Introduction
Online Conference and Exhibition
"Vilém Flusser and His 'Languages'"
June 29-30, 2020

1. The Event

2020 marked the 100th anniversary of the birth of the Czech-Brazilian cultural theorist and philosopher Vilém Flusser (1920–1991). On this occasion, we, the team of the Vilém Flusser Archive at Berlin University of the Arts, organized a two-day online conference, which aimed to bring emerging as well as experienced artists and researchers together in order to commemorate Flusser's thinking, philosophy and idiosyncratic conceptualization of language. This was driven by our contention that his deliberations on the philosophy of language are often eclipsed by his more well-known theorizations on technological mediations such as his notion of the telematic (or network) society or the technical image.

Many Flusserian scholars distinguish between two main periods in his oeuvre: 1) his early years in Brazil, when he developed his thinking on languages; and 2) his later years in Europe, focusing on media and communication theories. One of the main premises of the conference was to treat this categorization of his work not as hermetic seal, but instead, to foreground the continuous and recursive developments and interrelations between these two phases. As an example, Flusser's cybernetic arguments in his widely acclaimed book *Into the Universe of Technical Images* (2011 [1985]) can be traced back to his early writing in *Language and Reality* (2018 [1963]).

Flusser wrote intensively in four languages: German, Portuguese, English, and French. However, he consistently rewrote and retranslated his texts from one language into another, treating and exercising translation as a mediation between different cultures of thinking and writing. His style of writing is considered radically non-academic, essayistic, and artistic. He mastered the art of short essays which strike the heart of the matter quickly and yet allow for unexpected turns and endings. Many scholars see his way of writing and thinking as a specific method and use of language (e.g. Guldin 2016, Mozzini 2015) – one that is often considered his own artistic practice (Marburger 2016). Therefore, "his 'languages'" in the title of the conference refers to Flusser's unique way of playing with (and against) the limitations inherent in the instrument of language.

With these perspectives on Flusser's work in mind, we invited artists and scholars to submit abstracts about their research or artistic work related to the theme of the conference. Our call for papers was announced in September 2019 and the deadline for the abstract submission was December 10, 2019. In the call, we suggested the following topics of interest:

- Flusser's philosophy of language and influences from other thinkers (such as Carnap, Cassirer, Heidegger or Wittgenstein)
- Language and Reality (2017 [1963])
- Flusser's relations to artists in his Brazilian years: their influence on his work on language-related theories (e.g. Mira Schendel or the members of the Concrete Poetry Movement)
- Understanding contemporary issues such as multilingualism, language and power, language and manipulation, and the obstacles of translation with the help of Flusser's thought
- Flusser as a "science fiction writer" (e.g. *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*)

Furthermore, we also wanted to welcome papers which include reflective considerations on the following questions:

- How can Flusserian language inspire artistic (research) practices?
- What are the connections between Flusser's early writings on language philosophy and his later contributions to media theory?
- Is Flusser (un)translatable?

We highly encouraged not only scholars but also artists to apply. Subsequently we received 43 abstracts from all over the world – including Austria, Brazil, China, Columbia, Costa Rica, France, Greece, Hungary, Israel, Germany, Mexico, New Zealand, Russia, South Africa, South Korea, Sweden, Switzerland, the UK and the USA –, from which we selected twenty-three to be presented at the conference. At the time of the selection process, in January 2020, we planned the event to take place at Berlin University of the Arts, in the same building (called *Medienhaus* [*Media House*]) where the Flusser Archive is located, on the precise date of Vilém Flusser's 100th birthday on May 12, 2020. However, having to quickly adapt to the global COVID-19 pandemic, we were forced to change our plans and move the event to an online platform. We had to reorganize the whole program and implement various alternative digital tools for the communication. It took time to change

the format, and as a result, the event had to be moved to a later date. It finally took place on June 29-30, 2020. The conference was hosted on a website built on a site building platform called Cargo (n.d.). It can still be accessed to view the final program and the abstracts of the conference and exhibition: https://flusserarchive.cargo.site.

The presenters were asked to send in a recording of their 20-minute presentations, which were uploaded to the website and were made available for two weeks, allowing enough time for both the participants and the audience to watch these presentations. The unusual conditions had made us re-think telematics, particularly how telematics is embedded in society and exerts force on social bodies. To simply copy and paste analogue forms of communication into a digital format would have been a grave translation error. It would have caused great stress and exhaustion to sit in front of "telematic tools" for two very long days and watch all the presentations together. We found a 2-week staging format more suitable. These two weeks gave the participants the opportunity to digest the videos in their own time. On the actual two days of the event, the audience and the presenters met in an online video call where the discussion (or dialogue, to use a Flusserian term) was focussed on synthesizing the information generated in the presentations. Two types of tools had been available to the participants and the general audience to post questions and comments throughout the preceding two weeks: They could send their questions in a Pad (n.d.) document or via a Telegram (n.d.) group, encouraging different ways of interacting and engaging with the conference and discussions.

For a variety of reasons (e.g. some presentations could not fit in the online format), we finally received sixteen pre-recorded presentations and six artistic works, which were then "exhibited" on the Cargo site as a virtual exhibition. We also complemented the program with two invited keynote presentations by Daniel Irrgang (Weizenbaum Institute/Berlin University of the Arts) and Martha Schwendener (New York University), which were also available on the site. (See all abstracts and the program in the attached leaflet.)

We grouped the presentations into five themes: "The Limits of Translation", "Correspondências", "Amplified language", "Vampyroteuthis infernalis: Le vampire des abysses" and "Angenommen", all of which resonate with Flusser's "languages", the unique perspectives and notions which make up his own vernacular language (see more in the attached leaflet). Each session was chaired and facilitated by a moderator, not unlike a traditional conference, who led the discussions.

As such, the very format of the event was a translation of Flusser's thinking on the *telematic society, dialogue* and *discourse*. Most importantly, it made apparent the untranslatable: the missingness of meeting in person, of informal gatherings and non-curated interactions, exposing the underbelly of telematic sociality.

2. Contributions

As mentioned above, some contributors could not deliver their videos for the online event, but many of them were able to write their papers without being part of the conference. Conversely, there are some presenters who were part of the event in June 2020 with their pre-recorded videos but were unable to send in their papers to this *Flusser Studies* special issue. Therefore, the attached program might differ from the written documentation of the project presented in this issue.

In keeping with the structure of the conference, the twenty-two contributions of this issue are grouped as follows: 1) "The Limits of Translation", 2) "Correspondências", 3) "Amplified language", 4) "Vampyroteuthis infernalis: Le vampire des abysses", 5) "Angenommen" and 6) "Artistic statements".

2.1 The Limits of Translation

This category refers to Flusser's theories of translation. *Translation* has multiple and metaphoric meanings in Flusser's oeuvre (Guldin, Finger & Bernardo 2009). To name some of them, it can be the translation between languages (especially in his works in the 1960s), between different fields of study and even between human and non-human agents. The contributions listed here expand on these Flusserian ideas.

In "Gestural translations from within the (post)digital: a Flusserian analysis of screenic gestures" Darren Gary Berkland reconsiders today's developing gestural language in terms of Flusser's writing. The paper argues that Flusser's work allows for gestures to be examined as phenomena, so that in viewing these gestures as situated and witnessed phenomena, it becomes possible to perceive of them not simply as symbolic movements of the body, but rather as a form of *translation*. The text then argues that what is being translated through these phonic gestures can be understood as a postdigital condition that has emerged following the alleged end of the digital revolution. To evidence these claims, the paper performs a gestural analysis of Luke Collins's short film, *Swiped* (2019) that demonstrates an interaction between two individuals attempting to navigate a peculiar (post)digital situation.

William Hanff's article "Fiktions des Wissenschaft – Is Science Fiction Translatable?, or is Translation a Science Fiction?" is based on Flusser's essay "Science Fiction" (Flusser 2015 – translated by Hanff) which explores two strategies of science and fiction as science, and provides clues to his process of translating and retranslating Flusser's own work. Hanff concludes thateither translation or science fiction can exist as a kind of "Technofantasy" as proposed by Don Ihde (1991),

but that Flusser's two fiction-in-science strategies to approaching truth (*Wahrheit*) in science (*Wissenschaft*) are analogous to Hans Vaihinger's two categories of fiction: "figments" as imaginary fantasy, and "fictions" as falsifiable conjecture.

In his text "Für eine Philosophy of Caixa Preta," Marc Lenot undertakes a critical textual analysis of the different versions of Vilém Flusser's book *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* and a short history of its editions" (also available in French). He highlights the important textual differences between the German, English and Portuguese versions of Flusser's text. The essay suggests combining the different versions to arrive at a comprehensive text that reflects Flusser's thinking better. In doing so, it raises the question of power and language, and proposes some strategies to confront it.

Yanai Toister and Jonathan Ventura, in their paper "Slouching Towards the Abyss," use Flusser's theories on design to present his ability to cut back and forth between languages as a means of discussing various types of subject-matter, The authors term this the "linguistic chameleon" ability. Secondly, they address the unique quality of sleep and the impossibity of designing it. According to the authors, these two issues are bound together. Hebrew despite its frugality is arguably the most suitable language to tackle the physiological (and psychological) process of sleep.

2.2 Correspondências

The title *Correspondências* reflects on Flusser's extended correspondences with artists, friends, other thinkers and different institutions. In the Vilém Flusser Archive, the largest part of the archival material is Flusser's letter exchanges. He encouraged others to be in dialog with him in form of letters and continuously sent his new ideas to different people in order to receive feedback and begin a conversation about diverse philosophical topics. The following contributions reflect on these knowledge exchanges.

Bárbara Sesso Carneiro in her article "Vilém Flusser, Theon Spanudis: their languages" revisits Flusser's correspondence with the Greek-Brazilian art collector, poet and psychoanalyst Theon Spanudis. The paper argues that language was the medium but also the theme of their letter exchanges. Language – especially German – was a kind of space where their sociability happened. It also takes a closer look at how languages impacted the presence of these two figures in a Brazilian cultural scene, and how they did auto-translations, textual experiments and written theories.

In "From Ecstasy to Melancholy: An epistolary journey recounting Flusser's unrealized proposal for the Art & Communication nucleus in the 1973 XII Bienal de São Paulo" Isabel Löfgren presents a brief commentary on Vilém Flusser's activity as a technical advisor for the 1973

XII Bienal de São Paulo. Drawing on an archive of unpublished correspondence, the essay aims to critique notions of art display, spectatorship and production, by proposing a utopian, radical, and collective laboratory with artists using communicative practices. Most of the correspondence between 1971-1973 was written while Flusser was working in Europe, in part to garner international approval and participation for the event. The correspondence also testifies to a period of development in Flusser's approach to the visual arts, leading to his ambitious outlook on artistic practices and their discursive potential for social and political transformation. The author suggests that Flusser has used a curatorial approach as a means of embedding his philosophy in everyday life through the medium of the art exhibition.

In "Sismic Cist: Vilém Flusser's Journalistic Philosophical Quasi-Poetry and Oswald de Andrade's Telefonemas in the Corpus of Brazilian Philosophy" Gabriel Salvi Philipson relates Vilém Flusser's thought to Oswald de Andrade's philosophical approaches by comparing Flusser's quasi-poetical way of writing philosophy in newspaper articles in the 1960s with de Andrade's "Telefonema" newspaper articles in the 1940s and 1950s. The purpose of the article is to follow the fleeting traces of the two authors' literary-philosophical machines and their (dis)articulation with (neo)colonial powers. Philipson's assumption is that there is a similarity in the way they deal with the question of otherness, which is manifested in their philosophical and journalistic approaches.

2.3 Amplified Language

"Amplified Language" is one of the subchapters of Flusser's book *Language and Reality* (2018 [1963]), in which he writes about music ("auditory symbols") and visual arts ("visual symbols") as forms of language and how they create realities (Flusser 2018: 137ff.) different from that created by spoken language. Therefore, in this section we grouped contributions that elaborate on similar ideas.

Kyle P. Booten, in his paper "Flusser's Demon: Writing Under the Eye of an Automatic Critic," positions Flusser as a key theorist in the conceptualization of computer-mediated writing. In *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, Flusser (2011) glimpses the potential for "automatic critics" to filter and censor writing on a mass scale, not merely correcting infelicities but stringently enforcing all sorts of aesthetic virtues. For him, such a critic would be a "demon" that, in the style of the demon described by James Clerk Maxwell's famous thermodynamic thought-experiment, would impact language at the level of its entropy. The author also introduces StyleVise, an automatic critic that he designed to force himself to use more complicated syntactic structures. He describes the

workings of this system as a way to think through what our linguistic universe would look like if such automatic critics were widespread. While Flusser foresees a future in which human judgment has been almost totally outsourced to machines, the author worries about a different future, a "demonic arms race" in which the cast of actors competitively scrambles to acquire the most sophisticated artificially-intelligent writing assistants.

Daniel Irrgang in his article "Reversing the vectors of meaning. The diagrammatic language of Vilém Flusser" argues that there was, besides writing, another sign system with which Flusser also operated frequently and which can be linked to his image heuristics: the diagram. Scattered over his manuscripts, letters and notes in the Vilém Flusser Archive, Irrgang found over 160 diagrammatic sketches by Flusser. According to the author, these sketches are interesting not only in light of the nearly exclusively textual character of Flusser's legacy, but also as Flusserian technical images. Here the author comes close to Flusser's notion of technical images as projections of abstract models. Following up on this comparison, the paper draws attention to the non-trivial relation between Flusser's heuristic of the technical image and his diagrammatic practice.

In "Art and Language in Vilém Flusser's Brazil: Concrete Art and Poetry" Martha Schwendener revisits Flusser's relations to the Brazilian Concrete Poetry Movement. Flusser was impressed by the formal layout of Concrete art and poetry and their approaches to space, color, and typography. Concrete painting and poetry served as proto- interfaces or screens and offered what poet and theorist Haroldo de Campos called a "new dialogical relationship" with "imperial" languages. These developments caught the attention of Max Bense, the information-aesthetics theorist who served as an early and important model for Flusser, and who exhibited Concrete poetry, as well as computer-generated drawings and the work of Flusser's friend Mira Schendel, in the Study Gallery at the University of Stuttgart. Flusser translated a fragment of Haroldo de Campos' Galáxias for Bense's and Elisabeth Walther's experimental journal *rot,* and the enduring impact of Concrete art and poetry can be glimpsed in Flusser's later concepts: the "superficial" reading of technical images, non-linear "post-historical" thinking, and the idea that philosophy itself would be practiced in images rather than written words.

2.4 Vampyroteuthis infernalis: Le vampire des abysses

With *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*, Flusser steps into the métier of a science fiction writer. The emergence of Animal Studies or tentacular thinking as put forth in Donna Haraway's writing has turned Flusser's prized cephalopod of the deep sea into a critter of great import in contemporary discourse. The contributions in this section offer new readings of Flusser's philosophical fiction and

bring to light the ways in which his unconventional methodology remains generative for ingenuity and inventiveness in academic and artistic research today.

Ruth Y. Hsu's paper "Flusser's Vampyroteuthis Infernalis: Homo sapien's Posthuman Future?" focuses on Flusser's mock treatise and reports on reputedly one of the most elusive animals in the ocean, the vampire squid. Vampyroteuthis Infernalis is interpreted as a literary text, specifically regarding the narration's polyphony – ironic, satirical, elegiac, awe-struck; the vampire squid in this narrative is cast in the role of a gothic monster that glides, darts, slips into darkened recesses and away from the hunter-marine biologist, naturalist, or the philosopher demanding to know what it knows. In Flusser's ironic telling, the creature possesses many fascinating qualities, and, like Humboldt, one is driven to capture and study this alien being. In her contribution, Hsu enlists the help of Martin Buber and Donna Haraway in examining Flusser's ontological questions brought forth by the narrator's confrontation with the irredeemable squid/other. The presentation concludes with a (mock) conversation among Buber, Haraway, and a vampire squid.

In "Vampyroteuthis as a bioluminescent lighthouse to think among the Living. Some mutations: From 1981 to 1991" Elise Rigot translates *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis* into the dialogical medium of the podcast. The article turns Flusser's writing into a workable program, proposing a recontextualization of how Vampyroteuthis provides a different lens to re-think the conditions one inhabits, i.e. what Frédéric Worms calls "the moment of living". In this regard, the author analyzes the French version, which is the first and unpublished manuscript, the typescript Flusser gave to his friend, the artist and biologist Louis Bec. According to Rigot, Flusser's writing must be read through a situated scientific context: the emergence of the French molecular school of biology advanced by Jacob and Monod, and the thinking of Bergson and Canguilhem. In the late 1960s, the discovery of DNA, biology was redefined, and with it the notion of the biological code, pinning down a historical moment of molecular biology. It revolutionized the way in which living beings would henceforth be understood. At the same time, this historical moment also lacked the critical perspective put forth by Flusser in his critique of the apparatus. In an original move, Rigot contends that Vampy as an apparatus can be mobilized for the production of situated knowledges.

In the spirit of Borges and Flusser, and set in Brazil, Karen Tei Yamashita and Ronaldo Lopes de Oliveira's essay depicts the legacy of colonial processes that continue to destroy native populations, human and non-human, by conceiving of earth as inanimate, blind, mute, and utterly insensible. Divided into two parts, part one re-imagines Oswald Andrade's "Manifesto Antropofágico" and Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal," countering the empiric construction of native peoples as "savages" and innate cannibals. Part two re-composes a story told by a parrot, whose ancestor had been separated from her mate by Alexander von Humboldt. In 1799, Humboldt is said to have sent a parrot home to Prussia, the parrot being the last keeper of the language

of an extinct Amazonian tribe. The descendant parrot and her interlocutor reconstruct a fabula composed in the register of dark humor about the deepest recesses of a forest (or the human id). In this primordial forest – reminiscent of a staging of Pina Bausch's "Rites of Spring" – a fecund exchange occurs between sightless Mother Tongue and a ravenous Father Penis who "ate the eyes of everything." The narrative, itself a cannibalization of theory and fiction, is accompanied with original drawings by Ronaldo Lopes de Oliveira.

2.5 Angenommen

"Angenommen" is the title of one of Flusser's last book projects. In this grouping we wanted to include those contributions that connect Flusser's early works on philosophy of language with his later ideas on media philosophy and theory.

Michael Hanke, in his paper "From Language to Communication – Vilém Flusser's path from language philosophy to communication and media theory," reconstructs Vilém Flusser's first academic field of research, the philosophy of language that arose from his initial interest in language in general. He describes how these early probings were preserved in the later course of his work when his focus changed from language to communication and mediation. It fleshes out concepts that represent a continuity in his work, such as sign, meaning and symbol, information, knot, entropy, discourse, the technological world, and dialogue and conversation; all of this being based on a wider concept of language that encompasses not only speech but also sound, images, and symbolic forms in general. It intends to shed light on the continuity in Flusser's work over the course of its progress and changing focuses.

In "Towards no body – traces of Flusser's psychology" Eckhard Geitz connects the psychological dots in Flusser's thinking from his early philosophical writings to his information philosophy and the call for a new anthropology in his late texts. To do so, the author revisits Flusser's thought on psychology in his first and unpublished book manuscript *Das 20. Jahrhundert* [*The 20th Century*], which was then unfolded in *Language and Reality* and finally summarized in *The History of the Devil*. The author further analyzes two articles by Flusser: "Wahrnehmung" (1990) and "Das Universum der Technik als Spiegel und/oder als Verschleierung menschlicher Absicht" (1987) – both were published in the journal *Praktische Psychologie*.

2.6. Artistic statements

In this category we grouped all artistic contributions that deal with Flusser's work. They were part of the above-mentioned virtual exhibition, except for Karla Brunet's work, which requires a setting for live performance.

Cristina Achury's installation *Anti-Archive*, in the Vilém Flusser Archive (Berlin), establishes a design posture, a method for conveying content from memory that rejects the reproduction of historical discourses. Instead, it seeks to show the ruptures and gaps in history in which each individual can endlessly reconstruct his memory.

Karla Brunet's description of the audiovisual performance *Antarctica Tempo* presents the concept, along with the aesthetic and technical choices leading up to the performance. It is the result of a 60-day expedition to Antarctica. A mixture of codes – software and language – it tries to translate the experience lived in that distant place. It is a complex technical image: the remix of this imagined place and tempo.

In Pablo-Martín Córdoba's *L'inter-code* a pseudo-random algorithm controls the appearance of zones of images and zones of text in mutual exclusion over the screen. The images include animations based on 3D models of objects exhibited in the Musée des Arts et Métiers in Paris: astronomical instruments which measure the infinitely big, a cyclotron which probes the subatomic world and above all, photo cameras adapted to the measure of space (photogrammetry). Flusser's *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* inspired this work.

In the VR installation *Al Zahir,* Alice Dalgalarrondo reconciles Deleuze's object's ontology and Flusser's concept of virtuality with aspects of the Sufi philosophy in order to find out how a single object manifests itself. The Zahir here is a hibiscus flower that was photographed and 3D-scanned to create a virtual object of contemplation in a meditation room.

Maria Lalou's essay "Camera and The Mirror 'a post-manuscript'" is a non-linear narrative text, an attempt of a post-manuscript, aligning the writing of her video essay tetralogy *Camera and The Mirror,* an experimental documentary that involves the relation of the camera's role in the animated experience of the viewer by analyzing the function of the medium in our contemporary surveilled networked life towards the history of film production.

Elisa Storelli's *Temporal Clusters* are mind maps of her artistic practice, used as a tool in her artistic research, chronomorphology: the study of how time develops and changes shape. One cluster is a diagram of notions. Concepts are positioned and connected in relation to one another to create a resonance between meanings. This form of diagrammatic writing is used by the artist to

navigate through her thinking and to describe a possible correlation of ideas. The work was also inspired by Flusser's notion of time in *Language and Reality*.

Hana Yoo's video *Muju* is based on the Zen Buddhist notion of *Muju* that denotes to leave all forms of obsession, and at the same time to change without sticking to oneself. With the narration reflecting the interpretation of Zen Buddhist philosophy and anarchism on the theme of the center and periphery, the video induces meditative appreciation and eventually leads to an artificial nature. While presenting different technical images of the desert, the question remains in between temporality and the continuity of the wandering mind.

In view of the current pandemic, *Flusser Studies* is also publishing the essay "Da raiva" (On Rabies) published in the Literary Supplement of *O Estado de São Paulo*, on February 8, 1969. The text has been translated into English, German and French and is accompanied by short presentations in these three languages.

3. Final words

This issue draws together many seemingly disparate threads, yet they are all practices of thinking *with* Flusser and his notions of "language" (literal and metaphoric). They all unfurl from his brimming and eccentric personality, which lends itself both as reason and cause for organizing this event and celebrating his work and legacy on the special occasion of his 100th birthday. We believe that the outcome could not have been more Flusserian: balancing both the dialogical and the discursive, the artistic and academic, the definitory and the relational, facilitating exchange and transmission of information between both established and emerging practitioners of theory and theorists of praxis. Our aim was to present fresh perspectives on (artistic) research to reroute and rewire the circulation of Flusserian thinking. We hope our readers will find joy in this entangled mesh of diverse topics and find their own passages and pathways of inquiry and exploration through it.

Guest Editors: Anita Jóri, Hana Yoo and Steph Holl-Trieu, Flusser Archive Berlin, March 2021

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