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Flusser as an art critic

On Marcel Marburger's Flusser und die Kunst.

Edition _ I/f/u/S, Köln 2011, ISBN 978-3-9814246-0-7, 214 S. 23 €

Vilém Flusser was not a professional art critic. He basically pursued his own theoretical interests within the field of the arts. One can deduce this already from the single case studies, but now for the first time a survey of Flussers writings in the field of the arts has been published, which is based on the whole corpus of his personal archive stored at the University of Arts in Berlin.

Marcel Marburger discovered many ignored documents and shows the way to them. The number of art-relevant texts is relatively small: Marburger lists about 70 out of 2400 documents, most of them written or published after 1983, the year the German version *For a Philosophy of Photography* was first published. Out of the 70 texts chosen as a corpus only 13 are about individual artists, works or exhibitions, and what is more, they are seen exclusively from a communological point of view. For this reason, Marburger adapted the structure of his analysis, explaining and discussing extensively Flusser's communication theory and media theory. Central terms are technical images, techno-imagination, dialogue and creativity. Marburger highlights the fact that Flusser did not move towards the art discourse in general but profited from a new tendency in the arts to include media. Marburger's account gives the impression that Flusser did not take any notice of the field of the performing arts, music, dance, theatre and their infinite combinations – not to speak of the literature of the 70ies and 80ies.

While still living in São Paulo, Flusser definitely had shown more empathy towards the artistic endeavors of the artists he met with, such as Mira Schendel, Samson Flexor or the poets Haroldo de Campos, João Guimarães Rosa or Dora Ferreira da Silva who play an important role in his autobiography *Bodenlos*. Marburger is convinced – as well as Ricardo Mendez in „Das Dritte Ufer“ – that Flusser's interest in art theory started with his activities in the process of organizing the 1973 Art Biennale of São Paulo. Flusser refused ninety percent of the local candidates. He chose the works of the artist he wanted to include only for their relevance with respect to his own artistic conception. In this sense, he was a precursor of today's dictatorial art event curators. The lucid chapter „Chronologie eines kuratorischen Scheiterns“ (Chronicle of a failed Curatorship) has been published separately in the thirteenth issue of *Flusser studies* – also in a Spanish

translation.¹

From the 80ies on there was little chance for artwork to fit into Flusser's theoretical framework, which allowed only two ways of expression: to push the apparatus beyond its program or to make a tricky step aside, producing not only experimental photography or video but also paintings or the like, but he abandoned the idea, since those silent pictures have not the potential to shake the supremacy of mass-media. Anyway, he was prejudiced against the photographic and cinematic art, as Marburger points out.

Marburger's main aim is to gain more attention and recognition for Flusser and his work from the point of view of academic aesthetics. One obstacle, however, could be Flusser's ignorance of the current methods of professional analysis within the theory of aesthetics. Marburger calls for an open-minded approach and offers the outlines of a phenomenological art criticism based on some of Flusser's ideas. At the same time he is very much concerned with a possible fusion of Flusser's fragmentary art related theories into a coherent unity. In this connection comes to my mind a short sentence Flusser wrote in a letter to Theon Spanudis in 1977: General theories are no longer readable. They suck. The traces of Flusser's deeply anarchic and provocative – his diabolical – style of writing still show in his more scientific texts, and is strikingly evident in Marburger's academic paper.

Marburger reminds the reader of Flusser's warning: The go-between, the mediator tends to hide the original. This is also true for the academic interpreter, who ultimately positions himself between the work and its public. I have no doubt that Flusser's essayistic thinking and writing style is deeply affected when forced into a synthetic theoretical statement. His energies freeze up: His experimental style aiming for provocative suggestions, his rhetoric brilliance and self-irony tend to disappear. Impulses for vital and passionate discussion change into conventional doctrine-building. Flusser was an artist – as Marburger himself stresses in the end – and a philosopher. He was a man of the first half of the twentieth century who accompanied with passionate enthusiasm and fear the first steps of the digital revolution. Why trim him down into scholarly shape? Theory based on firsthand experience can evolve in our minds more or less spontaneously while reading his writings and discussing them. Their concise and trenchant expression meets well with my own reading habits. The next time I pay a visit to the Archives in Berlin, I will try to be more aware of the stylistic qualities of each text, of each word he uses.

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¹ <http://www.flusserstudies.net/pag/13/marburger-cronologia-de-fracaso-curatorial.pdf> See also:
<http://www.flusserstudies.net/pag/13/abstract-marburger.pdf>