

**Henry Lewis**  
**Brief Encounter with Vilém Flusser**  
**An Interview**

*Rainer Guldin: How do you see your work as a photographer?*

Henry Lewis: I got into photography at a relatively young age it being a childhood hobby. I started to document my friend's hobbies and as time went on, photography ate up my time. I suppose I improved and then at school, I was given tasks to perform like doing annual end of year photos and then this started to bore me to the extreme. I was looking at the photography greats or at least those in books I could get my hands on, searching for a direction. At about 19, I started to try things that I thought were personal and it became obvious that there was no returning to the emulation of the greats I was doing up until then. This was sort of redoubtable but exciting at the same time and led to working on an idea/thought etc. and then responding with a counter reaction in the form of an image to convey this thought. The photography part for me was important as I could attack problems with what I learned through my autodidact apprenticeship. These self-imposed problematics naturally evolved with time. Being able to fabricate or stage the subject has also been an important tool for me as it became clear I was not attracted to search out there for the subject that might convey what I wanted to say, I wanted to fabricate it. Being interested in the concept of 'looking or seeing', the notions of on which side of the mirror are we standing became important, looking at or being looked at, etc. at that time I set out to photograph my face and hands then decomposed that idea and worked with photographing ephemeral constructions as in the LVNA PROXIMA series.

The radiography work then allowed the chance to break through the mirror the see inside. I like the French word Bricolage which is the art of 'do it yourself', for me it is constructing an ephemeral piece from things that I find at hand and then, after photographic capture, its deconstruction and demolition. The work necessary to arrive at the final piece is very important and I look at it as a kind of performance of photography. I see this coming in a direct line from my work with the body where I photographed my own face or hands.

So even if the subjects of my recent work are objective, the treatment is leading to the non-object through various photo or optical based tools or phenomenon. Of course, many paint-

ers and sculptors have worked that way in the past, for example Ellsworth Kelly et al. I am drawn to look at artists over a wide spectrum rather than only photography.

*Rainer Guldin: Which other photographers did inspire or influence you?*

Henry Lewis: Your question is in the past tense. The first I was captivated by, and still today, was Man Ray who I saw as someone who found ways of breaking the rules and creating others. It is particularly amazing that he named his own process Rayographs where other photographers merely made photograms. His joyous surrealism was really attractive as opposed the precious work made in the West Coast USA at the same time. Tom Drahos, Jürgen Klauke, Joan Fontcuberta are photo artists that I looked and look at amongst many others.

*Rainer Guldin: How did you get to live in France?*

Henry Lewis: I am originally from Australia and left to study at San Francisco Art Institute when I was young, about 19. I found this time especially energising, living in a vibrant city with an amazing artistic climate the school and coming in contact with people such as Chris Burden, Alain Sekula and Martha Rosler ... After that period nonetheless I wanted to make a change. My wife Christiane and I moved to what seemed the opposite world, Forcalquier in rural south France where we found an abandoned farmhouse with a huge barn attached. I guess we were very naïve or did not know better. We cleaned the place and set up. As I am a bit of an isolationist and uncontrolled wonderer, the act of living somewhere in particular is important and also maybe not so; France seemed interesting. The change seemed fortuitous. I had a small body of work that I showed to François Braunschweig and Hugues Autexier who unbelievably offered immediately to show the prints in their Texbraun Gallerie in Paris. Through them, I met and worked with other dealers like Harry Lunn and Rudolf Kicken, Baudoin Lebon, etc. So it seemed that even though we were living in relative isolation there so much going on. Marseille was also very positive for me. I met radiology student Philippe Demange and then Professor Georges Salomon a medical professor in neurology and a director of the friends of the museums of Marseille who I somehow convinced to lend me a radiology lab in a national medical research facility (INSERM) with a fantastic X-ray machine. This lasted for a couple years and I was able to create a large number of radiographs. I was able to do museum shows in this city and obtain commissions. This work was shown in museums and galleries in a number of countries in Europe.

*Rainer Guldin: How did you get to know Vilém Flusser? Where did you first meet?*

Henry Lewis: It was at his home but the idea came about in Germany. At this time, I entered the Young European Photography contest and was awarded second prize for my LVNA PROXIMA work, which took place at the Museum Ludwig in Cologne. This event put me in contact with Andreas Müller-Pohle with whom I showed my radiographic work and he suggested I make contact with Vilém Flusser in Robion and show him the work. Vilém kindly accepted to see me and we continued to visit him and show how the radiography being made at the INSERM was progressing and generally listen to his comments and analysis. It was generous and totally captivating to have this treatment especially when one is involved with the project.

*Rainer Guldin: The internet provides two addresses for your name: Tarascon and Puy Chenin. Did you live in Tarascon in the 1980s? This is very close to Robion. Did you ever visit Flusser there?*

Henry Lewis: Actually, in the 1980s I lived near Forcalquier, which is an hour from Robion. We visited Vilém and Edith on numerous occasions and they made the effort to come to the studio to view the radiographic work in situ. They were very welcoming and this erudite made me forget my lacking. On one occasion, Andreas Müller-Pohle was also present. Subsequently we moved in 1990 to Tarascon and then to Puy Chenin near Xaintray in West France but by that time that episode ended. We now live in Burradoo near Sydney in Australia.

*Rainer Guldin: What about Edith Flusser?*

Henry Lewis: Naturally Edith was always present and very welcoming. It was remarkable how she arranged the situation so that Vilém could have the freedom to spend time with us, looking after his needs as well as joining in the discussions.

*Rainer Guldin: In a text from the late 1990s, the French critic Philippe Piguet wrote about the work "Là et par Là", which you made in tandem with Christiane Thomas. He sees your work as a photographer in a line with Man Ray's Rayographs, as well as El Lissitzky's and Moholy-Nagy's photography. Would you agree?*

Henry Lewis: An interesting point where there might have been a touch of amalgam in the critic's vision. I presume Piguet is referring to the aesthetic appearance of the work. Technically all three of the illustrious practitioners mentioned used a light source to expose photosensitive paper or film where diverse objects, more or less transparent were placed upon the photosensitive sup-

port. I was using X-rays as an energy source, which as we know, has the quality of penetrating matter. So I suppose the radiograms are in line with them in that the working method is similar although there is a divergence in the technic that rendered the ‘props’ transparent. The element of experimentation is certainly in line, but to continue in this direction would be uninteresting. I see these predecessors as drawing with light whereas the “Là et par Là” series (produced with Christiane Thomas) and other radiographic works intend to present the viewer an invisible space that Piguet successfully refers to when he refers to *Le Micromégas* of Voltaire. We are dealing with the concept of transferral; x-rays take us into a space that we can only view through radiology although this realm is very much in existence, everywhere around us like climbing into space. This Other World idea has been interesting to me for some time. Figures were crafted and inserted in the composition or subject in an attempt to cross a bridge into an X-space maybe akin to that described by Voltaire. The shape of the border refers to a segment in time and part of the whole disc that requires it to be imagined.



Là et par Là, unique gelatine bromide contact print, 95cm x 95cm, 1990

© Henry Lewis

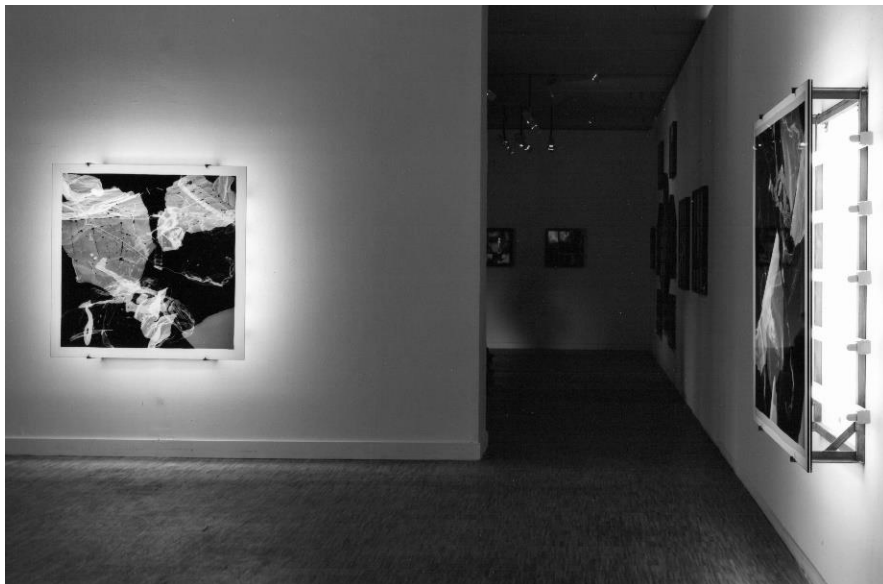
*Rainer Guldin: How did Flusser's article about your pictures on radiography come about?*

Henry Lewis: Andreas Müller-Pohle had the idea and it was conveyed to Flusser who I imagine saw the radiographs as an interesting subject for him. Over months, I had been showing repro-

ductions in the form of large photographic transparencies with the aim of provoking dialogue. At the time, he was writing the text, he came over to see the work installed in the studio, which gave quite another effect, as he was able to gaze into the large images.

*Rainer Guldin: How do you relate to its content?*

Henry Lewis: Flusser delved into this idea of space and time with gusto and these elements naturally are important to the understanding of the work. His analysis obliged the reader to consider a duality between a technical excuse for emitting X-rays, the desire to create an object that conveys ideas about space and time and the use of an artistic language that is; objects assembled that make for a more physical approach. I also had chosen to consider the content/subject matter in the images as opposed to make abstract imagery. His revelations reconfirmed the notions I was thinking about in my clumsy ‘artistic’ way, as his ideas/observations were clear and compact. Certainly, his view is broad one and also encompasses ideas that I had not imagined then. On the other hand, the effect of the light source sprawling out forming a halo around the steel and glass supports seems to have evaded his attention, possibly due to not seeing the works in an exhibition atmosphere.



Installation at the Centre de la Vieille Charité, Marseille 1990

© Henry Lewis

He was interested chiefly in the idea of what is shown on the film and the illusion of space. When he discusses the way one looks at the ‘pictures’ as photos the notion of the way of seeing things is

brought onto the table and that is really interesting. Can one perceive depth from a flat plane of film less than a millimetre thick?

*Rainer Guldin: Did Flusser have any influence on your work?*

Henry Lewis: How could a meeting with such a person not effect one and this has continued. I do not know if you could call this an influence on the following work but certainly, his thoughts and reasoning remains in mind although the subject matter naturally is not the same. Are artists influenceable, the critics might say they are so, but I wonder. Encounters such as Flusser do allow pointers, a sort of freedom. The spatiotemporal conception he insists on has become very important to me. The problematic of how to work with this and the execution is another domain - the complex of looking at a photo as being detached from thinking about the subject in the photo via the photograph. I think of his "It is not the world out there that is real, nor is the concept within the camera's program - only the photograph is real. This is especially true today and as the Photograph is rapidly evolving. Projects also evolve and their visual solutions are adapted. I seem to see solutions most often through photographic keys. Flusser brings up the idea of the camera not being a tool but a plaything and I often wonder how intrinsic is the resulting work done when it is used in that way. Is one led by the technical programme of the camera rather than having total liberty of creation? I feel total liberty is impossible. But is this not the case with any technic and in any domain. Maybe you make do with the baggage you possess.

*Rainer Guldin: How would you judge the relevance of his work thirty years after his death?*

Henry Lewis: Flusser was a visionary whose ideology seems to cover the three tenses. As regards photography which is the part closest to me, it seems that his work is not wavering and in parallel to the phenomenon of the image. I wonder how he would have seen the assimilation to photography of graphics editors. The first version of Photoshop was just coming on the scene shortly before his untimely disappearance. This allowed more than just the manipulation but the creation of imagery, which is a jump from previous anagogic manipulation. We are seeing a slick form of manipulation connecting with painting minus the historic elements. The work of the photomontage artists of the 20's and 30's seems more in tune with the Photograph that Flusser is bringing up. One cannot really think that Dora Maar's images are reality whereas Photoshop can achieve such smoothness that we are tempted to imagine a direct trip to reality. One wonders how he would have placed this phenomenon and that of virtual reality.

*Rainer Guldin: What about his vision of photography?*

Henry Lewis: Vast programme. His views support themselves and I, coming from a very narrow slice of the medium have a practitioner's outlook. He has beautifully told us how photography or "technical images absorb the whole of history and form a collective memory going endlessly round in circles." That was written before the advent of mobile phones/cameras. Might he have seen the phenomenon enlarged exponentially to almost be on the level of an appendage of the body? The new black boxes are basically in a mode of continual filming, accessible through social media, almost like breathing.

*Rainer Guldin: And what about the future of photography in general?*

Henry Lewis: I suppose that question would need to be looked in function of how photographs are consumed. Originally, in the nineteenth century, there were so few photos made, the uses were minimal but this grew exponentially to where it is [almost] impossible to view a subject that does not have a photo to illustrate it even to just reconfirm that that subject exists - we view photography everywhere. The photo object has its interest, illustrated by the enormous market existing for 'serious' photographic equipment. Today cameras are so perfect that they show us things that we cannot visualise with our eyes, things that we see in enlarging images on the computer screen.

Nonetheless, the photographic object is diminishing and becoming enormously weighted towards only existing in a digital support, allowing images to circulate around the world (and further) at the speed of light. Flusser talks about how the naïve consumer of photographs looks through them to see the world, why will this change. Why would the public wish to consider the validity of archaic supports that reduce the transmission of [their] images? We are told that AI will facilitate this and make the act of photographing more attune to the humane biology. We will make images through our spectacles, which naturally will be tethered to our smartphone and connected to the web. Our streets are watched through closed-circuit television (CCTV) and it is not uncommon to see the reproduction of crime scenes so here we have imagery produced that does not require human operation. Basically, every aspect of photographic imagery that existed when Vilém Flusser wrote not only still exists but is continually being perfected and enlarged.

November 9 2021