Marc Lenot
On Ed Sommers and Ulrich Mertens

Everyone has read Vilém Flusser's best-known book *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*[1], and remembers his conclusion: while most photographers are functionaries of the camera, who photograph according to the camera's programs, there are a few photographers, the so-called "experimental" photographers who do not respect these programs, "play against the camera" and thus produce "unpredictable information". But Flusser, for whom photography was, to a certain extent, a pretext, or at least a vector to express his theory of the apparatus, says no more, does not cite any examples, and leaves the reader uncertain as to what this experimental photography might be. I have tried elsewhere[2] to use Flusser's ideas to define what experimental photography could be, and I mentioned[3] the little-known texts that Flusser wrote about photographers to partially illustrate his point. Flusser wrote nine articles in German and English in the journal *European Photography* of his publisher Andreas Müller-Pohle (he also wrote some reviews of photography books there); in addition, some of his other texts on Müller-Pohle (who is also a photographer), Joan Fontcuberta and a few others have been reprinted in German in the book *Standpunkte*[4] (which also reproduces the German version of the chronicles published in the magazine). A bibliography is appended to this article.

The purpose of this article is to provide readers with Flusser's texts on two photographers who were not published in *European Photography*, Ed Sommer and Ulrich Mertens, contextualizing them and providing the versions or translations in the four languages used by Flusser. [5] In Sommer's case, these texts are completely unpublished; in Mertens' case, the French original was published as a leaflet for an exhibition. These two texts are (along with those on Müller-Pohle and Fontcuberta) those that come closest to Flusser's idea of playing against the apparatus.[6]

---

[1] English translation by Anthony Mathews, London, Reaktion books, 2000. Quotes page 81.
[2] Marc Lenot, *Jouer contre les appareils (Playing Against the Cameras*), Arles, Photosynthèses, 2017.
[3] Marc Lenot, "Flusser and Photographers, Photographers and Flusser", *Flusser Studies* nº 24, December 2017 https://www.flusserstudies.net/sites/www.flusserstudies.net/files/media/attachments/marc-lenot-flusser-photographers-photographers-flusser.pdf . See also my communication at the VIIth ComCult in 2021 «About Photographers. Photography Criticism by Flusser: Theory and Praxis » https://www.comcult.cisc.org.br/wp-content/uploads/anais-comcult7/lenot_marc_VII_comcult.pdf
[4] Vilém Flusser, *Standpunkte. Text zur Fotografie*, edited by Andreas Müller-Pohle, Göttingen, European Photography, 1998.
[5] I am grateful to Victor Geuer for revising the Portuguese translations and to Rainer Guldin for checking the German transcriptions.
[6] Bibliographical note. Articles published in European Photography in German and in English: Nancy Burson, No. 33, 1988; Astrid Klein, No. 34, 1988; Paolo Gioli, nº 35, 1988; Gert Bonfert, No. 36, 1988; Boyd Webb, No. 38, 1989; Lizzie Calligas, No. 40, 1989; Henry Lewis, No. 41, 1990; Bernard Plossu, nº 49, 1992; Jiri Hanke, No. 50, 1992. Other texts about photographers: Flusser's texts on Müller-Pohle are available in German on the artist's website

The Swiss artist Ed Sommer (1932-2015) was a painter, a sculptor and a photographer, exploring action and gestural painting, monochrome and geometric reliefs, geometric and thermoplastic sculptures, and some forms of experimental photography (see his website: https://www.ed-sommer.com/). Between 1983 and 2002, he and his wife, the artist YongSa Sommer, lived in Mirabeau, in the Luberon, at 60 kms from Robion, Flusser's home. He met Flusser on many occasions, and his son Christian remembers well Flusser coming to their home in the second half of the 1980s[7]. Sommer made several portraits of Flusser, some regular portraits and others that he called "Projections Photography". He published a small catalogue, *Portraits Réponses*, (Goethe Institute Paris, 1988[8]). In 1990 (14 and 15 May), he organized a symposium at the Goethe Institute in Paris about the construction of the image and its ambivalence in reflecting reality. Flusser was invited and contributed an essay in French, titled "*Création – Découverte*"[9], asking if the concepts of creation and discovery were still pertinent in modern society. On this occasion, Flusser met the psychopharmacologist Roland Fischer and the conceptual artist Jochen Gerz.

As Flusser describes in the first text, *Fugen / Fugues*, these portraits of Flusser by Sommer were a repeated composition, as a form of dialog between the subject and his image: "Sommer has taken me three times for this picture. The first time he followed the traditional method, the second time he projected the first picture on me, and the third time he projected thus both precedent pictures". This created overlapping and distortions, but the picture was "a true reproduction of a perceived context", an "honest documentary photo" without manipulations *a posteriori*. It reflected the context, the process followed in obtaining the image, showing distinct points of view, distinct "levels of reality". The picture itself (and not what it showed) was "reality in the true sense", Flusser's face was just a "virtuality to be actualized in the picture" through "deliberate computation". Flusser concluded his text with an analogy with the detection of atomic particles through their traces in a cloud chamber: the perception of reality can only come as the result of computation of several virtualities. This was the occasion for Flusser to discuss the concept of reality of the photograph, the actualization of "virtualities" in it, as an implicit opposition to the idea of indexicality and the "Ça a été" of Roland Barthes in *La Chambre claire* (1980).

https://muellerpohle.net/texts/; the preface (written in German and English) to Joan Fontcuberta's book Herbarium (Göttingen, European Photography, 1985) has been translated into French by Marin Schaffner (in Nous sommes les enfants de Marie Curie (Marseille, Wildproject, 2024). Flusser's exchange of letters in German with the photographer Hans-Peter Dimke has been published: Vom Aufschreiben und Einbilden. Ein Entwurf zu keinem Buch. Briefe von Vilém Flusser an einen ungelehrigen Lerner (Barterode, Künstliche Intelligenz e.V., 1985).

[7] Mail from Christian Sommer to Marc Lenot, 9 Feb 2021.

[8] Another quasi-identical catalogue was published the same year in La Tour d'Aigues (close to the village of Peypin d'Aigues where Flusser had lived between 1975 and 1980). Both books were in Flusser's "travel library".

[9] See this text in Vilém Flusser, *Arts, Sciences, Technologies*, eds. Yves Citton & Marc Lenot, Paris, ArTec / Presses du réel, 2025, p. 54-58.

This essay was written by Flusser in German and in English[10] for the review *European Photography*, but the German typescript bears the handwritten mention by Flusser "Rejected by Andreas"; Andreas Müller-Pohle does not remember why he rejected this essay[11]. It was unpublished until today. The other text presented here, *Dialogisches Fotografieren*, is an unpublished typescript in German found in the Flusser Archive; it was written after 1985, since it mentions his book "Into the Universe of technical Images". For Flusser, while the camera program is a one-way discourse, Sommer "is trying to intervene in this program and turn the discourse into dialogue", and dialogue "is the only strategy for generating new information, the only 'creative' method". Alluding to the cases where the people photographed by Sommer (such as Victor Vasarely, Theo Gerber, Jean Baudrillard, Hubert Reeves, André Chouraqui, Edgar Morin) contributed texts or images inserted in the photo[12], Flusser explains: "Sommer takes a picture that does not "say something" but "speaks to someone", he transforms his object into another. If the other acknowledges this, Sommer's claim is to ask for an answer. Sommer "takes up the answer" and puts it in his appeal. The image thus created is therefore the result of a dialogue and must contain something unexpected (a new piece of information). The camera was forced to record not a "something" (as in its program) but a "we"." This leads Flusser to reflect on the idea that promoting dialog instead of discourse is a form of revolt against the camera, against the apparatus.

Ulrich Mertens (born in 1957) is a German photographer who is best-known for his work about energy sources (whether coal, uranium or wind), about the landscapes formed and transformed by the impact of technology, and about sustainability (see his website https://www.visuelle-konzepte.de/). His testimony[13], especially written at our request for this issue (in German and in English), tells that, having encountered Vilém Flusser at the university in Bielefeld, he dared, a few years later, to ask him to write a text for his exhibition in Marseille in 1988. In this work, Mertens presented pairs of photographs, one above ground showing a church, a house, a control room, a field, and one below ground (more or less exactly below the first one) showing the galleries of a coal mine; one of the pictures shows an elegant couple in an open field, and the same couple below ground in miners' outfits. As the writer Emmanuel Loi noted[14], he offers "a gift of double sight to those who do not inquire about what they are walking upon."

The advice Flusser gave him that day proved to be essential for his future work, inciting him to first explore the links between coal and diamonds, both made of carbon, and then to

[10] The English text was probably revised by Derek P. Bennett (1944-1990).
[11] Mail from Andres Müller-Pohle to Marc Lenot, 14 August 2021.
[12] Several are included in the catalogues *Portraits Réponses*.
[13] Ulrich Mertens had already mentioned, with less detail, his encounter with Flusser in the Flusser memorial issue of the review *European Photography* (n°50, spring 1992, p. 30)
[14] Emmanuel Loi, « Travaux d'optique. Uli Mertens », *Mars. Magazine d'art contemporain*, n° 23, hiver-printemps 1989, p. 14-15, our translation.

continue his research on how "to make the invisible visible" ; but, Flusser added, he must "break out of the limitations of the conventional apparatus", noting kindly that "this observation can serve as an indication for his future work".

In his text, Flusser notes that, while photography allows, and even imposes, a variety of viewpoints, it seems impossible to have a viewpoint from below, from "the depths of hells", since the camera cannot penetrate into the earth to photograph the world above. But, in these photographs, Mertens was attempting to achieve this "infernal viewpoint" by entering mine shafts and galleries. His exploration of the abysses enabled him to delve not only into the earth but also "into psychoanalytic repressions and etymological roots," according to Flusser. However, Mertens knew that he had to go back to the surface, that the perspective below was "without horizon". Flusser suggested that he explore further, for example with radioactivity (evoking Chernobyl), to "photograph the world above from the perspective of the depths below".

Vilém Flusser wrote this text in French for Ulrich Mertens' exhibition, "Sans Horizon", at the Galerie des Rambles (20 rue Saint-Antoine, Marseille), opening on April 8, 1988; a leaflet with the text was distributed to visitors to the exhibition. He translated it into German, and this text was later published in the booklet *Mertens, Ulrich: Ohne Horizont. Fotoarbeiten 1983–1990* (Stuttgart, Lindemanns Verlag, 1991). This 36-page booklet with 31 reproductions of Mertens' works also includes a text by the painter Jörg Boström; it accompanied an exhibition in the Kunstverein Region Heinsberg (from 11 October to 6 November 1991). There is also a translation of this text into Czech, by Milena Slavická and Jiøí Fiala, which was published in Flusser's collection of essays *MOC OBRAZU* [Die Macht des Bildes] *Výbor filosofických textù z 80.a 90.* (let. Výtvarné Umì ní. The Magazine for Contemporary Art, Nr. 3–4/96, Prague, OSVU 1996) pp. 171-174 (we have not been able to take it into account). The French and German texts (and their typescripts) are in the Flusser Archive in Berlin and São Paulo. We reproduce here the original French version and the German text of 1991[15] (indicating the slight variations between the two texts), as well as our English and Portuguese translations.

All photographs by Ed Sommer, courtesy Seraina Sommer. The author thanks Seraina and Christian Sommer for their help and assistance. All photographs by Ulrich Mertens, courtesy of the artist. The author thanks Ulrich Mertens for his comments and his help.

[15] The German text was republished in *Standpunkte* (Göttingen, European Photography, 1998), pp. 162-164 with some stylistic variations from the original.