

Vilém Flusser
*Vampyroteuthis infernalis: His Art*¹

Both, *Vampyroteuthis* and humans acquire information in order to relay it to others. Many of the so-called higher animals do this. In many mammals and birds, specific behavioral models – for example, hunting or flight – are transmitted from the mother to the young. Yet in the case of humans, and by analogy *Vampyroteuthis*, it is different. It is actually a matter of storing the acquired information in memories, continually nourishing these memories with new information and relaying it thus enriched. In humans and *Vampyroteuthis* the transmission of information is a cumulative process; they are historical animals, so to speak – animals that have overcome their animal nature.

Animal nature means transmitting inherited information by means of gametes from generation to generation, whereby the inherited genotype can change accidentally through errors in transmission, creating new information. Super-animal nature means transmitting acquired information by means of conventional codes, deliberately changing this information again and again and changing the code itself. This is super-animal nature because on top of genetic evolution is laid a historical one, in which intention (a nebulous concept) has replaced accident.

The central problem in this is memory. Animals store their acquired information in gametes. These are practically eternal memories – they last as long as life on earth. Humans, on the other hand, utilize artificial memories to transmit acquired information – books, buildings and pictures, for example. They are far less durable than eggs or sperm. Humans are therefore in search of more permanent memories: *aere perennius* (more permanent than bronze). They know that when all artificial memories – all human creation – has long decayed into entropic debris and rubble, human gametes will continue to pass on their information, perhaps altered by chance. Animal nature is more permanent than super-animal nature and humans cannot accept that. For not as animal, but rather as su-

¹ Excerpt from *Vampyroteuthis infernalis: A treatise along with a report from the Institut Scientifique de Recherche Paranaturaliste* (from the German version, “Seine Kunst,” in: *Vampyroteuthis infernalis: Eine Abhandlung samt Befund des Institut Scientifique de Recherche Paranaturaliste*, hg. von Andreas Müller-Pohle, Göttingen, European Photography, 2002, p. 52-58, translated by Anne Popiel.

per-animal does the human want to become “immortal.” The central problem of memory is the central problem of art, which is basically a method of fabricating artificial memories.

From the perspective of *Vampyroteuthis*, this is all a downright laughable error. How can humans entrust their acquired information to inanimate objects like paper or stone? It is well known that these objects are subject to the second law of thermodynamics, according to which they must decompose and be forgotten. In his abyss, where everything is mired in sedimentation and where everything is submerged in fluid, the impermanence and unreliability of all inanimate materials in fact become more apparent than on the relatively dead surface of the continents, where bleached bones can lie around for centuries. And yet, the laughable error that has led to human art may not only be laughed at – insofar as *Vampyroteuthis* is capable of laughing – but also deserves to be properly considered.

When we attempt to express a new experience or a new perception – when we endeavor to make sayable what was until now unspeakable, and audible what was until now unheard-of – we do this in the function of an artificial memory, of an inanimate object. Experience and perception are interwoven with the object into an inextricable unity. We experience and perceive in the function of marble, of filmstrips, of letters of a written language. It is not the case that we first experience and perceive something and subsequently search around in the environment for an object in which to express the experience, but rather we already experience and perceive as sculptor, as filmmaker, as author, in short – as artist. The inanimate material objects (stones, bones, letters, numbers, music notes) model all human experience and perception.

Every object is insidious, going against our attempt to inform it because it is inert. In fact, every object is insidious in a way peculiar to it alone. Stone cracks when it is chiseled; cotton sags when it is formed; written language distorts the thoughts expressed in it with its grammatical rules. As the informing of objects and their transformation into memories, art is always a struggle against the resistance of the object. In this struggle one experiences and perceives the essence of the object – of stone, of cotton, of language. This experience and this perception are new information which it is vital to preserve in the artificial memory. Thus, arises a growing feedback between object and human, in other words: “art history.”

The resistance of each object engages the human. It is like a call directed to humans to inform a specific object. There are humans whose occupation it is to inform stone and others whose occupa-

tion it is to inform language. Whoever misses his occupation leads a false existence. For the feedback between a specific object and a specific human is finely tuned and in its course it changes both object and human. It lets stone become statue and human become sculptor. The object absorbs the human's existential interest. The human lives in the function of his object. That lets him forget the most basic purpose of art, namely transforming objects into memories from which other humans may retrieve information. The artist forgets that he is committed to the transmission of acquired information to other humans, and he allows the object to swallow up his commitment. This typically human absorption of existential interest by the object, this work ethic threatens (sic!) to make of the objects not media of communication, but instead barriers to communication between humans. This is at bottom the laughable error on which human art is based and which comes to light from the perspective of *Vampyroteuthis*.

We can observe in him what an art looks like that does not lapse into this error – that does not get snared in objective resistance and is intersubjective and immaterial. An art, therefore, that does not create artificial memories (artworks) but rather transmits its information immediately to the brains of other *Vampyroteuthes*, where it may be stored. In short, the difference between ours and Vampyroteuthian art is this: We have to struggle against the inertia of matter, he against the inertia of other *Vampyroteuthes*. Just like our artists with marble, Vampyroteuthian artists chisel the brains of their receivers. Their art is not objective, but rather inter-subjective – it seeks immortality not in artworks, but in others' memories.

The strategy of Vampyroteuthian art – his skin painting, for example – can be depicted in the following manner: He experiences something new and tries to store this new information in his memory, which means allocating a place for it among the information already stored there. He discovers that the new information cannot be integrated, that it doesn't fit in. He must reorganize his memory to make a place for it. His memory is jarred by the new information and he must process it (what we humans call “creative activity”). This creative jolt surges through his organism, seizes him, and the chromatophores on his skin surface contract and secrete pigment. At the same time, he experiences an artistic orgasm in which the color ejaculation on his skin is enciphered into the Vampyroteuthian color code. The sexual partner is stimulated and made curious about the new information being expressed. This curiosity seduces the partner to copulation. It becomes a conversation during which the information penetrates the partner's memory and is stored there in the brain. How it ar-

rives from there to other *Vampyroteuthes*, how it advances into general Vampyroteuthian conversation, cannot be accounted for here. In any case, the newly-acquired information is elevated into Vampyroteuthian conversation – and as long as there are *Vampyroteuthes*, it remains preserved.

The creative process of Vampyroteuthian art thus consists of two phases. First, the data processing by the artist: What was until now unspeakable and unheard-of is articulated – in fact, as ejaculation in orgasm. Second, the seduction of the partner: An artful trick brings the other to orgasm, allowing him to store the articulated information in his memory. Artistic creation is therefore an expression directed outwards and an impression on the other. It is rape of the other in order to become immortal in the other – art as a strategy of rape, of hate; art as deception, as fiction, as lie; art as deceptive appearance, and therefore as “beauty” – and all this in an atmosphere of orgasm.

It cannot be denied: In the description of Vampyroteuthian art offered here we are forced to recognize critical components of our own. Nothing in this creative, orgiastic deception is strange to us. And not only is none of this strange to us, but also we are almost to the point of Vampyroteuthizing our own art – defying the basic error of our art, giving up the labyrinthine detour through material objects, renouncing the artwork and daring an immaterial, inter-subjective art. We have lost trust in material objects as artificial memories and are beginning to create another type of artificial memory and to assemble immaterial and inter-subjective mediations. Admittedly these are not photophores on our skin, but they are indeed electromagnetic. A Vampyroteuthian revolution is under way.

Vampyroteuthian art may serve as a model for understanding this cultural revolution – the history of human art may be divided into three unequally long stages. The first stage lasted up until the first industrial revolution, the second for the duration of industrial society and the third started with the second industrial revolution and leads into a future as yet unimaginable. During the first stage, art (*techné, ars*) was the strategy for embedding information in objects (stone, leather, iron, language), and builders, cobblers, blacksmiths and writers were artists. The modern distinction between art and craft was meaningless. The industrial revolution produced steel tools and built them into machines so that stone, leather and iron were no longer informed by artists, but rather mechanically. Builders, cobblers and blacksmiths became superfluous and the process of informing the corresponding objects was no longer seen as art. Toolmakers and machine builders – that is, technicians – displaced craftspeople, those pre-industrial artists, and became the actual creators of information. Only the non-mechanizable processes of informing objects were left over as archaic remains – what bourgeois in-

dustrial society from now on called “art” in order to excise it from daily life, to preserve it in museums and other glorified ghettos in the form of works.

Before the first industrial revolution it was difficult to distinguish the information from the informed object. The information was located in the artist’s head and it only became visible in the work. With the invention of steel tools the information became visible and tangible. Modern technology is not, like pre-modern art was, the embedding of information in objects by artists, but rather it is the manipulation of information by technicians and the embedding of this information into objects by machines. Existential interest thereby shifted from the objects which were informed increasingly more cheaply to the information which became increasingly more expensive. Humans became more Vampyroteuthian. The second industrial revolution was the result.

The information to be embedded is no longer manufactured in the form of steel tools, but rather it is manipulated symbolically and thus immaterially with the help of artificial intelligence and fed into automated apparatuses which then manufacture steel tools. These steel tools are built into automated machines which inform the objects. In this, human existence changes. Human self-actualization is no longer the struggle against the insidious resistance of inert objects, for this struggle can be left to the machines and apparatuses. Human work becomes superfluous. Human self-actualization from now on is the manipulation of new immaterial information, or what is known as “software processing.” In this context, “soft” unquestionably refers to mollusks.

Vampyroteuthis is a mollusk that is complex in such a way that he sees himself forced to grasp at vertebrate strategies and to develop a skull. We are vertebrates that are complex in such a way that we see ourselves forced to grasp at molluscan strategies and to develop immaterial art. Our interest in objects is beginning to wane; we are prepared to create media through which we rape human brains and force them to store immaterial information. We create chromatophores (television, video, computer monitors transmitting synthetic images) with whose help the senders deceitfully seduce the receivers – a strategy that will doubtless be called “art” (in case one does not decide to discard this concept entirely).

In the face of the dawning future, every glorification of art, of artifice—in short, of the strategy of seduction – is out of place. It would be a glorification of *Vampyroteuthis*. And yet, as animals that have overcome our animal nature – or think we should overcome it – we must commit ourselves to im-

mortality in the other just as much as *Vampyroteuthis* does. We must commit ourselves to art. In our commitment, *Vampyroteuthis* surfaces in us. We become noticeably more Vampyroteuthian.