate; he does not stop to think, but he relies upon chance, upon "deliberate hazard" (Pedroso, 2020, pp. 418-430) with no predetermined vision. He begins by "blindly" taking 10,000 photographs at random, without planning them or even looking through the viewfinder, constantly moving; he then develops them, looks at the prints, and only then does he select them. Photographs taken in the "normal" way must endeavor to be perfect as soon as they are taken, but Müller-Pohle's photographs only become real and present through his delayed viewing, his subsequent critical gaze. "Normal" photographs hide their artificial nature, programmed by the apparatus, pretending to represent the world objectively, but Müller-Pohle's photographs destroy this illusion: they are gestural and abstract, they allow no myth or magic and it is difficult to recognize the world through them. Rather than showing us the world, they show us the raw material of which the photographs are made, which was not visible before: the inside of the black box and the processes that occur within it. They question the very ontology of photography and subvert

---

[9] Online: http://muellerpohle.net/projects/transformance/
[10] See Lenot, 2017a, pp. 169-171.

the usual meaning of the word freedom, for which this deliberate happenstance is actually a breeding ground. Flusser ended his text as follows: "This book, then, opens a perspective onto what life in a world dominated by cameras and similar machines might be: a deliberate, creative informing of the accidental products of apparatus". As an epigraph to his book, Müller-Pohle had chosen a sentence inspired by Man Ray: "What I can't see, I photograph. What I don't wish to photograph, I see," and in a later version, "What I don't see, I photograph. What I don't photograph, I see". This phrase was later the title of his show at the Brandenburgische Kunstsammlungen in 1991, for the catalogue of which Flusser wrote the preface (Flusser, 1991). By thus dissociating viewing and photographing, Müller-Pohle asserted himself as a practitioner investigating photography itself, from the inside[11].

Besides these prefaces, Flusser wrote a few other texts on Müller-Pohle work. One is a letter (Flusser, n.d. a) to the Czech review *Ceskoslovenska Fotografie* in response to a critic of *Transformance* by one DM (Flusser said, with a certain emotion, that this was his "first contribution to Czech dialogue since 1939"). Other texts by Flusser on his work include an unpublished essay written for *Camera Austria* (Flusser, 1998, pp. 31-36), the notice on Müller-Pohle in the anthology *Contemporary Photographers* (Flusser, 1995), and an unpublished essay (in English[12] and German) titled "Landmarks" about Müller-Pohle series "Da Capo", and especially about a photo of Corcovado (Flusser, 1998, pp. 195-197). In addition, the extensive correspondence between the two amounts to four files in the VFA. In his Travel Library, Flusser had three books by Müller-Pohle.

Another photographer to whom Flusser was particularly close was the Catalan **Joan Fontcuberta**[13] (born 1955). The elements of the correspondence between Flusser and Fontcuberta in the Flusser Archives (Flusser & Fontcuberta, 2012) reflect their discussions from 1984 onwards, their complicity, and the similarity of their ideas. They visited each other's homes, went on vacation together, worked on shared projects and exchanged texts; Flusser asked Fontcuberta for a photographic work to illustrate one of his texts, and each

---

[11] See Marburger, 2011, p. 92 and Pedroso, 2020, pp. 418-431.
[12] Online: http://www.flusserbrasil.com/arte90.pdf
[13] See his Wikipedia page: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joan_Fontcuberta

wrote about the other's work. Both Fontcuberta and Müller-Pohle accompanied Flusser on one of the last trips he made before his death: in September 1991, the three men (and Edith Flusser) went to Israel to the third (and last) Photography Biennale, at the Mishkan Le'Omanut Museum of Art, Ein Harod, where Flusser gave a lecture entitled "Photography and History", and where he met Lizzie Calligas (on whose work he had written two years earlier, see below). They also went to Jerusalem and occupied Palestine, and met the Israeli experimental photographer Aïm Deüelle Lüski. According to the latter[14], Flusser wanted to write a text about Lüski's photographs, but did not have time to do so before his death. Fontcuberta and Müller-Pohle were also invited by Flusser to conceive together a photographic project called *Countervision* (Flusser, 1998, pp. 37-39[15]). In a letter to Fontcuberta dated January 1, 1986, Flusser quoted what the Italian critic Angelo Schwarz had just said to him: that Fontcuberta was "one of the most important photographers, because [he] understand[s] what photos are about: to document something which does not exist" (Flusser & Fontcuberta, 2012, p. 10).

Flusser wrote the preface to Fontcuberta's photographic series *Herbarium*[16] (Flusser 1998, pp. 113-116[17]), featuring twenty-eight photographs of plants that "have not come about by a mutation of genetic information, but by a manipulation of photographic information" (*Ibid*, p. 113). The photographs, which show assemblages of small pieces of scrap metal and plastic, recall the botanical studies by German photographer Karl Blossfeldt, but are actually ironically perverse deceptions, manipulations that destroy the myth of photographic realism[18]. In his preface, Flusser developed the concept of information, distinguishing between biological and photographic information, stressing the importance of chance in the production of information in both biology and photography, and emphasizing the difference brought about by the criterion of usefulness. There are three key themes in Joan Fontcuberta's photography: a questioning of veracity and the naturalism of the image through fiction and

---

[14] Interview with the author on October 24, 2012.
[15] In English:
http://www.flusserstudies.net/sites/www.flusserstudies.net/files/media/attachments/flusser-countervision-best16 08.pdf
[16] Online : https://www.juanmagonzalez.com/fontcuberta/herbarium.html
[17] Typescript in English: http://flusserbrasil.com/arte44.pdf
[18] See Marburger, 2011, pp. 161-162 and Pedroso, 2020, pp. 431-446.

manipulation (in the *Herbarium* series, for example); a questioning of the nature of the photographic medium through experimental work; and, more recently, an exploration of the mechanisms behind the circulation of images through digital networks. In 1996-97, Fontcuberta dedicated his theoretical essay *The Kiss of Judas* (Fontcuberta, 2005) to Vilém Flusser, to whom he referred four times in the book, evoking his ideas on the apparatus, program and functionary, and celebrating "the warlike gesture of refusal, the dignity in opposition to the program" (*Ibid*, p. 95); in this essay, Fontcuberta proposed a radical questioning of naturalism and the function of photography, glorifying manipulation and rebellion against the visual order. Andrea Soto Calderon and Rainer Guldin (2012) have analyzed in detail the connections between the two men and have, in particular, demonstrated the similarities between Flusser's thinking and Fontcuberta's description of his counter-vision in *The Kiss of Judas* (Fontcuberta, 2005, p. 106); in very similar terms, both urge the avant-garde photographer—the one who breaks with routines, criticizes visual intent and attacks the system's vulnerable points—to be triply subversive. Firstly, by subverting the camera's program, its internal routines with their predefined, limited ambitions, its "technological unconscious"; secondly, by subverting the ontological status of the photographic image (the naturalism of the image, the objectivity of photography) and of the distribution platforms; finally, by challenging the usual understanding of the concept of freedom, masked by the illusions of the technocratic society, in order to go beyond the limits imposed by the program. The link with Flusser's concepts of apparatus and program is obvious.

Flusser also wrote in 1988 a presentation of Fontcuberta's *Morphogenesis* project (Flusser, 1998, pp. 165-169[19]) for the Fotografische Akademie in Bielefeld. It is noteworthy that, when Joan Fontcuberta was artistic director of the Rencontres Internationales de la Photographie in Arles in 1996, he organized a program called *Réels, Fictions, Virtuel* as a tribute to Roland Barthes, Jorge Luis Borges and Vilém Flusser. Flusser had five of Fontcuberta's books in his Travel Library.

---

[19] In Portuguese: http://flusserbrasil.com/art296.pdf

The German photographer **Gottfried Jäger**[20] (born 1937) created in 1963 the movement called Generative Fotografie, based upon Max Bense's concept of generative aesthetics, a rational creative approach aimed at finding a new world inside the camera and trying to bring it out with a methodical, analytical system. Jäger discovered Flusser's writings in the mid-80s and invited him to Bielefeld. After Flusser's death, Jäger wrote a short text in the *European Photography* obituary issue: "My photographs owe more to the principle of 'structure' than to that of form, more to a 'program' than to individual items, and more to rhythm than to melody. They are structural works that seek to explore and disclose the language, grammar, and inner legitimacy of the medium. For Flusser, this approach was always a creative game with and against the apparatus. […] It peers into the apparatus instead of through it. […]" (Jäger, 1992a). He also wrote an homage to Flusser in the *Kunstforum* obituary issue (Jäger, 1992b), and, more importantly, he directed in 2001 the book *Fotografie denken* about Flusser's media philosophy (Jäger, 2001). Except for a letter sent to the American journal *Leonardo* as a reaction to an article by Jäger (Flusser, 1986), where he expanded the concepts of reproduction versus production and apparatus versus man, Flusser wrote only one text about Jäger's work, published in the 1992 catalogue *Licht Bild Raum. Fotogene Projekte* of his exhibition at Kunstverein Paderborn (Flusser, 1992). As a counterpoint to Jäger's texts, this single essay demonstrated nevertheless the close proximity of their approach around the concepts of apparatus and program, sharing a common critical perspective[21]. There are two correspondence files between the two men in the VFA, and Flusser had 13 Jäger's books in his library.

Flusser did not write any essay about the work of the German artist, musician and photographer **Hans-Peter Dimke**[22] (born 1941), but the two maintained an extensive correspondence (two files in the VFA), where they discussed Flusser's ideas and Dimke's work. Dimke invited Flusser to talk in November 1983 at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste in Hamburg (Flusser, 1998, pp. 59-62). Dimke then published the text of this conference as well as part of their correspondence in a small book (Flusser & Dimke, 1985).

---

[20] See his website : https://lr-develop.de/gottfried-jaeger/
[21] See Pedroso, 2020, pp. 447-459.
[22] See his website: http://dimke.org/

These four photographers (three Germans and one Spaniard) not only knew Flusser personally but, more significantly, their approach to photography was in line with Flusser's concepts of the apparatus and the programs. Flusser's writings about them reflects this commonality of approaches.

Starting in 1982, Flusser published several articles (28 in total) in *European Photography*, the magazine created in 1980 by Andreas Müller-Pohle; the first reviews Flusser wrote were of photography books. In 1987, he was invited to write a regular column about photographers titled "Reflections": he published nine essays there (two posthumously), that is one in every other issue on average. He wrote them in German and in English; each was illustrated, usually with four photographs. We have added to this corpus two other texts of a similar vein, one he wrote for a show by Ulrich Martens at a Marseilles gallery, and a critic of Ed Sommer's work, intended for *European Photography*, but not published. As we will see, in these essays, Flusser put less emphasis on the apparatus and the programs[23], but his main approach was rather around the point of view and the construction of space, and also objectivity and reality. We will review these texts, not in chronological order, but trying to follow a path, from the logic of the point of view to the exploration of the public / private dialectics. It is interesting to note that Flusser wrote about photographic criticism (for instance in his lecture at the École Nationale de la Photographie in Arles in 1984: Flusser, 1984b), recommending that the critics analyze the technico-economic apparatus behind the photographic apparatus, but that this was not a line he followed in his own critical approach.

We will start with **Boyd Webb**[24], a New-Zealander born in 1947 and living in the UK. Writing about Webb's work, Flusser reflected on the issue of staging in his 1989 article in *European Photography* nº 38 titled "On Staging[25]" (Flusser, 1998, pp. 173-174, "Vom Inszenieren"): Webb's photographs[26] are constructed tableaux, with props and hidden devices, they stage the world. Flusser wrote: "For magical thought, the world is a stage: things relate

---

[23] In these eleven essays, the word "apparatus" appears only 6 times (3 of them about Gioli), and the word "program" 4 times. The word "information" or "informative" is present a dozen times, mainly with respect to Burson and Bonfert; the word "functionary" is absent.

[24] See his Wikipedia notice: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boyd_Webb

[25] Typescript in English: http://flusserbrasil.com/arte19.pdf

[26] This photograph illustrated the article: https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/webb-first-principles-t11983

to each other. For historical thought, it is an event: things follow from each other […] In order that there be a world, one must stage it." Because Webb's photos are images of "improbable relations", they are highly informative. All his pictures are simulations and metaphors (staged scenes), they are "metapictures" since they show not the staged scenes proper but the staging itself. While this echoed Flusser's concept of information, Webb was seen by him principally as someone who was playing against representation and thus "could cause one to laugh oneself to death." Flusser had one Webb's book in his library. In the following issue of *European Photography* (nº 39, p.15), one Peter Marshall wrote a letter to the editor arguing with Flusser's interpretation of Webb's images: "Let's enjoy them without pretending that they are full of great significance".

The main interest of Flusser (1998, pp. 235-237, "Standpunkt") in analyzing the photographs of the Czech **Jiří Hanke**[27] (born 1944) in *European Photography* nº 50 (titled "Standpoint" and posthumously published in 1992[28]) was the concept of the point of view: between 1981 and 2013, Hanke photographed the street in front of his apartment, with always the same frame. He caught images of events in the street, passersby, marches, street vendors, images of public works, images of the weather, … To some extent, these photos were staged, not like Webb's, but because of their immutable framing. Flusser considered this persistence on a single standpoint "an acrobatic achievement": normally, the photographer jumps from viewpoint to viewpoint[29], but here, like in paleo-photography but now deliberately, this photographer chose to adopt a single viewpoint. His viewpoint was lofty and he caught "a stream of appearances as it flows by." Flusser, viewing Hanke's photos before 1989, noted that they were taken during the Communist regime, "in spite of the swarming, colliding and diverging drifts of viewpoints that characterize totalitarian oppression". For him, Hanke was thus able to "climb into transcendency", seeing history for himself.

---

[27] For lack of adequate references in English about him, I take the liberty of referring to my review in French of an exhibition of his work in Prague:
https://www.lemonde.fr/blog/lunettesrouges/2019/07/25/jiri-hanke-a-la-fois-documentaire-et-conceptuel/
[28] Typescript in English: http://flusserbrasil.com/arte84.pdf
[29] This idea is expended in "Le geste en photographie" (Flusser, 2014 , pp. 117-142).

Bernard Plossu, *Portugal*, 1987, ©Plossu

Bernard Plossu[30] (born 1945) is the only French photographer on whom Flusser wrote (Flusser, 1998, pp. 227-229, "Die Wissenschaft des Ungenauen"), after seeing his exhibition "Les paysages intermédiaires" at the Centre Pompidou in 1988; he had the catalogue in his library, but the two men never met[31]. The essay, titled "The Science of the Imprecise" was published posthumously in *European Photography* nº 49 at the end of 1991[32]. What Flusser emphasized in Plossu's case was the photographer's play against the classical structuration of the image by perspective, where foregrounds must be clear and backgrounds imprecise: on the contrary, in Plossu's photographs[33], what is close is fuzzy, what is far away is clear. Flusser linked this aesthetical approach to Mandelbrot's theory of chaos and to Abraham Moles' essay on the imprecise, contrasting it with Descartes' and the Enlightment's emphasis on clarity and precision. This posture of Plossu, this choice of a point of view and a vision, set him apart from standard photography, and Flusser saw that as another "new way to look at the world".

Flusser's text "Sens Dessus Dessous"[34] (1998, pp. 162-164, with the title "Drüber und Drunter") about the work of the German photographer **Ulrich Mertens**[35] (born 1957) was

---

[30] See his Wikipedia notice in French: https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bernard_Plossu
[31] E-mail from Plossu to the author, June 4, 2020.
[32] Typescript in English:
http://www.flusserstudies.net/sites/www.flusserstudies.net/files/media/attachments/plossue-the-science-of-the-imprecise.pdf
[33] The photographs illustrating the article can be found in *Flusser Studies* nº 31, 2021:
http://www.flusserstudies.net/sites/www.flusserstudies.net/files/media/images/plossu-1.jpg and followings (2, 3 & 4).
[34] A play of words between "Sens" (Sense) and "Sans" (Without); "sans dessus dessous" can be translated as "turned upside down".
[35] See his website: https://www.visuelle-konzepte.de/

also about the choice of a point of view. It was written in French for the brochure of Mertens' exhibition "Sans Horizon" at the Galerie des Rambles in Marseilles in April 1988[36]. While photography allows, and even imposes, a variety of viewpoints (precisely what Hanke was challenging), a viewpoint from below, from "the depths of hells", is impossible, since the camera cannot penetrate into the earth to photograph the world above, said Flusser. But Mertens was attempting this by entering mine shafts and galleries. His exploration of the underground allowed him to drill not only in the earth, but also "in psychoanalytical repressions and etymological roots". But Mertens knew that he had to go back to the surface, that the perspective below was "without horizon". Flusser suggested that he explore further, for example with radioactivity (evoking Chernobyl), in order to "photograph the world above from the perspective of the depths below". In *European Photography* nº 50 (p. 30), the 1992 obituary issue in homage to Flusser, Mertens wrote that, stimulated by Flusser, he later photographed an uranium mine and made photograms of stones containing uranium ore, an attempt to work outside the visual spectrum, and thus adopt a different point of view[37].

Another attempt to change viewpoints by photographing outside of the standard spectrum was demonstrated by the Australian photographer living in Southern France **Henry Lewis**[38] (born 1957): in his exhibition "Radiographie" at the art center Cadran Solaire / Passages in Troyes (Eastern France) in 1990/91 (jointly with Christiane Thomas), he showed X-ray images of his sculptures. Flusser, who had one of his books in his library, wrote a text for the small catalogue in French, titled "X-Spaces" (Flusser, 1998, pp. 192-194) which appeared also in 1990 in *European Photography* nº 41[39]. For him, since X-rays can pierce the surfaces and see the insides, they allow us to see spaces; without them we can experiment space with our legs, seize it with our hands, but not visualize it with our eyes, even if we have tried to render it imaginable through projections, perspectives and *trompe l'oeil*. X-rays allow one to look into space through surfaces. Lewis attempted to visualize his experience with spaces, becoming "a pioneer in the progressive attempt to imagine space". His sculptures in lead were "not meant to be seen by eyes, but by X-ray apparatuses". This showed a new

---

[36] See images here: https://www.visuelle-konzepte.de/art/sans-horizon/
[37] See also Marburger, 2011, p. 91.
[38] See his biography: https://galerie-photo.com/henry_lewis_christiane_thomas_biographie.html
[39] Typescript in English: http://flusserbrasil.com/arte57.pdf

attitude toward vision, and it had to be deciphered: "we tend to look at those images as if they were photos […] but this is not so: in those pictures, there is no optical delusion, but there is space as it is 'seen' in fact by X-rays." Flusser concluded in describing X-rays (and holography) as "the initial phases of an entire future evolution" which will "radically transform our space experience and space concepts."

Ed Sommer, *Portrait of Vilém Flusser*, 1987, ©Sommer

In the above cases, Flusser was interested in the point of view of the photographer and his approach to space. In the following ones, he focused principally on constructions questioning objectivity and demonstrating the ambivalence of the image in reflecting reality. First, Flusser's essay on the work of the German photographer **Ed Sommer**[40] (1932-2015), who lived close to Flusser in Southern France, was not published by *European Photography* and exists only as a typescript (Flusser, n.d. b) titled "Fugues" ("Fugen"); Flusser, who had Sommer's book on portraits in his library, also wrote (in German only) another unpublished essay on Sommer, titled "Dialogisches Fotografieren" (Flusser, n.d. c). The portraits of Flusser by Sommer were a repeated composition: "Sommer has taken me three times for this picture. The first time he followed the traditional method, the second time he projected the first picture on me, and the third time he projected thus both precedent pictures." This created overlapping and distortions, but the picture was "a true reproduction of a perceived context",

---

[40] See his website: https://www.edsommer.com/

an "honest documentary photo" without manipulations *a posteriori*. It reflected the context, the process followed in obtaining the image, showing distinct points of view, distinct "levels of reality". The picture itself (and not what it showed) was "reality in the true sense", Flusser's face was just a "virtuality to be actualized in the picture" through "deliberate computation". Flusser concluded with an analogy with the detection of atomic particles through their traces in a cloud chamber: the perception of reality can only come as the result of computation of several virtualities.

The praxis of the Greek photographer **Lizzie Calligas**[41] (born 1943) as analyzed by Flusser (1998, pp. 188-190, "Bodies") in an article in European Photography nº 40 in 1989[42], partook of a similar vision of transparency and layering: she drew the body of her nude model on a canvas, then photographed her, and projected the photo on the canvas, then rephotographing the composite image; this work[43] was called "My Body – Your Body", the possessive referring not to the body itself, but to the artist's engagement in the production of the image ("my" meaning that I painted it; "your" meaning that it is a technical automatic image). She did create a "synthetic body-image" showing "how a body expresses itself or how it is expressed", and "how two spirits overlap": "it is the image of a dialogue between two spirits", resulting in different ambiguous layers of meaning. In his essay, Flusser (who had two books of her in his library) engaged into a vibrant defense of women rights and a denunciation of the male gaze and of "the crimes we have committed by repressing women (by subjecting their bodies to ours)". What the image is saying to us is: "This is how you men must see us women, if you want to acknowledge us and be acknowledged by us". He added: "this is indeed awful, because it makes us strangers even to those women we love." But, while recognizing that "all the producers of images of beautiful women failed to recognize the otherness of the female spirit [and] have violated these women", he concluded by expressing some anxieties about the future of love in such a liberation context: "If we begin to reconsider women, we risk destroying love. Possibly because justice and love cannot be reconciled". This is a very rare, maybe unique, feminist text by Flusser (one can contrast it

---

[41] See her websites: https://www.lizziecalligas.com/ and http://lizziecalligas.blogspot.com/
[42] Typescript in English: http://flusserbrasil.com/arte83.pdf
[43] See images here: https://www.lizziecalligas.com/442606319 and
http://calligaslizziecv.blogspot.com/2013/01/1990-91-metamorhoses.html

with Jeanne Gatard's reproaches to him chastising his machismo[44]). Lizzie Calligas, besides a few lines in the obituary issue of *European Photography* (nº 50, 1992, p. 33), also wrote about his encounter with Flusser a few months before his death (Calligas, 2020).

This engineering of composite images can also be found in the morphing work of the North-American photographer **Nancy Burson**[45] (born 1948), about which Flusser wrote in European Photography nº 33 in 1987 with the title "Chimaeras[46]" (Flusser, 1998, pp. 146-148, "Chimären"). In analyzing her work, Flusser (who had one of her books in his library) emphasized the distinction between telematics and biotechnology, between pixels and genes, between art and science, but also their convergence: for him, we confront a revolutionary new mentality, "we calculate the world, then we compute it". Burson's compositions of a chimpanzee and a man, of a lion and a lamb[47], of a goat and a sheep are frightening as "models for every future – and not necessarily merely genetic – computation." But, he added, Burson's chimaeras are computed on the basis of existing, old information, they do not include unavailable information, "noise", they lack "imagination (fantasy, inspiration, whatever)", they show that "unimaginative calculation and computation will not result in what the heart desires – namely in a world that is not as it is now, but that is as it ought to be." Flusser implied that, this work (unlike Calligas' or Klein's), although technically fascinating, lacked imagination, lacked revolutionary potential.

Imaginative treatment of images was what Flusser found in the work of the German artist **Astrid Klein**[48] (born 1951). His essay, titled "Shock Treatment", appeared in *European Photography* nº 34 in 1988[49] (Flusser, 1998, pp. 149-151, "Das Entsetzen", the fright). Working with documentary media pictures, Klein[50] manipulated them "in order to pluck them from their redundancy and objectivity, and to charge them with her own intentions." Her pictures were neither objective (representative) nor subjective (imagined), they were part of a

---

[44] See Bernardo & Guldin, 2017, pp. 211-215

[45] See her website: https://www.nancyburson.com/index

[46] Typescript in English: http://flusserbrasil.com/arte81.pdf

[47] Visible here:
https://www.mocp.org/detail.php?t=objects&type=browse&f=maker&s=Burson%2C+Nancy&record=0 and here https://www.nancyburson.com/portfolio/G0000Vk2soDvV_Fc/I0000v3s8rzlA_R4

[48] See her Wikipedia notice: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Astrid_Klein

[49] Typescript in English (previous version): http://flusserbrasil.com/arte1.pdf

[50] An example of this work can be seen here: https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/klein-petrified-vision-t05034

concrete experience "charged with representation, imagination, emotion, desire and intellect." Since the world is not objective but "phenomenal", concrete experiences can be embodied in pictures. Klein's motive was not epistemological, but ethico-political: to shock us with the horror of the events shown by the media pictures. Her manipulations made truth appear: she showed us experiences which had been "filtered by her own living climate (by her own feelings of terror, of being cornered". She modified our vision of the world.

The issue of objectivity and subjectivity was also present in the work of the German-Romanian photographer **Gerd Bonfert**[51] (born 1953): his pictures were deformations of his own body, which he transformed "into something improbable" wrote Flusser in his essay "Im-maginations[52]" in *European Photography* nº 36 in 1988 (Flusser, 1998, pp. 159-161, "Einbildungen"). He liberated himself from his subjectivity and assumed projectivity. Flusser called "im-magination" this capacity enabling us "to put self-produced information into a picture" (as opposed to "imagination, the "capacity to step back from the world in order to see it as an [objective] picture"). Thus, instead of being subject to an objective world, one becomes a project. The information available in the original photo is processed, thus rendered "improbable" and informative, and the new information thus obtained is "im-magined" into the final photo, "a new picture of man, of ourselves" outside of objective reality

Slightly different were the issues that Flusser raised with respect to the work of the Italian artist **Paolo Gioli**[53] (born 1942) in the article "Publication[54]" he wrote in 1988 for *European Photography* nº 35 (Flusser, 1998, pp. 170-172, "Veröffentlichung") after seeing Gioli's exhibition at Musée Réattu in Arles (the catalogue and another Gioli book were in his library): it was now not only a question of point of view, nor of objectivity, but an exploration of the borders between the public and the private. The series *Autoanatomies*[55], which he saw in Arles, was composed of Polaroid photos of female sexual parts, where the "vulgar, unsavory" Polaroid screen had been transferred to silk and drawing paper and there cut,

---

[51] See his website: http://www.gerd-bonfert.eu/
[52] Typescript in English: http://flusserbrasil.com/arte56.pdf
[53] See his website: http://www.paologioli.it/
[54] See text in English: http://www.paologioli.it/download/Flusser.pdf
[55] See images here: http://www.paologioli.it/foto18a.php?page=foto&sez=2&id=11

pasted, recombined to compose an image which, indeed, was not objective anymore. In art, says Flusser, exhibiting private experiences is almost impossible, because one will either preserve their concreteness and risk being undecipherable to others, or making it available and understandable, but at the risk of losing their concreteness. Gioli "undertakes the extraordinary attempt to publish what is most private in the present [public] context". Gioli worked with and against his Polaroid apparatus, demagogical and kitschy, an instrument of the "vulgarity and devaluation of mass culture". By pasting, cutting and re-combining the image, he preserved the uniqueness of his concrete experience, articulating it through his "gesture of imposition of forms (of 'ideas') upon what is concrete, his gesture of 'informing'." This truly experimental work (see Lenot 2020a) was not only questioning the photographic apparatus and playing against it, it was also redefining the social dimensions of the public and private universes.

Flusser intended to write more such essays for *European Photography*: he discussed with Müller-Pohle the names of Tom Drahos, Christian Boltanski, Chris Marker, Teun Hocks, Vera Schwamborn[56], Michael Wesely, Robert Heineken, Costas Tsoclis, John Hilliard and others (and Lüski as indicated above). He met Jacqueline Salmon in Robion two months before his death (Lenot, 2021, pp. 9-10) and was planning to write about her work.

As we have seen, his philosophical critiques of photography expanded beyond his initial concepts of apparatus and programs. While his analyses of the works of Müller-Pohle, Fontcuberta and, to a lesser extent, Jäger were essentially based upon the key themes in *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, his later texts, mainly for *European Photography*, while still engaged with the crucial importance of information, dealt with new issues, some partly developed in *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, such as the objectivity of photography or the articulation between text and image, and some more original, such as the transcendence (Hanke) or the private-public transformation (Gioli). This modest attempt to identify some of the new concepts which appeared in this corpus of praxis criticism may help to further refine and expand his previous theoretical writings.

---

[56] For the "Mérou" project :
https://www.flusserstudies.net/sites/www.flusserstudies.net/files/media/attachments/schwamborn-merou.pdf

Bibliographical References

Texts by Vilém Flusser

Flusser, Vilém (1965). "Do Funcionário". *Suplemento Literário, O Estado de São Paulo*, nº 427, May 20, 1965.

Flusser, Vilém (1982), "Counter-vision. A Sketch for an Essay in Collaboration with Mueller-Pohle and Fontcuberta". *Flusser Studies.*
https://www.flusserstudies.net/sites/www.flusserstudies.net/files/media/attachments/flusser-countervision-best1608.pdf

Flusser, Vilém (1983a). *Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie*. Göttingen, European Photography.

Flusser, Vilém (1983b). "Introduction/Einführung". In Andreas Müller-Pohle, *Transformance*, Göttingen, European Photography.
http://muellerpohle.net/texts/project-texts/transformance/

Flusser, Vilém (1984a), *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, Göttingen, European Photography.

Flusser, Vilém (1984b), "Critique photographique (École Nationale de la Photographie, Arles. 4ème cours, Mai 1984)". *Flusser Studies*.
https://www.flusserstudies.net/sites/www.flusserstudies.net/files/media/attachments/flusser-quatrieme-cours.pdf

Flusser, Vilém (1985), *Filosofia da Caixa Preta. Ensaios para uma futura filosofia da fotografia*, São Paulo, Hucitec.
https://monoskop.org/images/6/6f/Flusser_Vilem_A_Filosofia_da_caixa_preta_Ensaios_para_uma_futura_filosofia_da_fotografia.pdf

Flusser, Vilém (1986). "Comments on "Generative Photography: A Systematic Constructive Approach". *Leonardo*. Nº 20, p. 357.
http://flusserbrasil.com/arte22.pdf

Flusser, Vilém (1991). "Prospektive". In Andreas Müller-Pohle, *Was ich nicht sehe, fotografiere ich. Was ich nicht fotografiere, sehe ich. Arbeiten 1976-1991*. Cottbus, Brandenburgische Kunstsammlungen.
http://muellerpohle.net/texts/prospektive/

Flusser, Vilém (1992). "Postmoderne Farben". In Gottfried Jäger, *Licht Bild Raum. Fotogene Projekte*. Paderborn / Stuttgart, Kunstverein Paderborn / Lindemanns.
http://www.flusserbrasil.com/artg313.pdf

Flusser, Vilém (1995). "Andreas Müller-Pohle". In Martin Marix Evans & Amanda Hokinson, *Contemporary Photographers* (p. 806). Detroit, Saint James Press.
http://www.flusserbrasil.com/arte6.pdf

Flusser, Vilém (1998), *Standpunkte. Texte zur Fotografie*, Göttingen, European Photography.

Flusser, Vilém (2014). *Les Gestes*. Marseille / Bruxelles, Al Dante / Aka.

Flusser, Vilém (n.d. a). An answer to "Transformance" in "Czekoslovenska Fotografie", p.497. Unpublished letter.
http://www.flusserbrasil.com/arte188.pdf

Flusser, Vilém (n.d. b). Ed Sommer: Fugues. Unpublished typescript.
http://flusserbrasil.com/arte45.pdf
http://www.flusserbrasil.com/artg115.pdf

Flusser, Vilém (n.d. c). Ed Sommer: Dialogisches Fotografieren. Unpublished typescript.
http://www.flusserbrasil.com/artg113.pdf

Flusser Vilém & Dimke Hans-Peter (1985). *Vom Aufschrieben und Einbilden. Ein Entwurf zu keinem Buch. Briefe von Vilém Flusser an einen ungelehrigen Lerner*. Künstliche Intelligenz, Barterode.

Flusser Vilém & Fontcuberta Joan (2012). Correspondance. *Flusser Studies*.
http://www.flusserstudies.net/sites/www.flusserstudies.net/files/media/attachments/flusser-fontcuberta-1984-88.pdf

Addendum: photography books reviewed by Flusser

- Quando as palavras falham [Joe J. Heydecker, Onde está Abel, teu irmão]. *Iris*, nº 349, 1982.
- Roland Günter, Fotografie als Waffe. Zur Geschichte und Ästhetik der Sozialfotografie. *European Photography*, nº 13, 1983, p. 29.
- Herbert Franke, Computer-Grafik Galerie. *European Photography*, nº20, 1984 (also Flusser, 1998, pp. 97-99).
- João Urban, Bóias-frias. Tagelöhner im Süden Brasiliens. *European Photography*, nº 22, 1985, pp. 31-32.
- Mark W. Berghash, Jews & Germans. Aspects of the True Self. *European Photography*, nº 27, 1986, pp. 46-47.
- John Goto, Terezin. *European Photography*, nº 38, 1989, pp. 44- 45.
- Herlinde Koelbl, Jüdische Portraits. Photographien und Interviews. *European Photography*, nº 44, 1990, pp. 43-44 (also Flusser, 1998, pp. 207 -209).
- The Photography of Invention. American Pictures of the 1980s. *European Photography*, nº44, 1990, pp. 46-48.
 - "Augenblicke". In Walter Ebenhorfer, *Bildmischung, Rollfilme, 1989-90*. Steyr (Austria), neue text, 1991, pp. 22-25.

Other references

Arrouye, Jean & Guérin, Michel, dirs. (2013). *Le photographiable.* Aix-en-Provence, Presses Universitaires de Provence.

Bernardo, Gustavo & Guldin, Rainer (2017). *O Homem sem chão. A biografia de Vilém Flusser*. São Paulo, Annablume.

Bozzi, Paola (2007). *Vilém Flusser. Dal soggetto al progetto: libertá e cultura dei media*. Novara, de Agostini.

Calligas, Lizzie (2020). "Light and Dark". *Flusser Studies*, nº 30. http://www.flusserstudies.net/sites/www.flusserstudies.net/files/media/attachments/calligas-light-and-dark.pdf

Campanelli, Vito (2015). *L'utopia di una società dialógica. Vilém Flusser e la teoria delle immagini tecniche*. Roma, Luca Sossella.

da Silva, Teófilo Augusto (2016). *A Busca pela Clarificaçâo da Caixa-Preta. A Análise do Discurso como Complemento do Conceito de Programa em Vilém Flusser*. Rio de Janeiro, Novas Edições Acadêmicas.

Fontcuberta, Joan (2005). *Le Baiser de Judas. Photographie et vérité*, Arles, Actes Sud [original edition in Spanish 1997].

Jäger, Gottfried (1992a). Untitled. *European Photography*. Nº 50, p. 36.

Jäger, Gottfried (1992b). "Freiheit in Apparatekontext: Vilém Flusser". *Kunstforum*. Nº 117, pp. 82-83.

Jäger, Gottfried, dir. (2001). *Fotografie denken. Über Vilém Flusser's Philosophie der Medienmoderne*. Bielefeld, Kerber.

Lenot, Marc (2017a), *Jouer contre les Appareils. De la Photographie expérimentale*. Arles, Photosynthèses.

Lenot, Marc (2017b). "Flusser and Photographers, Photographers and Flusser". *Flusser Studies*, nº 24. http://www.flusserstudies.net/sites/www.flusserstudies.net/files/media/attachments/marc-lenot-flusser-photographers-photographers-flusser.pdf

Lenot, Marc (2020a). " Paolo Gioli, un artiste expérimental ?". In Philippe Dubois & Antonio Somaini (dirs.), *Paolo Gioli, impressions sauvages* (pp. 42-53). Dijon, les presses du réel.

Lenot, Marc (2020b). "Für eine Philosophie of Caixa Preta. Critical textual analysis of the different versions of Vilém Flusser's book *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* and a short history of its editions". *Flusser Studies,* nº 30. http://www.flusserstudies.net/sites/www.flusserstudies.net/files/media/attachments/lenot-critical-textual-analysis.pdf

Lenot, Marc (2021). "Les rendez-vous manqués. Flusser, la France et la photographie". *Flusser Studies*, nº31. https://www.flusserstudies.net/sites/www.flusserstudies.net/files/media/attachments/lenot-rendez-vous-manques.pdf

Marburger, Marcel René (2011). *Flusser und die Kunst*. Cologne, Institut für unakademische Studien.

Marburger, Marcel René (2015). "Artwork". In Siegfried Zielinski & Peter Weibel (dirs.), *Flusseriana. An Intellectual Toolbox* (pp. 64-67). Minneapolis, Univocal.

Pedroso, Anderson Antonio (2020). *Vilém Flusser : De la Philosophie de la Photographie à l'Univers des Images Techniques* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Sorbonne Université (Centre André Chastel), Paris.

Schwendener, Martha (2016). *The Photographic Universe: Vilém Flusser's Theories of Photography, Media and Digital Culture* (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation). City University of New York, New York. https://academicworks.cuny.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1707&context=gc_etds

Schwendener, Martha (2017). "Introduction". In Vilém Flusser, *ArtForum Essays* (pages 11-34), Milton Keynes (UK), Metaflux.

Soto Calderon, Andrea & Guldin, Rainer (2012). ""To document something which does not exist". Vilém Flusser and Joan Fontcuberta: A collaboration". *Flusser Studies*, n°13. http://www.flusserstudies.net/sites/www.flusserstudies.net/files/media/attachments/calderonguldin-to-document.pdf

Zielinski, Siegfried & Irrgang, Daniel, dirs. (2015). *Bodenlos – Vilém Flusser und die Künste*. Berlin, Akademie der Künste [exhibition catalogue].