

**Isabel Löfgren**

**From Ecstasy to Melancholy:**

**An epistolary journey recounting Flusser's unrealized proposal  
for the Art & Communication nucleus in the 1973 XII Bienal de  
São Paulo**

A unique philosopher in his work and his life, Vilém Flusser is mostly known for developing a phenomenological theory of communication evidenced in his extensive oeuvre of books, essays, and correspondences. Less scrutinized are his nomadic incursions into other realms of cultural activity, namely as a newspaper columnist and art critic, and the multiple roles he performed in the art world in Brazil and abroad, even though art was always central to his thinking and provided a fertile ground for his philosophical ideas (Schwendener 2018). As an art critic, he had over the years entered into dialogues with artists such as Mira Schendel and Samson Flexor who figure prominently in several of his works (see Flusser 1999), and his involvement with international artists such as Fred Forest and Louis Béc, for instance, would be occasioned through his work for the São Paulo Biennial.

The period between 1971-1973 when Flusser was working on behalf of the São Paulo Biennial Foundation to articulate a restructuring of the international exhibition can be mostly grasped through a set of correspondences including letters, telegrams, reports, newspaper clippings, diagrams and documents which show yet another facet of Flusser's persona as an art curator. Flusser doesn't seem lured into the task of restructuring the 1973 XII São Paulo Biennial to necessarily gain a position in the art world, but rather embraces it with a kind of utopianism where he sees the opportunity of turning theory into practice by way of the exhibition as a medium for a "communicological" experiment grounded in his philosophy. This brief curatorial stint also signaled a possibility for a fresh restart for Flusser in a period marked by uncertainty in his teaching appointments in São Paulo and diminished activity as a lecturer due to circumstantial carefulness during the military regime.

Flusser's role as a technical advisor for the restructuring of the 1973 XII São Paulo Art Biennial (henceforth Biennial) in the early 1970s, and especially his proposal for the Art

& Communication nucleus, is revealed through the device of letter writing in a certain turning point of his life between his exile Brazil and a new life in Europe which would soon follow. He articulates his proposal writing from Geneva, Switzerland and Merano, Italy, in dialogue with several important figures in the international and Brazilian art and philosophical circles, where we can see a fully-fledged artistic program slowly unfold. This period in Flusser's life is recounted in detail by Ricardo Mendes (2008), who describes it as a period of inflection in Flusser's approach to the visual arts, and also by Vinicius Spricigo (2013) who develops the notion of exhibitions as a medium taking Flusser's theoretical perspectives of open works as a point of departure. Less attention is devoted to this period in Flusser's life in Anglo scholarship as Isobel Whitelegg (2009) points out, as the international attention to Brazilian art in the early 1970s is largely based on the work of Brazilian artists who were active in their exile to Europe and the USA, leaving a gap of research to be explored about what was happening in Brazil at that moment. Whitelegg (2009) also points out that the history of the Biennial in the 1970s deserves more attention as important shifts, such as Flusser's proposals for restructuring the Biennial, inspired the succeeding Biennials during the period of the military regime (1964-1985) with a series of important curatorial innovations.

Some of the archival material in the Flusser archive such as diagrams and letters from this epistolary journey through the inner workings of the Biennial have been exhibited as part of biographical timelines or accompanying artworks in exhibitions, but a more in-depth study of this particular set of letters still remains to be fully grasped. As such, this essay intends to contribute to deepening an understanding of Flusser and his languages through this set of correspondences and documents and also contribute to understanding his role as a curator in the field of curatorial studies, in addition to already existing art historical (such as Schwendener, 2014, Whitelegg, 2009, and many others) and media theoretical contributions.

Flusser was nonetheless known in the intellectual circles in São Paulo for his growing corpus of innovative theories in the philosophy of communication, and for participating in several cultural events along the 1960s. He caught the attention of Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho, an industrialist and art collector and founder of the São Paulo Biennial Foundation, who first invited him in 1967 to coordinate a series of workshops and sessions about youth and technology in the *II Bienal do Livro*. From this point forward, Flusser would become a collaborator of the Biennial Foundation, leading up to his appointment to become part of a committee charged with first and foremost rewriting the regulations for the 1973 XII São

Paulo Art Biennial. The decision to reorganize the Biennial resulted from a falling number of visitors to the XI Biennial of 1971, as a consequence of the “hiatus” X Biennial of 1969, better known as the “Boycott biennial”. In reaction against the infamous Institutional Act no. 5 (AI-5), 90% of the participating Brazilian artists as well as six international delegations boycotted the Biennial to protest the military dictatorship’s new laws for censorship of culture and arts. In 1971, the military regime’s decision to deliberately halve the funds promised to the event and further censorship precipitated yet another wave of boycotts, turning the Biennial into a stage to call out the political injustices against artists and intellectuals. This moment also coincided with an expansion of experimentalism in the arts from strictly object-based artworks to more performative and conceptual art practices which previously had been overshadowed by more traditional “salon” expressions, and which were already being embraced in the Paris Biennial (*Biennale de Paris*) and other prestigious international art events. To recuperate its international prestige and to legitimize itself as the most important arts institution outside the US-European axis, the Biennial had no choice but to renew itself urgently.

In September 1971, Matarazzo Sobrinho organized a series of roundtables during the opening week of the XI São Paulo Art Biennial to address the dwindling global interest in the Biennial. Led by Swiss art critic René Berger from the AICA (International Association of Art Critics), Flusser, among 50 other invited art critics and historians, the critics concluded that the current situation of art exhibitions needed to be reconsidered in light of the changes in the art system and in regard to new technologies and new regimes of spectatorship. They discussed the agenda of a) renewal of the Biennial, b) art and communication, and c) art and technology (Matarazzo Sobrinho 1971: 1). The idea to turn the Biennial into an “open work” was thoroughly discussed, and reported on by prominent figures such as Dietrich Mahlov, Carl Unger, Pierre Restany, and others. Flusser, who had until then gained popularity in intellectual circles and wrote regularly in cultural issues in newspapers, was named a technical advisor to the Biennial in early 1972, in a committee with Antonio Bento, Bethy Giúdice and Mário Wilches, and helped develop the theme for the forthcoming XII Biennial of 1973: “Art and Communication” and new regulations.

The late 1960s and early 1970s years also saw the surge, in Brazil, of the development of mass communication infrastructures, spearheaded by private media conglomerates such as *Globo*, in part boosted by the military government and by new mass broadcast satellite technologies. This effectively changed the media landscape of the country, expanding its mass

communicative apparatus to the entire national territory. Flusser saw in this communicative apparatus of continental reach as an opportunity to bring art closer to the public and make it more democratic, through his proposal for the reorganization of the Biennial on a “communicological” and scientific basis.

This communicological reorganization entailed not only the acknowledgement of the influence and use of mass media in contemporary art but would more systematically put a dialogic dimension into practice in the museum space, breaking with Modernist conventions of the prominence of the art object. This proposal was in fact a way to listen to current developments of artistic practices in consonance with mass media, communication, and participation which Flusser framed within theories of communication as a point of departure. “Communicology” for Flusser, includes questions concerned with human communication and language where a change in the communicational method and codes necessarily result in a change in the way humans place themselves in the world (Poltronieri 2014: 170-171). Flusser summarizes his participation at the round table in a document as such: ““Résumé of my contribution to the Round Table held at the 11th Biennial on Sept. 5th, concerning reformulation of the Biennials: / Point of view: Communicological critique / Defects pointed out: (1) The Biennials have had a “discursive” structure, limiting the consumer to mere reception of messages. (2) The Biennials never consciously knew what type of message they wanted to transmit: i.e., maximal communication, maximal information, or the middle term. / Suggestions: (1) To study a way in which the consumer participates in the planning of future Biennials, thus changing them from “exhibitions”, (in reality: inhibitions of the consumer), into dialogues with feed-back. (2) To decide today provisionally if the aim of the Biennial to come is to inform, (present maximum originality), or communicate (present some originality in partially redundant surroundings).(3) to appoint a group of communicologists, (including sociologists, psychologists, etc.) to constantly control the preparatory and executive work of future Biennials. NB: I suggest the organisation (free of charge to the Biennial) of a group of students at my chair, (“Theory of Communication” and “Aesthetic Communication”), at the School of Humanities and Plastic Arts, to try and execute the above suggestions (...)” (Flusser 1972g: 1 – author’s translation)

In this embryonic stage, Flusser had already identified some possible areas of intervention, from his communicological perspective, of urgent matters in society and of the “crisis in art” which he now had the chance to develop in the context of an international exhibition,

using the art institution and the art exhibition as a medium of communicological critique of this crisis. We also see a collaborative and participative thrust to include young people and other professionals and disciplines in the endeavor.

Flusser claimed that the “crisis in art” was not only *in art per se* but was contingent to a series of political matters which plunged the institution of the Biennial itself in a crisis, and therefore the urgent need to reinvent itself. In the essay “Crisis in Art” (Flusser 1972c) he describes it as a crisis in the emission and reception of *culturemas*, or cultural artefacts. He proposed that the static emission of *culturemas* by a cultural elite in gallery and museum walls to be as alienating as the passive consumption of mass media by the masses, who are the receivers of information. There is not one kind of art, but two – one by the elites, and one by the masses. The art of the masses, he writes, is easily replaced by modes of life emitted by the “elites” (a rich ensemble of messages situated in exclusive venues such as art galleries, museums and theatres) and reproduced through mass media communication channels for the purpose of sustaining modes of consumption, keeping the masses as consumers/receivers. The art by the elites is in a crisis because its end game is to fall into sterility and obsolescence, indeed the “death of art” (Flusser, 1972c, p.3). Once the bourgeois art is surpassed, the future is in the art by masses. To overcome the paradigm of consumption, art can resolve its crisis by abandoning its objecthood, intervene discursively through disturbances in the system, and open up to a higher level of engagement. As in a feedback loop, the masses would engage with the aesthetic dimension of mass media as a way of revealing the reality of everyday life. In order to make this relationship more dialogical, the relationship between emitter-message-receiver had to be reconceived in light of new technological and social developments. How to create active consumers of information and culture through active mechanisms of participation? How could art become a more embedded part of everyday life with the help of mass media? (Flusser, 1972c, p. 4)

The work of art, from a communicological point of view, had to be replaced with the idea of art as experience. It is in the realm of experience that art, as a practice, as a series of gestures, actions, and presences, could have a dialogic presence. The dialogic relation, Flusser explains in *Post History*, is the encounter between two subjects is marked by the recognition of one within the other, not capable of being incorporated into any theory, since subjects cannot be known beforehand, and as such “modern science is incompetent for intersubjective encounters” (Flusser, 1993/2013, p. 47). It is thus not the discursive, which is the realm of

the scientific and of information, not the ideological, which is the realm of consumption and advertising, but of the exchange between both as an experience.

At the center of his proposal was the creation of ‘communicological experiences’ through ‘happenings,’ ‘gesture and behavior,’ and ‘everyday life’, approximating audience and artwork, shifting work from the individual to the collective effort, from exhibition to laboratory, from works of arts to prototypes, models and propositions. The artist, in this case, is no longer isolated from society, but is embraced by a shared responsibility in the creation of aesthetic experiences together with the public. Mass media in the forms of television and radio appear as a new medium which expands the museum, including the corporate apparatuses that support them, that dislocates the experience of the viewer from a situated experience to a networked experience, in contrast to the more static museological experience based on physical presence before physical works of art.

Flusser and his wife Edith embark on a journey to Europe in mid-1972 to, in part, advance his proposals with international contacts for the Biennial. The following autumn was an intense period of correspondences, contacts with artists, curators, activating supporters, international delegations and refining propositions. Several projects were defined, and a series of letters with the Foundation continuously informed Matarazzo Sobrinho of the progress and articulating means to make proposals viable and possible. Writing first from Geneva and then Merano, and a string of other cities, he articulates his proposal more succinctly in a letter to Abraham Moles on August 7<sup>th</sup>, 1972, where he phrases his proposal as such, almost like a manifesto, and asking for Moles’ collaboration. Here Flusser also finds important to motivate his stay in Europe, and the mission he is entrusted with: ”Dear Friend, Our talks in São Paulo [in 1971] had a delayed effect on me. Like you, I want to translate theory into praxis. That is why I have accepted the invitation of the São Paulo Biennial to reorganise it in a communicological way. In short: desalienate senders and receivers, de-sacralize “Art”, and abandon the “oeuvre” for something useful. Make art again part of everybody’s daily life. This is why I am in Europe. I shall propose this thing at the AICA conference in Paris in September (...). (Flusser 1972d: 1 – author’s translation)

On the same day, Flusser writes to Fred Forest, contacting him for the first time by suggestion of René Berger, and formulates his proposal as follows: “Dear Mr. Forest, (...) In the course of discussions rising from the last São Paulo Biennial I was appointed to try and reorganize it on a communicological basis. This is why I am in Europe. The idea is not that

the arts themselves, but their communication to the broad public which are in crisis. We shall therefore try to shift the emphasis from works to group effort, and from exhibitions to laboratory, and thus motivate the public (sic) to active reaction. (...)" (Flusser 1972e: 1 – author's translation)

On yet another letter addressed to Matarazzo Sobrinho, as the second of three reports to the steering committee of the Biennial Foundation, sent prior to his presentation of the proposal at the AICA meeting in Geneva later that September, he reformulates the aims for the reorganization of the new Biennial as such: "a) Break through the isolation that menaces the cultural establishment, and thus avoid its sterility; / b) Open up wide strata of the population to the influence of recent culture, and thus avoid that the mass media continue their passive consumption of it; / c) Have the arts become again a significant dimension of everyday life, and thus motivate again modern man in his activities. This implies a fundamental change in attitude towards art: from contemplative consumption to creative production; / d)

Do away with the barrier between art and other activities. (Flusser 1972f: 1 – author's translation)

This report also includes the identification of target groups, kinds of participants, criteria of selection, means of communication and mediation highlighting modes of exhibition, documentation, learning, the importance of mass media as a channel for creativity, discussion groups, etc. In short, the philosopher proposes a methodology for socially oriented action through "open works" with an ambition that this openness be conceived as a multi-dimensional program of dialogic relations that surpasses its programmers and becomes autonomous, independent of the program's functions (Flusser, 1983/1993, p. 25): "These proposals are 'open' and obey a 'tree structure.' They need not be realized in full to be successful. What matters is their structure. If this is put into practice, and if the existing facilities of the São Paulo Biennial are put into service, a decisive center of cultural and communication activities with a true communication of their message in Brazil and abroad will have been created. Traditional exhibitions are probably doomed for lack of communication. And so, consequently, is 'art' in the traditional sense of the term. A reform of its communicological impact like the one proposed might change the scene, not only in Brazil, but all over." (Flusser 1972f: 1)

Through these open experiential structures, Flusser saw this not only as an opportunity to connect with experimental intellectual and artistic production from the US and Europe by way of the Biennial, but it was also a way of decentering the sites of innovative knowledge production to the peripheries of the world (Spricigo 2013). As such, Flusser embraces a cosmopolitan view on his proposal but nonetheless, in many of his correspondences, it is possible to detect that he writes his addressees as a Brazilian. He invokes a modernist, anthropophagic approach with both a nihilistic and utopian enthusiasm for the “new” and breaking with traditions and worn out concepts. In the midst of organizing meetings and preparing reports, he writes to his assistants Allan Meyer and Gabriel Borba in São Paulo in August 1972: “Dear Friends, The thing of the Biennial is moving along. The basis is now this: we will not bring works of art, but we will bring teams to create artworks or models together with Brazilian teams. (...) He [Ott, a Swiss artist] will come, together with an art theorist and a guy from TV. You should prepare the corresponding team in S. Paulo (...). So, let’s get to work. This is only an example. Other proposals will come. Please talk to the old folks. I think we really have something here, and this should also take yourselves out of your gloom (it certainly is doing that to me). After all, we are not as Zulu as we thought. People here are swallowing our ideas.” (Flusser 1972a: 1; author’s translation) In the proposal presented to AICA in September 1972, Flusser is successful in garnering the international approval for his plan and hoping to put the Biennial back on the map. In his presentation, he places the dialogical notion as a *premise* and highlights the importance of the Biennial as a *laboratory* (Flusser 1972g: 2). He mentions the necessity of the connection to the city as an expanded laboratory of the aesthetic dimension of everyday life, criticizing the traditional Biennial model as a place where ‘all worlds meet,’ with no relationship to the surrounding urban context.<sup>1</sup>

In the same document, Flusser also describes the *purpose*: “Shift the emphasis from works to be exhibited to work to be done on the spot by groups of foreign and Brazilian

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, one of his suggestions to the *XII Bienal de São Paulo* which was actually realized (along with Eric McLuhan [Canada]) was his invitation to Fred Forest which culminated in several interventions in the city of São Paulo, including an intervention in the form a white ad space in local newspapers, and “White invades the City” (1973), a simulated protest with ten paid recruits from the favela holding empty placards in a procession, which earned him the Communications Prize at the Biennial, and which also got him temporarily detained by the military police for interrogation. Flusser would initiate a life-long collaboration with the artist beginning with the letter excerpted above. Forest then returned to the Biennial many times.



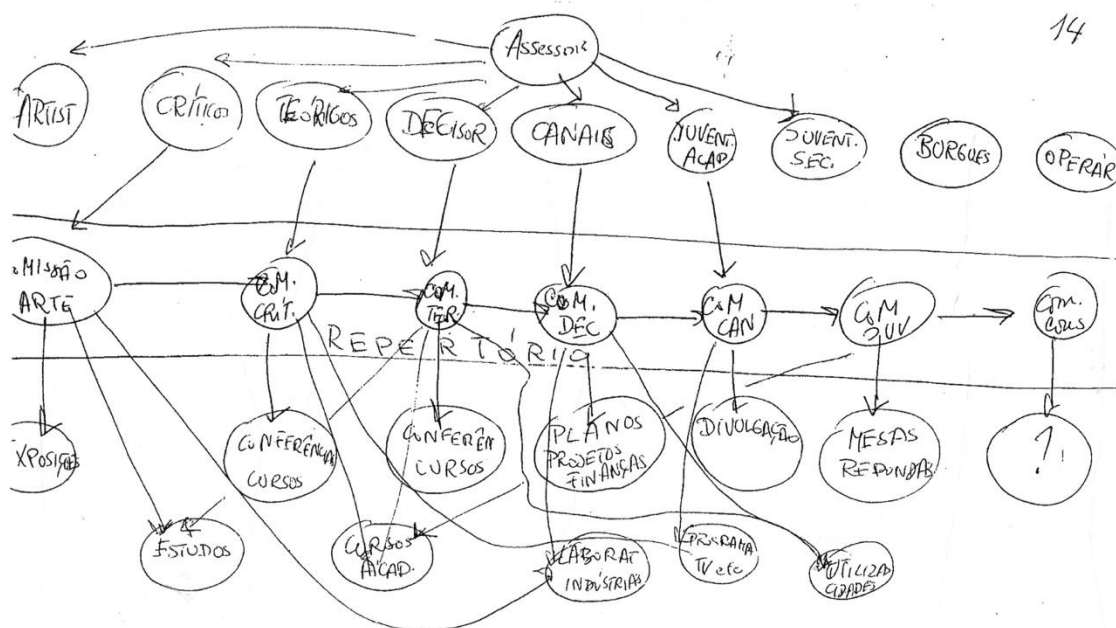
specialists in various fields of activities. The foreign specialists should be artists, critics, theoreticians of communications and manipulators of mass media [filmmakers, television producers, etc.]. The Brazilians should be workers in the various fields of application, like schools, factories and laboratories, and also artists and scientists. All sorts of people should be motivated to participate actively” (Flusser 1972h: 2). Here, Flusser embeds a clear emancipatory agenda in his proposal. Artistic production would no longer be the work of artists but would rely on the collaborative effort of many actors in society in the coming-into-being of the proposals, engaging workers and the elites on equal footing, technicians and theorists, artists and citizens, children and technology – thus signalling another move of decentralizing the art object while at the same time infusing the proposal with a utopian democratic ideal.

In a third report to Matarazzo Sobrinho later in the fall of 1972, after the AICA meeting, Flusser signals the need to create a local support infrastructure for international artists in proposing a *method* of collaboration: “Working groups should be established abroad with a view to executing the tasks in São Paulo. These groups may be established on a national or any other basis. Corresponding groups should be established in Brazil. After a coordination of these groups, an over-all program should be worked out. The foreign groups should come to Brazil by August 1973 and prepare, together with their Brazilian counterparts, the taking place of the events. Latest on opening of the Biennial conference rooms and projection rooms should be placed at the disposal of a selected public to discuss the works proposed. These discussions and active interferences should be widely broadcast in Brazil and abroad. Multiples of the proposals should be distributed, (or sold). These events should then be opened to an even broader public for active interference” (Flusser 1972h: 2 – author’s translation).

Here, Flusser indeed proposes to turn parts of the exhibition into a television studio, taking advantage of national television networks like *Globo* and even broadcasting live to international channels (Rouiller 1973), and also have television teams on the streets engaging citizens and artists more directly with direct broadcasts. And he concludes: “These proposals are open to counter-proposals. Any suggestion which might contribute to substitute archaic exhibitions by new methods will be considered.” (Flusser 1972h: 2) At the end, Flusser intended to redefine an exhibition from what it ‘is’ to what it ‘can do,’ by way of creating situations where communication and dialogue, research and practice are productively activated.

Within his methodology, one of the most important aspects of the elaboration of the program, Flusser created a few topics to contextualize the concept and put it into practice, inspired by propositions by artists he met during his travels in Europe. A list of propositions includes: “1) **Primary Education:** creating new learning strategies for children on video-tape based on collaborations between a Swiss group of artists, pedagogues and psychologists and a local musician, a sociologist, a teacher, parents and Brazilian children; 2) **The apartment and its aesthetic, social and urbanistic aspects:** creation of new ‘modes of living’ in a collaboration between architects, artists, sociologists with the participation of 3 Brazilian citizens who would participate actively in the elaboration process of the new ‘apartment’ in all of its aspects: from the furniture design, colors of the walls, the size of showers, the material used in fixtures, etc., and question all conventions in the domestic habitat; 3) **Psychiatry and the use of slides:** the linkage between psychology, psychiatry and art through the medium of screens and slides as a reference to the workings of memory and media; 4) **Food products** would be studied from the aesthetic point of view of a chemist, an artist, a sociologist, a food company who would work on all aspects of food culture, from packaging to the way of eating, trying to find the beauty in food, as in the traditional Tea Ceremony; 5) **The window** - aesthetic aspects of the “opening” - the window as a plastic element, recalling medieval glass windows, not as a void in space, but as a screen that gives a vision of the world that would cater to needs and desires of spectators. (Flusser 1972h: 1)

This open set of “provocations” was to become the breeding ground for whatever would happen in the Biennial itself with a welcome degree of uncertainty, and its highly mediated and performative character and, which is clear from the suggested use existing mass media apparatuses that “perform” the task of participation and openness, thus approximating art, process and audience. As proposals evolved, the program more and more incorporated a notion of play and interaction, as a further enhancement of the proposed dialogic and communicative structures. It is also interesting to note a parallel between the openness of the works as being symbolic of democratic openness, and the putting into practice of open structures in a society all the more restrained and restricted by a military regime. Flusser went as far as determining the operations behind the making of these proposals, in diagrams which reveal the structure of the work behind the scenes.



**Figure 1:** Flusser’s working plan for producing the communicological proposal, outlining the key areas and actors. Top row, from left to right: artists, critics, theorists, decision-makers, channels, academic youth, youth in schools, bourgeois, workers. On the second row, he outlines the committees, and in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> rows, the repertoire includes exhibitions, conferences, courses, round tables, articles, industrial laboratories, TV programs and the city. (Flusser 1972), Vilém Flusser Archive.

Despite the flurry of letters back and forth from Europe to São Paulo, a growing uncertainty can be felt in the felt between the lines. Despite the proposal being received very positively by René Berger and the AICA in September, the official approval of the proposition as a part of the new regulations was delayed in São Paulo but arrived just in time for the AICA meeting. Eventually the proposal went through, but then the issue of funding came to the surface, leading to the beginning of a series of misunderstandings and frustration. Matarazzo Sobrinho becomes ever more evasive in his responses, which causes growing anxiety in the correspondence. On November 26, 1972, by which time Flusser is entering more advanced conversations with several artists and connections and is also beginning to draft budgets, he expresses his concern to Gabriel Borba Filho in São Paulo: “Here things are going very well. And I will send details as soon as possible. What is missing is better communication with São Paulo, and

most of all, funding. Frankly, I am beginning to worry. The sums I am missing are ridiculous (if compared to the importance of the Biennial), but they break it all. Isn't it unbelievable? Can you interfere in this? I don't have a way on insisting on something so shameful, it's as if I am asking for money, when in reality I am investing my own funds without having any. But I am still very enthusiastic. I will not let this go so soon, now that everything is almost within my reach, and this kind become an event without its like. (...) I think we need to give it all now, since this is an opportunity which will not come again so soon. Don't be let down by difficulties which always appear when matters are serious. I also have them. *We shall overcome.*" (Flusser 1972i: 1 – author's translation)

In January 1973, Flusser's relationship with Matarazzo Sobrinho begins to see its end. With only a few months before setting up the proposed projects in São Paulo, the pressures to make proposals become reality began to mount, and Flusser asked consistently about budgets and funding to do his work, with no response from São Paulo. Ironically, in an interview about the proposal to *Gazette Littéraire de Lausanne* on January 6<sup>th</sup> (Rouiller 1973), Flusser provides the best articulation yet of the project, having now passed the conceptual and moving into the production stage. After a long silence from the Matarazzo Sobrinho, on January 15, Flusser decides to send a letter kindly asking for a final position in order to continue working within acceptable conditions to be able to follow through. As series of parallel correspondences with Borba and even Radu Varia, curator of the Paris Biennial and his main contact in Paris, warned Flusser that something was not quite right. Matarazzo Sobrinho finally sends him an irritated response to what he considered an ultimatum, confirming that it would not be possible to realize the proposal under such pressure from Flusser and that no funds would be released (Matarazzo Sobrinho 1973). On January 25, 1973, Flusser, disappointed with the impossibility of continuing his work, writes to Matarazzo Sobrinho the following letter: "I never asked money for myself (...) I did, yes, ask for funds for the Biennial, for the following reason: my project, approved by the technical secretariat and included in the regulations includes a communications event structured upon channels to be established between Brazil and abroad, and this costs money. In fact, this represents the biggest costs of the event. It requires building groups to start working before, during, and after the event, and this implies organization, and travel for numerous persons. I was able to finance some expenses thanks to your initial payment and the good will of foreign representations and other enthusiastic people. To continue the work, the amounts suggested (...) were considered minimal by all

parties involved (...). This is why I asked for a budget. It seems like you have found a way (which I ignore) to avoid such a structure, and therefore its expenses. I fear that with such a decision I have not only lost months of work, but what is worse, the unique opportunity to create an extraordinary event is lost. But I hope to be wrong, and that the Biennial be a great success nonetheless.” (Flusser 1973a: 1 – author’s translation)

Whether Matarazzo Sobrinho felt pressured by the government or other forces which led him to put Flusser’s work to a halt is uncertain. The melancholy following this misunderstanding is felt in all letters after the debacle. In a letter to his assistant Gabriel Borba, Flusser expresses his discontent as such: “Matarazzo has nominated [Radu] Varia as his “European consultant”, with a salary of USD300 per month, thinking perhaps that he eliminates me this way. Varia accepted under the condition that he travels to São Paulo since my project has been emptied. He is in regular touch with me. From the Biennial I have no news whatsoever, but I so know, from what is published in Brazilian newspapers and the New York Times, that Matarazzo has appropriated my project without mentioning me, and without having understood it fully. *Fim da picada.*” (Flusser 1973b: 1 – author’s translation)

In a letter to René Berger in March 1973, he further makes an attempt to participate in the Biennial, this time as an outside observer and critic, having somehow accepted the fate of his project, but harnessing the contacts he so energetically created in Europe where he intends to stay: “Dear Friend, I hope this letter will reach you on your return to Japan (...). In the meantime my leave at my Faculty [at FAAP] has been postponed to March ’74, and I am engaged in several work here. ([Radu] Varia went to S. Paulo, but from the news I have from Brazil I gather that my initial project was totally disfigured. I still hope to at least constitute a group of theoreticians, composed of yourself, [Abraham] Moles, [Marshall] McLuhan, [Umberto] Appolonio, [Umberto] Eco and myself, to at least analyze the happening critically.” (Flusser 1973c: 1)

In this same letter he also finally “turns the page” from The Biennial process and invites Berger to further collaborations for jointly developing theory in terms of dialogue and discourse, imperative codes, art criticism and ritual gestures (foreboding his work on gestures), and memory and immortality (Flusser 1973c: p.2-4) signalling his de facto arrival in European academic circles. As one last spin on this epistolary journey, Mário Wilches, the general secretary of the XII São Paulo Biennial sends Flusser a personal letter: “Dear Flusser, The battle was tough. But the reformulation [of the Biennial] finally came through, practically along the

lines of your proposal, which codified the suggestions of the Round Table [of September 1971]. (...) I cannot affirm what specific reasons fueled and aggravated the misunderstandings. Maybe jealousy of the relevant position which you, as the direct proponent of the reformulation, acquired in the European cultural scenario. Perhaps even a bit of tactlessness from yourself, very enthusiastic with exciting results, highly explosive, which for me were equally surprising since I did not believe that the idea would be that well received. However, it's probable that if it weren't for the proposal you presented, with the depth of a master and the energy of a young man, the receptivity would have been merely normal, far less intense, and not so encouraging. (...) I didn't want to write before afraid that my opinion would have negative effects, fueling instead of attenuating all the misunderstandings." (Wilches 1973: 1 – author's translation).

In his reply to Wilches, Flusser gets a chance to express his frustration but proposes a final possibility for his continued participation, not as a technical advisor, but as a critic. In this letter he also expresses his disappointment at the relative marginality of the Brazilian more socially oriented participation and the enduring centrality of foreign discourses: "Dear friend Wilches, I am grateful for your letter sent to me through Varia, (...), where I can deduce the current situation of the Biennial. I recognize myself in your description of my role in the restructuring, but I have to admit that the way in which the project has been mentioned in the Brazilian and American press by the Biennial (which doesn't mention my authorship) is not stimulating for any future engagement. But this is not what worries me. My concern is that the project is being disfigured. The idea I submitted to you (and which was approved), was to invite foreigners to form laboratory-teams with Brazilians. Even though nearly all my themes and persons proposed by me were accepted, and even though Varia was taken onboard as per my suggestion, I fear that you are wrong in saying that the reformulation follows my proposal. It seems like we will have foreign discourses directed to Brazilians. It seems like the active contribution by Brazilians has been marginalized. I would appreciate if my fundamental objection is documented and made known to the directors. There is still one hope: a round table of theorists to criticize the event. They are all important names. They can help in revealing the underlying foundation of the event, and by doing so, save it. (Without my presence I don't believe that the real communicological problem can be discussed). But Varia tells me that the management doesn't want to pay for my ticket (...) if this is true, this represents a final limitation (...) but I will still insist. If you can confirm that the Biennial can

send me a ticket [to S. Paulo], I will organize the round table and the themes to be discussed. I am already working with my friends A. Moles in this regard.” (Flusser 1973c: 1 – author’s translation)

To René Berger in a letter from May 1973, Flusser writes a similar version of the events, but expresses not only a personal discontent but also a theoretical discontent: “[Varia] probably told you that I fear my idea concerning the Bienal was only partly accepted, in order to be disfigured. We shall not have true communication, but only discourse. Also the people in S. Paulo would like to get rid of me, possible for reasons they could not tell Varia, and thus did not even pay my bill to take part in the round table [mentioned to Berger in an earlier letter]. I do not know if I would have gone anyway. I understand, neither will you? It is a pity that the whole thing will probably end as always: in favor of the apparatus (...)” (Flusser 1973e: 1)

Later, in August, closer to opening, he confides in Berger again: “The Bienal is becoming a disaster. I read in “O Estado de São Paulo” what is apparently going to happen: No mention of “Communication” to speak of, no mention of the artists invited, nor of the Round Table, no mention of either you or me, no mention of any true innovation. The Establishment has taken over. Are you going?” (Flusser 1973f: 2)

It is unclear whether Flusser attended the XII Biennial de São Paulo. Nonetheless, the event did contain an Art & Communication nucleus occupying one floor of the Biennial pavilion in São Paulo, albeit in a smaller scale and with another orientation. The works presented by a range of Brazilian and international artists nonetheless fulfilled, at least conceptually, the idea of interaction and technology in performative and experiential artworks (Löfgren 2020). Flusser’s name is mentioned discreetly in the Brazilian press announcing the Biennial closer to its opening, but there is almost no mention of him in the exhibition catalogue.

Flusser’s relationship to the Biennial would remain unsettled after he moves permanently to Europe in late 1973. After a series of discontinuous Biennial editions along the 1970s and Matarazzo Sobrinho’s death in 1977, Flusser makes a discrete comeback to the Biennial by inviting Louis Bec to the 1981 *XVI Bienal de São Paulo* and even later that decade where a yet another set of correspondence recounts yet another journey now with a new cast of characters, showing that his closeness to the Brazilian and international art scenes and with the Biennial Foundation in São Paulo never ceased.

Flusser's more practical activity within the realm of art having served briefly as an advisor and curator for the Art & Communication nucleus for the XII 1973 São Paulo Biennial sheds light on his philosophy of communication and in his rather unique mode of translating concepts into practice, in yet another development of his "languages". Flusser's correspondences give us a personal account of this journey, indeed an adventure, which he mourns not as a personal defeat, but as a missed opportunity to challenge conventions in the art world (Spricigo 2013) and to create something truly extraordinary in a cosmopolitan stage. However, were it not for this journey, perhaps Flusser would not have widened his networks abroad to the same extent and would not have met significant lifelong artistic collaborators which ushered him and his philosophical work in making a significant contribution internationally in the decades that followed.

This episode also sheds light on Flusser's personality and on the world, he articulated through and with his proposal in the correspondences which reveal the difficulties and affective labor involved in pushing such an ambitious forward. His way of conceiving his program forebodes Swedish curator Maria Lind's (2009) definition of "the curatorial" wrought almost four decades later, possibly indirectly influenced by his ideas through a rippling effect from the seedlings of Flusser's experimentations as they reverberated in time. She writes, "(...) is there something we could call the curatorial? A way of linking objects, images, processes, people, locations, histories, and discourses in physical space? An endeavor that encourages you to start from the artwork but not stay there, to think with it, but also against it? I believe so, and I imagine this mode of curating to operate more like an active catalyst, generating twists, turns and tensions – owing much to site-specific and context-sensitive practices and even more to various traditions of institutional critique (...) parallels the notion of "the political," an aspect of life that cannot be separated from divergence and dissent, a set of practices that disturbs existing power relations." (Lind 2009: 103)

Else, Flusser's curatorial ideas prophetized a future – where communication, not discourse takes precedence – which has already arrived.



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