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Exhibiting the Archive

Bodenlos – Vilém Flusser und die Künste /

Without Firm Ground – Vilém Flusser and the Arts

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Nothing that relates to Vilém Flusser is ever simple or straightforward. So, it is hardly surprising to find an overload of complexity in an exhibition that attempts to come to grips with his relationship to ‘the arts’, that most slippery and protean of contemporary tropes. The question driving the ambitions of the curators – Siegfried Zielinski and Baruch Gottlieb (in cooperation with co-curator Peter Weibel) – seems to have been, how much Flusser can we squeeze into a medium-sized gallery space? Depending on the visitor’s openness to multiple viewpoints, the answer is either ‘a lot’ or ‘too much’. The curators did not make things any easier for themselves by breaking down the mythic media thinker into any one of his multiple facets. To approach the topic via his writings on art and the artists in whom he took critical interest would have been an entirely appropriate way to proceed. To scrutinize his impact on subsequent developments in art and media, after his death in 1991, would have been challenging. To consider Flusser’s own explorations of the borders between philosophical speculation on language and early experiments in digital art would have been thought provoking. To attempt to do all of these, at once, without any subdivision or hierarchy, while adding to the mix a generous helping of archival material, plus more than a passing nod to the role of exile in shaping the contemporary intellectual landscape, is the course upon which the curators finally settled. A reverse 4½ somersaults with pike from a three-meter diving board. The degree of difficulty makes it all the harder to judge the imperfect results.

The curators’ own appraisal of their efforts is more modest, as can be gleaned from the introductory text accompanying the exhibition:

Always journeying, out of place, not belonging to any academic discipline, and out of time in a twofold sense, the exhibition invites the visitor to embark on a minimal parcours that tracks the

fleeting and fleeing life of Vilém Flusser as a model of the violent context that we call the twentieth century.

Minimal parcours, indeed. Were the visitor to attempt to watch all the videos and read all the texts contained in the exhibition, the least amount of time required would exceed the number of hours (eight) the gallery is open on a given day. A Flusserian conundrum, to be sure, and one the infernal provocateur himself would likely find entertaining. The absence of further explanatory texts, apart from the introductory and biographical ones, adds another layer of paradox to the riddle. Is it reasonable to demand even more text from an exhibition awash in ring binders stuffed with letters and papers, vitrines filled with books and typescripts, quotations and writing occupying every available bit of wall space? Possibly not; but two or three judiciously sized curatorial blurbs, expounding the central strands, would have made it easier to discern the exhibition's intentions and meanings. Signposts, as it were, amidst a jumble of signs. Something that Flusser's open-ended oeuvre requires, especially for the viewer/reader coming to him for the first time.

The first dilemma that poses itself to the visitor is which way to turn. Conventional exhibition logic would suggest beginning with the small biographical section, comprised of historical photos and mementos. These include young Vilém's Hebrew prayer book, one of the few possessions carried out of his native Prague into exile, movingly inscribed after his death with a note from his widow Edith to their children, as well as a selection of books once belonging to the great man. Convention, however, is flouted by the fact that the biographical section stands directly behind the viewer as s/he gazes upon the panel bearing the introductory text. The visitor may well be tempted to move in the opposite direction, where the larger than life image of Flusser giving an interview is projected onto a wall, catty-corner to the visually intriguing installation of Dietmar Kamper's *ARCA-Black Box-la chose* (2000). The predicament of what to look at first and which way to proceed is one that repeats itself throughout the exhibition. Perhaps this disruption of design is intentional – a kinesthetic demonstration of the principle of *Bodenlosigkeit* that underpins the show.

It is notoriously difficult to circumscribe Flusser, and words such as 'multifaceted', 'heterogeneous' or 'elusive' almost inevitably creep into discussions of his work to disguise the perplexity he inspires even in admirers. To their credit, the curators make no attempt to reduce him to a simplified label or palatable version of himself. Rather, the exhibition takes the opposite tack and addresses head on the willful complexity of his oeuvre. Major themes are distributed in pervasive mode, running through successive works without explicit connections forged between them. Objects recur in various guises, often referencing texts well known to readers of Flusser but rarely indicated. The typewriter, for one, makes at least three appearances: once in the shape of Flusser's own AEG Olympia Dactymetal Senior, another time in the form of Peter Weibel's work

Electrical Typewriter (1971) and a third time as the installation piece *Egomachine* (1974), by Nam June Paik. The latter is accompanied by a label bearing Flusser's assessment of the artist: "This Nam June Paik is to philosophy what I am to judo".

This humorous, if uncharacteristically frivolous, appraisal evinces one of the major themes of the exhibition: Flusser's direct engagement with the production of visual artists. Though not usually remembered as an art critic, Flusser authored a considerable number of exhibition reviews in newspapers, as well as essays in exhibition catalogues. Many of his favourite artists are represented here, particularly those with whom he maintained personal relationships in Brazil during the 1960s and 1970s, such as Niobe Xandó, Samson Flexor and Mira Schendel. An untitled series of five monotypes by the latter, belonging to the collection of the Neues Museum, Nuremberg, is one of the high points of the exhibition. Joan Fontcuberta's *Herbarium* (1984), presented alongside an introduction to the work by Flusser, is fitting tribute to his continued engagement with visual art even after achieving fame as a media thinker.

The selection of more recent artworks chosen for their presumed dialogue with Flusser's ideas is slightly erratic. Some are literal and almost programmatic in their relationship to the exhibition – such as Andreas Henrich's three graphic exercises *VF-Trajektorien* (2015) or Cyriak Harris's *Chimpnology* (2014), dubiously deployed to illustrate Flusser's prediction (in the 1991 lecture, "Hypertext") that "a million chimps will necessarily type by chance all past and future texts on typewriters and produce such hypertexts". Others – including some of the most powerful works in the exhibition, like Matthias Müller's *Vacancy* (1998) or Alex Flemming's *Flying Carpet* (2005) – seem more than a little lost in the miscellany of past and present, art and non-art, documentation and display. In the case of Müller's video, as with other works involving sound, the mishmash of ambient noises and soundtracks bleeding together into an acoustic muddle seriously detracts from appreciation of the artist's conception.

The confusing soundscape is not the only flaw in the exhibition's design. Problematic lighting – too dark in places, too bright in others – generates conditions that are far from ideal for viewing many of the works on display, particularly some of the videos. Rustic exhibition panels of untreated plywood divide the gallery space into compartments that often do not allow sufficient distance for viewing works on the wall while, at the same time, enclosing larger areas in which a potpourri of objects compete for attention, more screaming over each other's voices than initiating any sort of dialogue. Despite the considerable collective experience of the curators, the adaptation of the exhibition to the gallery space of the Akademie der Künste gives the impression of having taken place in a hurry, perhaps as an afterthought to the prior staging of the show at ZKM Karlsruhe, where the exhibition was shown between August and October 2015.

Then again, the clutter and chaos may be intentional. There is a conscious attempt to enact the proverbial disorder of the polymath's mindscape. *Flusser Hypertext* – a stage-set piece consisting of a table bearing an old MacIntosh computer, diskettes and a ring binder containing papers that explain a 1990s project on e-publishing conducted at the *Kernforschungsinstitut* in Karlsruhe – is halfway between museum display and science fair exhibit. Its ambition to transform process and research into something that can be apprehended as diorama borders on the disingenuous, particularly in light of the crucial distinction between object, image and surface in Flusser's thinking. Of course, Flusser himself was certainly not averse to hamming it up for an audience. The performative aspect of his persona, visible in many of the documentary videos and photographs included in the exhibition, was ready and willing to collapse meaning into appearance. It is entirely possible that the cheesy pseudo-scientific look of some of the artworks on display is a knowing instance of irony, in the late great postmodernist tradition of the 1970s and 1980s. Nowhere is this more the case than in the productions of Louis Bec for his *Institut Scientifique de Recherche Paranaturaliste*. A word of explanation from the curators would have helped dispel the lingering suspicion that the work is little more than an elaborate joke shared by Flusser and Bec and played out on a gullible public.

At no point in the exhibition is the staged display of turmoil brought into sharper relief than in relation to Lisa Schmitz's three large photographs of the Flusser Archive taken during its period of permanence in Cologne. */TMP/In-pressis-verbis/Flusser* (2000) depicts the quiet and order of the archive, which contrasts so strikingly with the bluster and noise with which the media circus of the 1980s surrounded Flusser's launch into fifteen minutes of stardom. For anyone familiar with the depth and duration of archival time, these pictures are the real deal – no mere strategy of enactment or display, but sensitive depictions of the space of memory embedded into place and ritual. The prominence given to them suggests that the curators are aware that the time has come for Flusser to find his true level within the intellectual tradition of the twentieth century. With the increasing importance of exile, migration and nomadism as phenomena of our age, there is no longer any need to clothe Flusser in the trappings of maverick philosopher or media iconoclast. As stability gives way to emergency and coherence to chaos, his theoretical fragilities are fast transforming into existential strengths. The prophet of groundlessness has found a place to settle; and his baggage now demands to be unpacked rather than scattered about.