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From Science to Fiction.
Considering Vilém Flusser as an Artist

In Flusser's biography as well as in his writings one can easily detect an alienation from a, let us say, traditional and conservative dealing with science in general and the academic world in particular. There is a growing rejection of scientific writing and a growing sympathizing with non-academic essayistic writing. One well known climax of this development is his collaboration with Louis Bec creating the „Vampy“ as they called it – the Vampyroteuthis Infernalis, a work that Abraham Moles called philosophy-fiction. Parallel to this, Flusser's aim is to replace objects in art exhibitions through communicological processes. Now, being an expert in communication, could that mean already that he is thinking of himself as the artist of the future? Last not but least, he is talking about alternative realities that could arise from „zero dimension“, from the endpoint of his media chronological model, with the help of artists and, on the other hand, he writes in several letters that he wants to translate theory into practice – maybe as one of the artists who are creating these new and unexpected realities?

As announced, I will talk about the different, heterogenic readings of Flusser's oeuvre with the aim to consider him as an artist. I will start by introducing a short essay by Flusser with the title „Kunstaussstellungen“ – art exhibitions.¹ Art exhibitions are places, Flusser writes, where objects are located with the intention to be watched by spectators who are passing by. The objects might change their spectators but can't be changed themselves. Once they are exhibited, they cannot be treated any further. The art-works were produced in a hidden place, as Flusser continues, and were brought from a private one into a public space. As artificially created media, they invade the space and dialogue between the artist und and the recipient. Once exhibited, works of art are disconnected from their producers: they speak rather for themselves than for their authors. Plus, they are bad dialogue partners: They speak, but they don't listen. Or at least they can't answer.

By excluding any dialogue, the objects are, on the level of reception, turning into conditions. To conditions of “un-freedom” – as Flusser puts it into concrete terms. But whatever the term „art“ may mean, it can never be „un-freedom“. In opposite to this, „the meaning of this term must be concerned with the disclosure of reality, meaning the dispersal of an intentional or unin-

¹ Vilém Flusser, Kunstaussstellungen, Vilém Flusser Archiv, Nr. 3194, p.

tentional cover-up of reality – in other words: with liberation”. Therefore, art exhibitions are places, at which the nature of art, its essence (*das Wesen*), is somehow turned into the opposite.“ Following this argumentation, Flusser hopes that exhibitions that are containing art-objects are coming to an end and will be replaced by something more liberal and more communicative. „To re-connect life with art “, he explains, „art exhibitions must be replaced by something new. By what? Well, that’s the question the present situation forces us to deal with.”

Flusser probably wrote this essay in 1971, when he was still living in Brazil and when he started to get involved in the conceptual planning of the upcoming 12th biennial of São Paulo. The cause for his curatorial engagement was his participation at a round table that was organized on the 5th of September 1971 during the XI. Biennial of São Paulo. Under the supervision of René Berger, at the time the president of the AICA – the Association Internationale des Critiques d'Art – , the round table was initiated with the purpose to discuss the content-related orientation of future biennials. Not unusual as such, this gathering had a special relevance since the second oldest biennial of the world was confronted with a number of difficulties. Most probably as a response to the political situation in Brazil – since 1964 the country was governed by the military –, the biennial suffered under the boycott of a large number of foreign artists. So, maybe owed to these circumstances, the thematic focus was laid on the relationship between art and communication.

According to his own statement, Flusser had been invited to the round table because of his qualifications as a specialist for communication theory, since it had become apparent at the time that the diagnosed crisis of art was a communicational crisis – as Flusser later said in an interview. As soon as one day after the round table, on the 6th September 1971, Flusser summarized his participation at the discussion in the following way: First of all, all former biennials had a discursive structure, in which art-consumers were limited to the reception of pre-written messages, and secondly, all biennials were undecided, which kind of messages they intended to communicate. Following this personal inventory, he listed three suggestions for improvement: First of all, it should be investigated in which way visitors could be involved in the planning of future biennials. Secondly, it should be decided if the purpose of biennials is to inform or to communicate, and thirdly, a team of social scientist, psychologists and „Kommunikologen“ – people who are specialized in communication theory – should be commissioned with the organization of future biennials.

So basically, Flusser’s aim is to strengthen the dialogue between curators and recipients, as well as the one between artists and recipients. Above all, he wanted the organizational level to become interdisciplinary. To sum this up, Flusser approaches the phenomenon of art-exhibitions from his communicological point of view, and states a fundamental problem concerning the

communication structure of art exhibitions. According to his understanding, the theory of communication is a meta-theory, authorized to speak about any given issue. Therefore, it is not surprising at all that Flusser feels absolutely qualified to engage himself in the conceptual organization of future biennials. In March 1972, he actually was commissioned officially by the head of the foundation of the Biennial of São Paulo to take part in the organization of its 12th issue. Even though there would later occur major disagreements between Flusser and the president of the Foundation, Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho, about the extent of the mandate, Flusser interrupted his activities in São Paulo in June 1972 to boldly embark on a journey to Europe as an official ambassador of the São Paulo biennial, accompanied as always by his wife Edith. A letter that Flusser wrote to the French artist Fred Forest on the 7th of August 1972 tells us more about the purpose of the journey as well as Flussers self-concept: In the letter, he introduces himself as professor for communication theory as well as for aesthetic theory at the University of São Paulo and tells Forest that he was commissioned to re-organize the upcoming biennial of São Paulo on „a communicological basis“. About his assigned task he furthermore writes: „The idea is that it is not the arts themselves, but their communication to the broad public which is in a crisis. We shall therefore try to shift the emphasis from works to group effort, and from exhibition to laboratory, and thus motivate the public to an active reaction.”²

In another letter addressed to Abraham Moles on the same day, he adds: „Like you, I want to translate theory into practice. This is why I have accepted the invitation of the São Paulo Biennial to reorganize it in a communicological way. In short: disalienate senders and receivers, de-sacralise ‘Art’, and abandon the ‘œuvre’ for something useful.”³ So art should be de-sacralised, art objects should be replaced by something useful and exhibition places should be turned into laboratories. Important for us today is especially Flusser’s statement that he wants to translate theory into practice. For someone who said about himself a few years earlier that he was working during the day because of economic burdens and was doing philosophical studies at night, isolated from the world, this really means something. In his self-reflection, Flusser participates not only as a scientist at the planning of the biennial but also as someone practical: Under the premise that the material work of art is replaced by un-material forms of communication, and taking into consideration that Flusser understands himself as the creator of this idea, he himself is not just turning into a part of the evolving creation, but moreover, one can say that he turns into the creator of the developing art work himself. He also writes in these letters that he wants to disalienate senders and receivers. What he means by that, he explains in an essay named „On the

² Vilém Flusser, Letter to Fred Forest (7. August 1972), Vilém Flusser Archiv

³ Vilém Flusser, Letter to Abraham Moles (7. August 1972), Vilém Flusser Archiv

role of Art in the present situation“ in 1972.⁴ Art, Flusser writes, is nowadays recognized and received by only very few people, because most people get their artificially generated experience through the consumption of mass media. The original, pre-modern task of art – to explain, interpret and generate reality – has, in Flussers view, been taken over by modern mass media.

These for the most part “audio-visual media” are produced and coded by a small group of specialists, by „technicians for communication“, whereas senders and channels of communication are owned and administrated by a small elite. The media at hand are structurally complex but functionally simple, which means that they are difficult to understand but easy to use. As this statement points into the center of Flusser’s thoughts about the dealing with technical instruments, it makes sense to quote another one of Flusser’s writings. In the essay „Die lauernde, schwarze Kamerakiste“, Flusser compares a photo camera with the chess game and writes: “Although a camera is based on complex scientific and technical principles, it is very easy to get it to function. A camera is a toy that is structurally complex, but functionally simple. In this sense, a camera is the opposite of a chess game which is structurally simple, but functionally complex. The rules of a chess game are easy to learn, but it is difficult to become a good chess player. But the one who is using a camera can produce perfect photographs without even knowing which complexity the processes have that he is starting by pressing the shutting mechanism.”⁵

These thoughts tie in perfectly with his essay „On the role of Art in the present situation“ from 1972, that he (officially) wrote being an art critic or curator. There are other similarities: For example, Flusser in this essay also advocates the idea that artists should adopt the communication techniques and devices of mass culture in order to “break up” the complexity of the black box apparatus – and this correlates pretty much with what he would later, in the 1980s, refer to by the terms “telematic society” and “techno image”. So, his given role as a media-theorist or critic of the so called new media can be traced back to his dealing with art-theoretical questions. Or, in other words: The appropriation of audio-visual coded mass media as well as the use of them against their purpose was originally meant to help the art to be responsible again for designing our world and our reception of the world.

And there is another analogy: In his meanwhile famous letter to his long-term friend Alex Bloch, dating 16th of December 1977, Flusser mentions that he is working on a book about the history of mankind that is linked to the leading media, which are structuring our being in the world. The media-chronological-model – as I called it – consists of four main phases: A paradisiacal one, in which mankind is completely embedded in its natural environment; One in which

⁴ Vilém Flusser, On the role of art in the present situation. (Notes for a lecture held at “Institut de L’Environnement”, Paris, during a round table on “Art and communications” in December 1972), Vilém Flusser Archiv, Folder Bienal 1, Nr. 7-12)

⁵ Vilém Flusser, Die lauernde, schwarze Kamerakiste, Vilém Flusser Archiv, Nr. 738

objects or cave paintings are used to get an orientation in the world; A phase in which writing becomes an iconoclastic leading media. And the last one, in which we are nowadays – one in which technically produced images are replacing writing as the leading code. In this model, Flusser describes the cultural development of mankind as one of a growing alienation from the world (from the „Umwelt“) which could be experienced by senses and points out that new media were always invented as a strategy to face this situation of being alienated. So, in the last phase, Flusser writes to Bloch, he got stuck. What, he is asking himself – and Bloch – is the difference between the sort of alienation that came along with writing as the leading media and the alienation that will arise in our times with technical images being the leading media? Or, to say it differently: Where is the journey leading to? How can we face the upcoming problems that come along with the powerful influence of techno-images on our thinking and our being in the world?

The answers to these questions are given already: First of all: appropriation of new media and the channels of their communication. And secondly, the capability to decipher technical images which Flusser called “techno-imagination”. But he also mentions another possibility, which is to create alternative realities out of nothing, out of zero dimension. The different steps of his media-chronological-model are one of a growing abstraction, a movement that leads from a concrete experience of the world towards a just theoretical, abstract one. With techno-images the zero point of total abstraction is reached – and out of this zero dimension Flusser thinks that it is possible to create alternative and unexpected realities. Nevertheless Flusser is also thinking about holographic, virtual realities or Cyber-Spaces, and he thinks that artists are in charge to make these new and yet unknown realities happen. Organized in dialogical and non-hierarchic groups, he expects them to bring up new and unexpected information, and in doing that they are responsible to install a counter-program to the expected – since prescribed programs of the apparatuses. The artistic position is exactly the opposite of the position of the apparatus. Following this idea, art is responsible for saving the existence and the essence of human beings in a world that is threatened by electronically programmed devices. Art should save us all!

So, Flusser’s communicological based media-chronological model can easily be connected to his critical and curatorial engagement in art as well as to his media theory, being a critic of the apparatus. But is it also possible to connect these links with his experimental philosophical oeuvre? Now, what is Flusser’s art about? Let us go back to 1972 one more time, to answer this question. In the already quoted letters to the artist Fred Forest and the philosopher Abraham Moles, Flusser writes that he wants to translate theory into practice. First of all, this plan can concretely be put into relation to his curatorial engagement for the 12th Biennial of São Paulo. But secondly and moreover, even after his curatorial failure at the biennial, Flusser started intensively to cooperate with different artists. For example, he started to work on several projects with

the video-artist Fred Forest in the 1970s and – even as late as in 1991 – he started a project with the Hungarian filmmaker Gusztáv Hámós. More interesting for our subject though is the well-known work that Flusser realized in the early eighties with the French artist Louis Bec: *The Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*. Back then, the self-made Zoo-systematist Louis Bec was busy – actually he still is – with creating new species of animals, and doing so, he brought hundreds of species to life. One of them, as we all know, is the deep sea octopus *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*. In the special case of his text about the „Vampy“ – as the two friends called him – Flusser describes the world from the perspective of an animal that lives in the deep sea, in a totally different surrounding than the one we are living in.

So, Flusser sets himself into the position of a completely different, fictional living being, to get an unknown and therefore innovative view onto reality and our being in it. In a review of the book, Abraham Moles denoted the book as philosophy-fiction, writing „the latest publication of Flusser proposes an access to the relationship between philosophy and life that pushes the art of stepping back to the limit – which is fundamental for the phenomenological attitude. The phenomenological approach considers the creative intention, to grasp a phenomenon from his essential being; to observe it without distorting it. If there is a constant in phenomenological thinking, it would be the correlation to the strange. It is the intention to capture the remarkable. Only later follows the scientific phase, in which the realm of the strange hardens into atoms and codes.“ Following this, Abraham Moles understands the phenomenological exercise of philosophy fiction as a critique on the academic shaped scientific system: At first, there is a free, associative invasion in unknown areas, followed later by a scientific phase of concretization. In fact, this is not what usually happens in the work of scientists. Actually, all scientific findings must be connected to knowledge that already exists. The well-known picture for this is the tree of knowledge that Ramon Llull and others have used. In this picture, all knowledge goes back to already existing knowledge, and even worse: all knowledge has evolved from already existing knowledge. Now assuming, that the dignity of mankind consists in the ability to give birth to unexpected and innovative information – and that is what Flusser deeply believed in – how can a scientific system be adequate to that, if everything is depending on something already existing? Strictly speaking, in such a system it is just not possible to create something really surprising and innovative. Now, that is the reason why Flusser, who more and more got annoyed by the scientific system, was experimenting with alternative ways of thinking and was looking for an independent manner of philosophizing.

With the *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis* as well as in other texts Flusser is managing this by permanently questioning his own point of view, and by changing his perspectives as often as possible. Methodically, this can be seen as a further development of Edmund Husserl's phenomeno-

logical philosophy, but it can also be traced back to the Pilpul – a special method of commenting the Talmud – in which certain phrases are permanently re-interpreted to the extent that new comments are also commenting older ones – and not only the phrase that was discussed in the first place. The purpose of the method of the Pilpul is not to come to a final conclusion – to an ultimate truth – but to keep the process of thinking and discussing open in a permanent dialogue. So the aim is to question one's own point of view as well as the opinions of others without pre-judgements as an infinite process of re-thinking. In Flusser's adaption of the Pilpul as an experimental and playful method, the philosophy-fiction offers the opportunity to break out of already existing structures of thinking as well as out of pre-arranged constructions of reality: As the human brain is often titled as „Denkapparat“, as a thinking apparatus, Flusser's art can be found in the way that he doesn't consider his „brain apparatus“ as being programmed but as an undetermined structure in which almost everything is thinkable. So, in that sense, this is a consequent application of his thoughts about the apparatus on his own thinking-apparatus – his brain.⁶

Furthermore, his philosophy-fictional approach is also an artistic one: By articulating the changes of his point of views and by expressing his innovative movements in thinking, he does not only change the reception of the world but he also creates different and innovative realities. Comparable to his ideas about new forms of art exhibitions that I have talked about in the beginning of my short lecture, these changes in the reception of reality are not initiated by objects, but their nature is completely idealistic: they are abstract and not concrete, they are „ungegenständlich“. Having these qualities especially, they are an artistic expression par excellence: They do not only change reality but also the reception of reality, and they do this without becoming determining conditions.

Flusser's philosophy-fiction is an innovative creation and a dialogical offer – art and communication are merging.

⁶ Vilém Flusser, Pilpul, in: *Kulturrevolution*, Nr. 23, 1990, S. 43-46.