

Introduction

Volume 08 of *Flusser Studies* focuses upon “Flusser and Art” and contributes to the examination of the invisible dimensions of contemporary art and the historiographic challenges they raise. There is much in relation to the visual arts that is non-visual, and Flusser’s image theory is particularly relevant, precisely because of its iconoclastic perspective.¹ In contrast to the common notion that our times are primarily visual, a few visual studies scholars have argued just the opposite, that the invisible but pervasive reach of information technology is not only a meaningful aspect of our culture – the way banks, governments and corporations know about our identity, consumer patterns, and preferences, as well as financial status – it is changing the way art is being made and consumed, as well as documented, archived and historicized.

The essays in this volume throw fresh light upon Flusser’s multiple dialogues with artists and writers, and particularly, on his collaboration with the French media artist Fred Forest in the early 1970s. Nevertheless, there is still new research to be done in relation to Flusser, art and design. Among investigations in progress is Anke Finger’s examination of Flusser’s *artforum* column titled “Curie’s Children” published from 1986 to 1991, a total of twenty articles, as well as new research on Flusser’s dialogue with Walter Zanini and Flusser’s curatorial contribution to the *Art and Communication* segment of the XII São Paulo Bienal, 1973. Besides the young media artists who personally worked with Flusser in Brazil and in Europe in the 1980s, such as Mario Ramiro, there are many more, for whom Flusser’s understanding of media as *dispositivo*² evolved into radical experimental approaches to art making, seeing, displaying and designing/visualizing, such as Eduardo Kac in relation to bio art and other artists who are deconstructing the “black box” in relation to cinema, for

¹ Rainer Guldin, “Iconoclasm and Beyond: Vilém Flusser’s Concept of Techno-Imagination,” *Journal of the Swiss Association of Communication and Media Research*, Vol. 7, N. 2, 2007, pp. 63-83, argued that Flusser’s notion of techno-imagination circumvents the Western philosophical iconoclastic bias, as well as Flusser’s own.

² The term *dispositivo* is commonly translated into English as “apparatus” or “device,” which focuses on a more technical dimension. But the Portuguese *dispositivo*, like the French *dispositif*, carries the original meaning of the Latin *dispositio*, which in classical rhetoric was a system used for the organization of arguments in the sense of arrangement. Among Brazilian new media artists who are theorizing and producing artworks with the concept of the *dispositivo* and taking both Flusser’s and Hélio Oiticica’s legacy forward by deconstruction image projection and recording devices are: André Parente, Katia Maciel, Frederico Dalton, Rosângela Rennó, Milton Marques, and Giselle Beiguelman.

instance, and other moving images recording and projective devices, as well as architectural and narrative forms.

Flusser's books focusing particularly upon art, images, design and gestures are *Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie* (1983) [Towards a philosophy of photography] translated into about fourteen languages, *Ins Universum der Technischen Bilder* (1985) [Into the universe of technical images], his book on design *The Shape of Things to Come* (1999), as well as *Gesten* [Gestures] (1991) – these last two were both published in three languages. Philosophizing as an artist and a postmodernist *avant la lettre*, Flusser examined science as fiction with Louis Bec in *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis* (1987). He privileged poetry in the creation of reality in *Língua e Realidade* (1963) [Language and reality], and he created a provocative examination of time, history, religion, science and much more in his original interpretation of the seven deadly sins in *A História do Diabo* (1965) [History of the Devil]. In addition to this, there are many passages relevant to art in other books in which he directly dialogues with artists and writers, such as in *Bodenlos* (1992) [Without foundation], and in *Da Religiosidade* (1967) [Of religiosity], besides books that are especially dear to Brazilian artists such as *Natural:mente* (1979) [Naturally].³

Flusser's most famous book, *Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie*, 1983, not only celebrated the concretizing gesture of technical images but also the relational, inter-subjective potential of communication technologies, which, as I have argued elsewhere, is not simply a product of cybernetics and interactive communication media but is also part of the non-technological, conceptual developments of contemporary art.⁴ In addition, his concept of techno-imagination urged a new form of image criticism beyond traditional methodologies, which, according to him, consisted in explaining the relationship between pictures and the objects they represented by translating connotative elements into denotative meanings. For Flusser, these explanations were not radical enough because they were based upon mimetic operations, therefore a reductive process (from four to two dimensions), and dependent upon the linear logic of writing. He then argued that a second-degree criticism was needed as a critique of traditional image criticism itself. "This new form of criticism implied a radically new form of

³ Please refer to <http://www.flusserstudies.net/pag/bibliography.htm>

⁴ Simone Osthoff, "Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica: a Legacy of Interactivity and Participation for a Telematic Future," *Leonardo*, Vol. 30, No. 4. (1997): 279-289. This essay argues that the artistic legacies of Brazilian artists Lygia Clark (1920-1988) and Hélio Oiticica (1937-1980) developed from their participatory creations of the 1960s and 1970s although based on interactive and non-electronic works share a common conceptual ground with the works of artists exploring interactivity in telematic media in the 1990s.

imagination, diametrically opposed to the old one, and a new use of imagery, ensuing from a calculating, computational gesture.”⁵ For Flusser the gesture of technical images, based upon the zero dimension of calculations and numerical operations, was concrete, recombinant, and generative.

The current crisis of criticism seems to confirm Flusser’s intuition that the traditional methodologies of art history, theory and criticism – formal analysis, iconography, biography and autobiography, psychology, historical context, and a sociological examination of precedents, influences, patronage, stylistic development and so on – largely based upon mimetic representation and chronology, were incapable of addressing technical images and multimedia art practices, especially those involving science and technology as medium.⁶

We found it appropriate, then, to begin this volume with the reproduction of Flusser’s manuscript “The Gesture of Writing” in two versions – English and French. In this essay, Flusser approached writing, first as a gesture related to drawing – an act of engraving, a gesture of scratching a surface, “a penetrating gesture that informs a surface” – then as the structure of linear thought and of historical time. He further observed that alphabetic writing structures multiple languages as different programs with similar but different functions. These differences among languages were central to his philosophizing in translation: “I am convinced that the problem of translation is the central epistemological problem.” Finally, this essay examines the gesture of writing as a form of communication and knowledge, imbedded in the social fabric: “to write is to have been programmed by others, and cannot be a solitary action, but is always ‘social.’” He concluded by pointing out that “to write is structurally the gesture of a historical and scientific being-in-the-world. Should this gesture fall into disuse, [...] the universe of history and science will fall into oblivion, or at least it will cease to be the universe we live in.”

Flusser’s careful and insightful examination of the gesture of writing is analogous to his examination of photography in *Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie*, 1983. He approached both gestures – writing and photography – as *dispositivos*. For him, photographic images, like writing,

⁵ Vilém Flusser quoted by Rainer Guldin, “Iconoclasm and Beyond: Vilém Flusser Concept of Techno-Imagination,” p. 79.

⁶ Among other critics who called attention to a crisis of criticism are: Rosalind Krauss, Benjamin Buchloh, George Baker, Andrea Fraser, David Joselit, Robert Storr, Hal Foster, John Miller, James Meyer, and Helen Molesworth, “Roundtable: The Present Conditions of Art Criticism,” *October* 100 (Spring 2002): 200–28; James Elkins, *What Happened to Art Criticism* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003); Raphael Rubinstein, “A Quiet Crisis,” *Art in America*, March 2003, 39–45; Nancy Princenthal, “Art Criticism, Bound to Fail,” *Art in America*, January 2006, 43–47.

enable different forms of recording, seeing and thinking, in sum, modes of knowing and being. Consequently, each gesture structured a different historical era, each accompanied by an existential revolution.

In the essay “De Flusser a Benjamin – do pós-aurático às imagens técnicas,” [From Flusser to Benjamin – from the post-auratic to the techno-images] Márcio Seligmann examined the conceptual, existential, and “gestural” affinities between these two philosophers who theorized technical images in terms of art, culture, and history, but especially in relation to the future. Despite differences, their philosophies of photography were both based upon a long-reaching cultural perspective that included a comparison with the invention of writing, which structured and defined history. For both, the loss of the aura of the work of art — no longer defined in terms of authenticity and self-identity, but pure reproduction — was examined with a hopeful perspective, and also a sense of loss. This loss of authenticity in the face of endless reproduction had serious consequences to history and memory, such as the impossibility of historical testimony. While acknowledging the differences among them, Seligmann focuses upon affinities further listing, as such, Benjamin’s and Flusser’s concern for historiography, languages and translation, as well as a common Jewish identity which the tragedy of the Holocaust both connected and separated.

Gabriela Reinaldo’s “O retrato de Rosa em *Bodenlos*” [Rosas’ portrait in *Bodenlos*] explores questions posed by the impossibility of asserting fiction and non-fiction in biography and autobiography. Nietzsche believed that everything one writes is autobiographical. The late Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe was convinced of just the opposite – that nothing one writes is autobiographical. Oscar Wilde stated that criticism is the most sincere form of autobiography. Flusser, who did not believe that there is a hard core within each of us, observed: “we are but knots within a universal network of information flux that receive, process and transmit information.”⁷ Therefore, it is not surprising that he chose to write his autobiography without foundations by approaching identity through various encounters with others. Reinaldo analyzes the particular portrait Flusser made in *Bodenlos* of the great Brazilian writer Guimarães Rosa, one of eleven friends who, according to Flusser, shaped his intellect (nine men and two women, of which seven were born in Brazil and four were immigrants like him). In these rich dialogues, Flusser frequently questioned the “aura” of authorship – the supposedly special subjectivity of the artist endowed with inspiration, talent, and a

⁷ Vilém Flusser, “On Memory (*Electronic or Otherwise*)”, *Leonardo*, Vol. 23, No. 4, (1990): 399.

transcendent sensibility. A certain tension between the philosopher and artists/authors accompanied his conversations with Rosa. And it further appeared in *Bodenlos* in Flusser's difficult dialogue with Swiss-born, São Paulo-based artist Mira Schendel.

Contributing fresh insights into another important dialogue — the collaboration between Flusser and Fred Forest in the early 1970s — is the interview of Fred Forest by Annick Bureau. In it, the mutual admiration between the artist and the theorist comes to life. Forest describes how he shared methods of making and thinking with Flusser, while they explored video in real time as a new technological apparatus with epistemological potential and limitations. Forest also remarks on their competitive discussions, as the artist fought to protect “his” creations and Flusser found that Forest's ego was too present in the work, and that “the artist” frequently got in the way of taking the work to the extent it could go.

Priscila Arantes, in “Media, Gestures and Society: dialogues between Vilém Flusser and Fred Forest,” complements Bureau's interview by analyzing in their collaboration similar methodologies, intuitions, and critical reflections. Arantes connects Flusser's writing on gesture to Forest's experimentation with video, by emphasizing their phenomenological approach to theory and practice in terms of their potential for freedom and social transformation. She further extends the Flusser-Forest creative dialogue into their participation in the 1973 International São Paulo Bienal, in which Flusser served as curator, organizing the segment *Art and Communication*, and Forest, invited by him, produced a number of public actions and media interventions.

Examples of invisible aspects of media arts were explored by Forest's works with the mass media and video. Another example is the work of São Paulo multimedia artist Mario Ramiro whose photographs further illustrate his dialogue with Flusser. Ramiro searches for forms and forces that are visually imperceptible and yet perform an important role in the structure of the visible world. In the 1980s, he explored heat and magnetism as a medium for sculptures.⁸ His German series of “Schlieren photographs” (which can be translated approximately as “image of heterogeneous substances”) were a result of his desire to capture invisible phenomena occurring in the atmosphere around warm(ed) bodies, revealing the ephemeral existence of bodies and their inevitable tendency to be transformed into pure

⁸ Please see Mario Ramiro, “Between Form and Force: Connecting Architectonic, Telematic, and Thermal Spaces,” *Leonardo* Vol. 31, No. 4 (1998). Also on the web: <http://leonardo.info/isast/spec.projects/ramiro/ramiro.html>

energy. According to the artist, because we are warm-blooded creatures, our presence in space produces air turbulences that are defined by Schlieren photography as sinuous lines, similar to a warm aura. Ramiro's statement about the importance of Flusser in his career is an example of Flusser's rapport with young new media artists during the last two decades of the philosopher's life.

Eduardo Kac's visionary oeuvre shares with Vilém Flusser an exploration of language and communication without regard for disciplinary boundaries. For both, there is continuity between apparently discontinuous subjects such as art, science and religion, or design, philosophy and poetry. "Invisible in Plain Sight, and as Alive as You and I," my interview with Eduardo Kac, highlights his radical hybrid creations that seamlessly combine, for instance, language, light, and life. The invisible dimensions of bio-technology to the eye, the creation of living beings as artworks, like other provocative performances by the artist such as the ones involving telepresence, challenge viewers and critics to redefine what art can be, both in terms of the future and of the past, by enlisting unexpected precedents and unlike predecessors.

In this regard, Todd Meyers' review of *Signs of Life: Bio Art and Beyond*, edited by Eduardo Kac, expands the artist's contribution as an editor and historian while further drawing attention to the intersections between art, science, and technology in relation to the "natural" world as well as the history of art. *Signs of Life* probes questions of Biotech Culture, Bioethics, Bio Art, and Biology and Art History, including a chapter by Flusser – "On Science" – first published in *artforum* in the 1980s.

Increasingly visionary in his embrace of science and technology is one of Flusser's essays from 1990 – "Memory (Electronic and Otherwise)" – published in *Leonardo*. It examined the existential revolution resulting from the coupling of electronic memory and robots. Flusser approaches memory beyond simply information storage, as the anti-entropic commitment existing throughout nature that defies nature's "stream towards entropy." According to the essay, all memory is subject to errors in transmission, both genetic and cultural memory – including oral culture, literate culture (with libraries as Western culture's prosthetic memory), and electronic memory. And Flusser concluded the essay affirming: "the most pernicious ideology was the one that led us to believe that we have (or are) something opposed to

nature.”⁹ Given that for him we have no other essence beyond that of being imbedded within a relational network, he suggests we embrace electronic memory as an extension of our beings.

In this regard, the Flusser archive itself is instructive.¹⁰ Given Flusser’s practice of translating his own essays while constantly adding new meanings suggested by the language into which he transposed his thoughts, his archive is organized according to the four languages he wrote in — German, Portuguese, English and French — as well as according to a list of key terms that helps the location of conceptually related essays within his inter-textual web. The topological nature of his archive challenges researchers to understand its nodal structure and connect the multiple points of Flusser’s thought and life — which almost form a dynamic artistic project by itself. Flusser’s recombinant and generative approach to memory, archives, images and post history, rather than the linear sequence of cause and effect of classical history, exposed the fantasies, fiction and contradictions inherent in the Modern tradition of scientific reasoning.

The dynamic intersections of media arts, theory and history are gradually demanding an engagement with history “in real time.” More and more history and criticism are participants in art’s complex relays, no longer subscribing to the separation between creative and critical practices, making and thinking, as the collaboration of Flusser and Forest attested. Clearly this suggests a generative history in flux and mutation, to be developed creatively and dialogically. For this reason, before smoothing over contemporary art’s violent and iconoclastic dimensions, before sanitizing and making complex artworks docile in terms of archival possibilities, as Flusser suggested, we need to first abandon our fantasy of mastery over representation and respond in kind to ephemeral performances, invisible dimensions and to “living” archives.

Practices that contribute to erode the archive’s former boundaries, stability, function, and meaning – as the ones created by Fred Forest, Eduardo Kac, and Vilém Flusser, along with other important archive deconstructions, such as Jacques Derrida’s *Archive Fever* – help us recognize the need for more contingent and dynamic histories in flux, often unsystematic, generative, open to mutation and mutilation, and yet attuned to the rhythms and dimensions

⁹ Vilém Flusser, “On Memory (*Electronic or Otherwise*)”, *Leonardo*, Vol. 23, No. 4, (1990): 397-300.

¹⁰ First housed at the Academy of Media Arts in Cologne, Germany, it has been located since 2007 at the Universität der Künste in Berlin, Germany. The archive contains Flusser’s traveling library, copies of most of his publications and manuscripts, as well as correspondence, video and audiotapes, photographs and a few objects, including Flusser’s computer.

of our collective memory, always and already mediated by languages and wired by all sorts of technologies.

“If we abandon the idea of possessing some identifiable hard core, and if we assume we are imbedded within a relational network, then the classical distinction between ‘objective knowledge’ and ‘subjective experience’ will become meaningless. If intersubjectivity becomes the fundamental category of thinking and action, then science will be seen as a kind of art (as an intersubjective fiction), and art will be seen as a kind of science (as an intersubjective source of knowledge).”¹¹

From the post-auratic and the techno-images (Seligmann), to the creative dialogues that also question the aura of the artist (Reinaldo, Bureau, Arantes), the photographic record of the aura of bodies (Ramiro), and the creation of hybrid new beings (Kac), the artists, writers and editors contributing to this volume expand Flusser’s intuition that science, as a form of fiction, can be seen as an art practice, and that art making, as a form of theorizing, can be seen as a kind of science.

Simone Osthoff, Rio de Janeiro, May 2009

¹¹ Flusser, “On Memory (Electronic or Otherwise),” p. 399.