

**Marc Lenot**

## **Flusser and Photographers, Photographers and Flusser**

In his preface to the Portuguese translation of *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, the Brazilian mediologist Arlindo Machado (1998b: 10) considers that photography “functions as a pretext that Flusser uses to verify the functioning of our post-historical societies.”<sup>1</sup>

Vilém Flusser’s books on photography, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (2000) and *Into the Universe of Technical Images* (2011a) are well known, and I shall mention only briefly here his definitions of technical images, the apparatus, the program and the photographer-functionary. His forty-nine essays on photography, reprinted in the collection *Standpunkte* (1998a), shed further light on his views; of particular interest are his 1983 preface to the book of photographs *Transformance* by Andreas Müller-Pohle (2011b), his lecture on photographic criticism (1984c) and the chapter (initially written in 1975) on the gesture of photographing in his book *Gestes* (1999: 81-101). His other lectures at the École Nationale de la Photographie in Arles in 1984 (1984a and 1984b) and one of his last texts on the subject (1991)—written a few months before his death for the catalogue of the *Metropolis* exhibition in Berlin—can be added to this anthology of his writings on photography.

So Flusser wrote a good deal about photography. But was this just a pretext, as Machado suggests? Was photography just a useful vector allowing him to expose his vision of the post-historical world, a mere abstract concept within which the photographic image itself was of little importance? In other words, beyond photography as such, was Flusser interested in photographs themselves, in their representations and their materiality? Assuming that Flusser’s theories on photography are well known, the first part of this essay explores his writings on certain photographers and their work, replacing them in the context of his interest in art and artists. The second part proposes a definition of experimental photography in line with the final pages of *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, and the third examines how contemporary photographers are part of the movement thus defined.

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<sup>1</sup> [a fotografia] “funciona mais propriamente como um pretexto para que, através dela, Flusser possa verificar o funcionamento das nossas sociedades ‘pós-históricas’”

## Flusser and Photographers

Flusser became interested in art in the 1960s in Brazil, particularly through his friendship with the artists Mira Schendel and Samson Flexor. He was a regular contributor to the American art magazine *Artforum* with a column entitled “Curie’s Children,” from September 1986 until the posthumous publication in the summer 1992 issue; an anthology of his columns was recently published (2017).<sup>2</sup> In 1972, he spoke at the Annual General Meeting of AICA (Association Internationale des Critiques d’Art) and—despite a boycott by many artists because of the military dictatorship—headed the Art and Communication section of the 13th São Paulo Biennale in 1973 (to which he invited the French artist Fred Forest, among others), an experience that stimulated his interest in art theory. However, his interest in art was generally expressed in the context of his work on media and communications and was never really central to his activity. German art historian Marcel René Marburger studied some 2,400 manuscripts and typescripts held in the Vilém Flusser Archives for his book *Flusser und die Kunst*: only seventy of them concern art, only 13 concern individual artists, works or exhibitions, and according to Marburger (2015), all were written from a *communicological* perspective (von Graeve): “What interests Flusser particularly about artworks are their communicative qualities, and to a lesser extent their aesthetic ones.” Flusser was not a professional art critic; he simply pursued his own theoretical interests in the field of art, in particular the questioning of the apparatus.

It should be noted in passing that, unlike almost all other books on photography, those by Flusser contain no photographs in any of their editions or translations, the only exception being the cover of the latest French edition of *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (2004) which features a reproduction of a work entitled *Les Gémelles*, by the French experimental photographer Patrick Bailly-Maître-Grand.

Almost all Flusser’s art criticism concerns photographers, as is the case with the thirteen brief essays featured in the *Standpunkte* anthology (1998a). The photographers in question are (chronologically): Andreas Müller-Pohle, Herbert W. Franke, Joan Fontcuberta, Nancy Burson, Astrid Klein, Gerd Bonfert, Paolo Gioli, Boyd Webb, Lizzie Calligas, Henri Lewis, Herlinde Koelbl, Bernard Plossu and Jiri Hanke. Most of these texts first appeared in *European Photography*,<sup>3</sup> a journal published since 1980 by Andreas Müller-Pohle, in which Flusser was in charge of the “Reflections” section. Other texts, not reprinted in *Standpunkte*, concern Gottfried Jäger, John

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<sup>2</sup> These columns are not illustrated, contain no references to artists (apart from a few words on Van Gogh and color in the final posthumous text, summer 1992, p. 243), one reference to the Mona Lisa (October 1990, p. 174) and several highly pertinent references to Lascaux. The editor Martha Schwendener made a commendable effort to illustrate the book with artworks she considered to be more or less connected to Flusser and *Artforum*.

<sup>3</sup> < [http://www.equivalence.com/pavillon/pav\\_ep\\_back.shtml](http://www.equivalence.com/pavillon/pav_ep_back.shtml) >

Goto, Ed Sommer, Roland Gunter, Mark Berghash, and João Urban and Teresa Urban Furtado. In most of his reviews—with the notable exception of those concerning Andreas Müller-Pohle and Joan Fontcuberta, to which I shall return—Flusser takes a classical approach, adopting a spectator’s point of view in relation to the photograph and the subject, as do the vast majority of critics and writers. This position seems somewhat contradictory with the fact that, in his theoretical writings, he does not content himself with the narrow viewpoint of the spectator/consumer of images; instead, seeking to redefine the critic’s role (1984c), he sees the photographer as a creator who has to deal with the apparatus and must adopt a philosophical stance of critical distance with regard to the world. However, this critical approach appears in very few of his texts on specific photographers.

Only in the case of two photographers—Andreas Müller-Pohle and Joan Fontcuberta—do Flusser’s critical texts resonate with his theoretical writings (though in the field of cinema, this is also the case with the filmmaker Harun Farocki). Another text that could be included concerns Paolo Gioli (1988), whose series *Autoanatomie* (**Images 5&6**) follow closely in the tradition of Flusser’s research into the concept of playing against the camera; Flusser stresses Gioli’s *détournement* of the Polaroid by working both with and against it, but above all he explores the conflict between a personal experience and its public disclosure.

German artist and publisher Andreas Müller-Pohle,<sup>4</sup> born in 1951, met Flusser in February 1981 at the photography symposium organized by photographer Erika Kiffl at Schloss Mickeln in Düsseldorf. Müller-Pohle’s work became strongly influenced by Flusser’s theories on photography; he also became Flusser’s publisher and close friend. In 1983, in his introduction (2011b) to Müller-Pohle’s first photography monograph, *Transformance*<sup>5</sup> (**Images 1&2**), Flusser was able, perhaps for the first time, to elucidate the theories in *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*<sup>6</sup> (published in the original German edition the same year) by applying them to a photographic work. Flusser begins his text by referring to the typical sequence imposed on the photographer by the apparatus: “It [the camera] dictates that the photographer first see, then act; that he first look in the camera and through it at the world, then press the button”<sup>7</sup> (Ibid: 257). Then he goes on to wonder: “What would happen if I [the photographer] didn’t follow that prescribed sequence; what would happen if I acted first, and only looked after having acted? Wouldn’t the

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<sup>4</sup> See his website < <http://muellerpohle.net/> >

<sup>5</sup> A neologism between transformation and performance. Some of these photographs taken between 1979 and 1982, are visible online: <<http://muellerpohle.net/projects/transformance/>> and <<http://www.flusserstudies.net/sites/www.flusserstudies.net/files/media/attachments/transformance.pdf>>

<sup>6</sup> Published by European Photography, a publishing house directed by the same Andreas Müller-Pohle.

<sup>7</sup> As the original text of 1983 was not paginated, the references are to its 2011 edition in the journal *Philosophy of Photography*.

resulting images be evidence that one can also photograph without following the photo-program?” (Ibid: 258)

In principle, a photographer hesitates before pressing the button. He must decide at that very moment which specific possibility he will realize, which future he will make present, which photograph he will take. Müller-Pohle does not hesitate; he does not stop to think, but trusts to chance with no predetermined vision. He begins by “blindly” taking 10,000 photographs at random, without planning them or even looking through the viewfinder, constantly moving; he then develops them and looks at them, and only then does he select them. Photographs taken in the usual way must endeavor to be perfect as soon as they are taken, but Müller-Pohle’s photographs only become real and present through his delayed viewing, his subsequent critical gaze. Normal photographs hide their artificial nature, programmed by the apparatus, and claim to represent the world objectively, but Müller-Pohle’s photographs destroy this illusion: they are gestural and abstract, they allow no myth or magic and it is difficult to recognize the world through them. Rather than showing us the world, they show us the raw material of which the photographs are made, which was not visible before: the inside of the black box and the processes that occur within it, particularly time. They question the very ontology of photography and subvert the usual meaning of the word freedom, for which this deliberate happenstance is actually the breeding ground. Flusser ends his text as follows: “This book, then, opens a perspective onto what life in a world dominated by cameras and similar machines might be: a deliberate, creative informing of the accidental products of apparatus” (Ibid: 259). As an epigraph to his book, Müller-Pohle chose a sentence inspired by Man Ray: “What I can’t see, I photograph. What I don’t wish to photograph, I see,” and in a later version, “What I don’t see, I photograph. What I don’t photograph, I see” (Coleman 1997). By thus dissociating viewing and photographing, he asserted himself as a practitioner investigating photography itself, from the inside.

The other photographer to whom Flusser was particularly close is the Catalan Joan Fontcuberta (born in 1955). The elements of the correspondence between Flusser and Fontcuberta in the Flusser Archives (Flusser & Fontcuberta 2012) reflect the understanding they shared from 1984 onwards, and the similarity of their ideas. They visited each other’s homes, worked on shared projects and exchanged texts; Flusser asked Fontcuberta for a photographic work to illustrate one of his texts (Flusser 1998a: 291-298), and each wrote about the other’s work. Both Fontcuberta and Müller-Pohle accompanied Flusser on one of the last trips he made

before his death.<sup>8</sup> In a letter to Fontcuberta dated January 1, 1986, Flusser quoted what the Italian critic Angelo Schwarz had just said to him: that Fontcuberta was “one of the most important photographers, because [he] understand[s] what photos are about: to document something which does not exist” (Flusser & Fontcuberta 2012: 10). Flusser wrote the preface to Fontcuberta’s photographic series *Herbarium* (Flusser 1998a: 113-116), featuring twenty-eight photographs of plants (**Images 3&4**) that “have not come about by a mutation of genetic information, but by a manipulation of photographic information”<sup>9</sup> (Ibid: 113). The photographs, which show assemblages of small pieces of scrap metal and plastic, recall the botanical studies by German photographer Karl Blossfeldt but are actually ironically perverse deceptions, manipulations that destroy the myth of photographic realism. In his preface, Flusser develops the concept of information, distinguishing between biological and photographic information, stressing the importance of chance in the production of information in both biology and photography, and emphasizing the difference brought about by the criterion of usefulness. More generally, there are three key themes in Joan Fontcuberta’s photography: a questioning of veracity and the naturalism of the image through fiction and manipulation (in the *Herbarium* series, for example); a questioning of the nature of the photographic medium through experimental work; and, more recently, an exploration of the mechanisms behind the circulation of images through digital networks. In 1996-97, Fontcuberta dedicated his theoretical essay *The Kiss of Judas* (Fontcuberta 2005) to Vilém Flusser, to whom he refers four times, evoking his ideas on the apparatus, program and functionary and celebrating “the warlike gesture of refusal, the dignity in opposition to the program” (Ibid: 95); in this essay, Fontcuberta proposes a radical questioning of naturalism and the function of photography, glorifying manipulation and rebellion against the visual order. Andrea Soto Calderon and Rainer Guldin (2012) have analyzed in detail the connections between the two men and have, in particular, demonstrated the similarities between Flusser’s thinking and Fontcuberta’s description of his *counter-vision* in *The Kiss of Judas* (Fontcuberta 2005: 106); in very similar terms, they both urge the avant-garde photographer—the one who breaks with routines, criticizes visual intent and attacks the system’s vulnerable points—to be triply subversive. Firstly, by subverting the camera’s program, its internal routines with their predefined, limited ambitions, its “technological unconscious”; secondly, by subverting the ontological status of the

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<sup>8</sup> In September 1991, the three men went to Israel to the third (and last) Photography Biennale, at the Mishkan Le’Omanut Museum of Art, Ein Harod. Flusser gave a lecture entitled “Photography and History,” the text of which is available online: < <http://flusserbrasil.com/arte131.pdf> >. They also went to Jerusalem and occupied Palestine, and met the Israeli experimental photographer Aïm Deüelle Lüski. According to the latter (interview with the author on October 24, 2012 < <http://photographie-experimentale.com/aim-deuelle-luski-mon-entretien-et-echange-de-correspondance/> >), Flusser was to write a text about Lüski’s photographs, but did not have time to do so before his death.

<sup>9</sup> “Sie [die Pflanzenfotos von Joan Fontcuberta] zeigen uns Pflanzenarten, die nicht aus Mutationen von genetischen Informationen, sondern aus Manipulationen von fotografischen Informationen entstanden”

photographic image (the naturalism of the image, the objectivity of photography) and of distribution platforms; finally, by challenging the usual understanding of the concept of freedom, masked by the illusions of the technocratic society, in order to go beyond the limits imposed by the program. It is also noteworthy that, when Joan Fontcuberta was artistic director of the Rencontres Internationales de la Photographie in Arles in 1996, he organized a program called *Réels, Fictions, Virtuel* as a tribute to Roland Barthes, Jorge Luis Borges and Vilém Flusser.

## Experimental Photography

In the last pages of *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, having defined the apparatus and described the (numerous) photographers who respect its programs as “functionaries,” Flusser notes that some photographers nonetheless resist these constraints and rebel against this automatic programming. A philosophy of photography should therefore be constructed whose task would be “to expose this struggle between human being and apparatuses in the field of photography and to reflect on the possible solution to the conflict” (Flusser 2000: 75); this would serve as an example to post-industrial society as a whole as, in Flusser’s view, photography is merely an illustration of a far wider phenomenon in today’s world: the domination of programs and of functionalism of all kinds (scientific, political or aesthetic).

The photographers who exercise their freedom and struggle against the apparatus are therefore, perhaps, the only ones capable of answering the question of freedom within the apparatus. Flusser uses the vocabulary of strategy and battle to describe their attitude: fighting, perverting, deceiving, scheming, deluding, contesting, tricking, transcending, subverting. In 1966, he gave a metonymic description of himself: “I am not free. I am a functionary of programs that are alien to me; I am an instrument,” he wrote, going on to add, “I must rebel. Can I rebel? I believe I can” (Flusser 2013: ix). And he described these photographers in turn as *stricto sensu*, pure, true, authentic, avant-garde, experimental or even acrobatic. So what do these rebellious experimental photographers, these photographic “hackers,” actually do?

They show that it is possible to intentionally deceive and dominate the program of the apparatus, no matter how obstinate, automatized and rigid it may be. They secretly introduce unforeseen human intentions into the program, thereby forcing the camera to produce the accidental, improbable, unanticipated and unpredictable, i.e. the informative (Flusser repeatedly uses the image of an inverted glove); they thereby manage to resist the outpouring of images from the apparatus. “In short: freedom is the strategy of making chance and necessity

subordinate to human intention. Freedom is playing against the camera”<sup>10</sup> (Flusser 2000: 80). Flusser considers photography the most appropriate field for this rebellion as, contrary to the movie camera, for example: “Of all the instruments that produce images, the camera is the only one whose potential has been fully exploited; the others still have surprises in store for their users. [...] The camera has yielded all its secrets, it can even be considered senile, and many photographers evoke the imminent death of photography” (Flusser 1991: 52).

The rebellion against the camera and the program it imposes can only be carried out from the inside, by entering into what Theodor W. Adorno called the “logic of being produced” of the images themselves:<sup>11</sup> “The ability to see works of art from the inside, in their logic as things that have been produced—a union of action and reflection that neither hides behind naiveté nor hastily dissolves its concrete characteristics in a general concept—is probably the only form in which aesthetics is still possible” (Adorno 1984: 102).

Most photographers are reluctant to adopt such a rebellious approach, however, spontaneously asserting that they produce traditional images, create artworks and represent the world. And critics and historians of photography often adopt the same line of thought. With the sole exception, according to Flusser, of “experimental” photographers: “They are conscious that *image*, *apparatus*, *program* and *information* are the basic problems that they have to come to terms with. They are in fact consciously attempting to create unpredictable information—i.e. to release themselves from the camera, and to place within the image something that is not in its program. They know that they are playing against the camera. Yet even they are not conscious of the consequence of their practice: they are not aware that they are attempting to address the question of freedom in the context of apparatus in general” (Flusser 2000:81; italics in the original text).

In Flusser’s view, the experimental photographer does not aim to document the world, but to give it a new meaning: “He is not really interested in the world outside but in hidden camera virtualities which he is trying to discover” (Flusser 1984a: 4). What matters is to distance oneself from the representation of the world as reality, to turn one’s attention to the mechanics of photography, its very essence, perceived through the “hidden virtualities” of the apparatus. Flusser often waxed lyrical about the perspective of freedom that could be opened by this new photographic approach; in one fervent passage with libertarian overtones, he forecast the way in which society would free itself from the totalitarianism of the apparatus: “In this sense it is not

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<sup>10</sup> The reference to chance and necessity is clearly an allusion to Jacques Monod’s book *Chance and Necessity (Le hasard et la nécessité*, Paris, Seuil, 1970); Flusser had a German translation of this work in his travel library and referred to it several times.

<sup>11</sup> “Logik des Produziertseins.” This idea appears in the afterword to Flusser’s book by von Amelnunxen (2000: 92). I am grateful to Professor von Amelnunxen for his explanation in response to my email of March 22, 2010 and for providing the reference to the quote from Adorno.

exaggeration to say that the true photographer is one engaged in opening a space for human freedom within a context which is ever more automated. And that each photo produced in such an engagement is a window within our photo universe open toward freedom” (Flusser 1984b: 6).

Flusser saw photography as the terrain of an avant-garde battle that might then spread to all the political, economic and social apparatus, “the only form of revolution left open to us”<sup>12</sup> (Flusser 2000: 82).

So what is “experimental” photography? As we have already seen, Flusser wrote few reviews of photographic works, so there are few examples to elucidate his thinking. But some of his theoretical writings provide more concrete evidence of precisely what he meant by “experimental” or “rebellious” photography, further to the above-mentioned ideas. In his 1975 text on the gesture of photographing, Flusser evokes the potentiality of a “photographic mirror,” adding that he does not know what kind of camera could technically achieve this; he says that reflection could be “a mirror for looking at ourselves as we make decisions” (Flusser 1999: 99). He then imagines a camera with which the photographer would see himself photographing, would draw himself into the situation. The view made possible by this type of metaphorical apparatus: “[...] does not show the photographer to be a passive object... It mirrors an active subject (the goal of some philosophies). Such mirrors must—should they exist—permit monitoring not only of the photographer but also of the gesture of photographing itself. Self-control is another form of freedom.” (Ibid)

This search for the photographic mirror recalls contemporary photographers such as Jean-François Lecourt, who shoot a gun or bow at a *camera obscura* (a pinhole camera with no lens) or at a camera with a closed lens (**Image 7**), thereby creating a perforation through which light can enter; the photographic film or sensitive paper is then printed with the image facing the opening—that of the artist in the process of shooting. The image that appears when the film is developed shows the crack caused by the bullet, but in the case of the pinhole camera, the sensitive paper itself is pierced by the bullet and the trace is visible on the paper. According to art historian Didier Semin, “The subject of the image is nothing other than the way in which it was made—it could almost be said that the photograph is its own subject” (Semin 1986: 23). This is the reflection of the photographic gesture to which Flusser alludes.

Flusser gives another indication in his final text on photography (written shortly before his death), perhaps after his discovery of the photograms created by German artist Floris Neusüss. In this text, Flusser refers to images made without a camera; this could refer to photograms among other things, but he does not clarify further. According to Flusser, such images transcend the apparatus, and differ from technical images and images from the past: “Those who produce

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<sup>12</sup> The last sentence in the book

images without cameras are in search of voids left vacant until now by the apparatus; they are looking for something that the latter are incapable of producing. It is therefore mistaken (and injurious to those who make them) to consider their images as extra links in an age-old chain. This chain was broken by the invention of photography..." (Flusser 1991: 53)

Their difference from technical images stems from the fact that photograms denounce the limits of apparatus but, having done away with it, they do not force the camera to do anything it was not programmed to do. Although to my knowledge Flusser did not develop this premise elsewhere, this brief text opens some interesting perspectives on the nature of images made without a camera.

While bearing in mind that other definitions are possible, at this point we can propose the following tentative definition of experimental photography: "A deliberate act of critical rejection of the rules of the apparatus of photographic production, whereby the photographer calls into question one or more established parameters of the photographic process" (Lenot 2017: 202).

As indicated in the introduction to this book, which I am reproducing here (Lenot 2017: 15-20), my research was prompted by the realization that experimental photography was missing from the history of photography: "Originally, almost all the historians and critics of this medium, and the philosophers who have written about it, have contented themselves with a very limited definition of photography, implying that it should necessarily represent the photographic object and be obtained exclusively by means of a negative/positive technique, yet without clarifying or analyzing the reasons for their restrictive choices. But this definition, which has framed all photographic theory, has prevented the emergence of a reflection on a form of photography that would stand out from it—an experimental photography.

Admittedly, some authors [including Jean-Claude Lemagny, Michel Poivert and James Elkins] turn their attention beyond representation: they refer to photography in search of internal coherence, photography anxious about itself, the pleasure of trial and test, the taste for uncertainty of form. They note the existence of images that do not necessarily represent something, that can be considered abstract, that are, in a sense, useless within the logic of representation. Their chief concern is the photographic object itself, its materiality rather than its representativeness. In their view, some photographs that are no longer representations according to the established norms, that "go beyond the operation of shooting to work on substance, space, object or action" (Poivert 2015: 103-104), may appear to be enigmas or visual oddities but are photographs nonetheless because of the action of light on a photosensitive surface. However, few photographers attempt to explore these new fields, to approach the possibilities of experimental photography.

This book was inspired by my frustration with this lack: I could find no explanation of the concept of experimental photography. It was missing from dictionaries and from the indexes of books on the history of photography, and research in specialist databases was almost fruitless. Any vague mention of it usually referred to technical explanations, to the trial and error of early photography or the oddities of such and such a method. As there is a wealth of literature on other experimental arts, this conceptual void and historical gap were rather surprising. There is clearly an experimental dimension to the work of many contemporary photographers, with original research or methods that do not fully comply with a certain photographic orthodoxy. But no existing explanation, definition or conceptualization allows us to group these various practices together to provide a coherent, if not unified, view.

Nor can such a definition be found in the theoretical literature on photography, which tends to focus on photography as representation; very few authors are interested in photography as a system, a set of rules, an ontology.

The essay *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* by Vilém Flusser—an author as unacknowledged [in France] as experimental photography—introduces the possibility of a common framework for the work of all these supposedly experimental photographers [...].

The goal of my research, therefore, was to propose a definition of contemporary experimental photography and to illustrate this trend, situating it historically and analyzing the work produced since 1970 by about a hundred mostly European and American photographers (I was unfortunately unable to include photographers living in Japan). It led to a dissertation, supervised by Michel Poivert and defended in June 2016 at the Université Paris-1-Panthéon-Sorbonne. It also led to this book, which features a theoretical reflection on photography, a study of the work of photographers who play against the apparatus—playing with it, disregarding it, doing away with it, foiling it—and reproductions of over fifty works.

The context of my research was a questioning of the basic premises of photography. In recent years, museums and teaching institutions have begun to question the very definition of photography [...]. Their approaches tend to be confined within the boundaries of a rather classical theory of photography, with no overly radical questioning; nonetheless, they reflect a keen interest in a more ontological definition of photography. Where does this interest come from? Why are French and American—but also Italian, Spanish, British, and Czech—curators and authors exploring photography in a concomitant, but not necessarily coordinated, way?

The fact that contemporary experimental photography coincides with the decline of the analog medium poses the broader question of how and why the obsolescence of a medium can prompt transgression of its historic rules. The meaning and influence of the rules concerning the programs of the former (analog) medium are diminished by the success of the new (digital)

medium, exposing them to subversive modifications. I see an analogy here with the evolution of painting in the late nineteenth century, when [the French painter] Maurice Denis suggested his daring aphorism, “It should be remembered that a painting—before being a war horse, a nude woman or an anecdote—is essentially a flat surface covered with colors arranged in a certain order.”

At the same time, photography was becoming available to a wider audience and more accessible as a tool: technical progress made it possible to reduce exposure time and produce instantaneous photographs; inexpensive, easy-to-use cameras came on the market; and Kodak invented the slogan “You press the button, we do the rest.” In a sense, painting was relieved of its traditional task of faithfully representing reality; rather than devoting itself exclusively to the subject, it was now free to explore pictorial material, form and color with no concern for representation, and could thereby evolve toward impressionism, pointillism, cubism and abstraction: “Freed by photography from the drudgery of faithful representation, painting could pursue a higher task: abstraction.” (Sontag 2008: 200)

Similarly, the development of digital photography in the late twentieth century freed analog photography from its role of representing the real, allowing it to refocus on the photographic material, and thus on its essence. Admittedly, just as figurative paintings continued to be produced after the advent of abstraction, there are still analog photographs that represent subjects in the traditional way; in both cases, there was a fundamental evolution rather than an absolute, radical break.”

### **(Experimental) Photographers and Flusser**

So experimental photography is firstly an attitude of rejection and transgression of established norms and predefined discipline; it thus constitutes a critique of the established system of photography. As the poet Olivier Domerg wrote with reference to French experimental photographer Denis Bernard, it is a question of “freeing oneself from fashions and molds, from standardization, from commercial control and the uniformity imposed by schools, formats and machines” (Domerg 2010: 182), and of exploring all possible avenues. In a sense, this criterion is the essence of experimental photography, whether it results from a highly articulated or more implicit attitude on the photographer’s part.

This definition can be summarized with an expression coined by Flusser: “playing against the camera.” He uses it in his definition of experimental photographers at the end of *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*; often quoted by his commentators and critics, it is considered one of his

most significant expressions—by Gottfried Jäger, for example: “For this reason his intellectual legacy is: ‘freedom is playing against the camera’”<sup>13</sup> (Jäger 2001: 8). The notion of playing comes first; this playful dimension, an important aspect of his definition, may have been a consequence of the nomadic life led by Flusser, who fled the Nazi dictatorship in Czechoslovakia then the military one in Brazil, and was more inclined to play and evasion than direct confrontation. According to Adrian Martin, “such playfulness—the possibility of play mattered a lot to Flusser—is the only form of revolution (social or aesthetic) he can countenance”<sup>14</sup> (Martin 2012). And the playful dimension seems central to the creativity of many contemporary experimental photographers.

Then comes the idea of being “against,” and this opposition or challenge can take many different forms. Adrian Martin believes that “subvert” is too strong a word for Flusser, and that it is better to use the verbs “upset,” “re-route” or “outwit”<sup>15</sup> (Ibid), but other critics have used far more violent terms such as “provocation,” “revolt,” “rebellion” and “destruction.” The most radical is probably Giorgio Agamben, who wrote, “The aim is not to destroy them [the apparatus] nor, as some naively suggest, to use them in a correct way”; the aim is rather to profane them—the opposite of consecration (which consists of removing them from the sphere of human law)—in other words, “to return them to human use” (Agamben 2014: 3 & 38-39). The same diversity is found, of course, in the approaches of experimental photographers: some are content to circumvent or test the existing limits of the photographic apparatus; others, on the contrary (such as Aïm Deüelle Lüski, Pierre Cordier and Mr. Pippin) opt for direct confrontation with the system, rejecting the existing apparatus and trying to invent another.

An original take on the idea of “playing against” is that of the American psychoanalyst Martin Wilner, whose discussion with experimental photographer Marco Breuer took the form of a psychoanalytic consultation. Wilner’s conclusions regarding this sketchy analysis could be applied to all experimental photographers who resist the authority of the photographic medium and, more generally, of the apparatus: Wilner detected in the work of Breuer, who mistreats the photographic paper, a tendency to “rebel against the formal constraints” of the photographic medium and to unlearn its rules. The psychoanalyst told the artist that he seemed to be “engaged in a struggle against authority, symbolically represented by his approach to his medium” (Wilner 2002: 46-47). The work of experimental photographers also attacks the symbols of tradition and authority.

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<sup>13</sup> “Sein geistiges Vermächtnis lautet daher: ‘Freiheit ist, gegen den Apparat zu spielen’”

<sup>14</sup> “Such playfulness – the possibility of play mattered a lot to Flusser – is the only form of revolution (social or aesthetic) he can countenance”

<sup>15</sup> “Someone who, for a precious moment, upsets, re-routes, outwits (‘subverts’ is too strong a word for Flusser) what is called ‘the state of things’”

This calling into question or “playing against” is therefore manifested as an extension of the canons of photography. It can involve a variation of parameters, as pointed out by photography historian Clément Chéroux (2003: 92) with reference to French physiologist Claude Bernard’s definition of scientific experiment: experimental photography “consists, in the purest tradition of Claude Bernard’s experimental method, of deliberately varying the conditions of the experiment, namely the parameters of the photographic device, so as to accurately observe the aesthetic consequences of the operation” (Ibid: 97). This was the path followed around 1970 by conceptual photographers such as Ugo Mulas, John Hilliard and Jan Dibbets, who varied the diaphragm, exposure time, focus or luminosity. But experimentation is much more than the variation of the parameters of the photographic device within defined rules; according to Clément Chéroux (quoting Werner Gräff), it is the fact that “the new photographer accepts no restrictive rules” (Ibid: 80). According to Chéroux, Werner Gräff’s 1929 book *Here Comes the New Photographer!* is “a counter manual, a wrong-footed primer, the bible of photographic subversion” (Ibid: 81). In 1956, László Moholy-Nagy accentuated this questioning and rejection of norms: “The enemy of photography is convention, the fixed rules of ‘how to do’. The salvation of photography comes from the experiment. The experimenter has no preconceived ideas about photography” (Ibid: 84).

Experimental photography, therefore, can include spoiled photographs and photographic errors, but subversion cannot be reduced to a more or less deliberate mistake. It can also include “poor” photography—*foto povera*. As Roberta Valtorta says, “Experimental photographers also reject the Robert Filliou-style ‘well done’ principle, they do the opposite of what the technical manuals say, like Paolo Gioli with his Polaroids,”<sup>17</sup> but again, subversion cannot be limited to the practice of simple techniques. Experimental photography can also comprise the use of chance in photography, but once again, it cannot be reduced to a loss of control on the photographer’s part.

Although these various approaches can all come under the aegis of experimental photography as defined here, an ontological investigation of the medium—of photography itself—is at the heart of this questioning, going beyond and transcending approaches based on error, simplicity or chance. Just as twentieth-century painting used abstraction, then movements such as Supports/Surfaces, to explore its very essence, a similar concern lies at the heart of experimental photography. Hubert Damisch pointed this out in 1963: “The prime value of this type of endeavor is to induce a reflection on the nature and function of the photographic image. And, insofar as it successfully eliminates one of the basic elements of the very idea of

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<sup>17</sup> Interview by the author with Roberta Valtorta on January 5, 2010 in Milan < <http://photographie-experimentale.com/roberta-valtorta-mon-entretien/> >

‘photography’, it produced an experimental equivalent of a phenomenological analysis which purports to grasp the essence of the phenomenon under consideration by submitting it to a series of imaginary variations” and, further on, “Photography aspires to *art* each time, in practice, it calls into question its essence and its historical roles” (Damisch 1963: 34 & 37).

This investigation of the medium, as expressed by Ugo Mulas for example in his presentation of the *Verifische* – “photographs whose subject is photography itself – a means of analyzing the photographic operation to identify its component elements and their own value” (Mulas 2016: 145)—is therefore central to the definition of experimental photography. This approach can be linked to Swiss art historian Victor Stoichita’s comment on a seventeenth-century painting by Dutch artist Cornelis Norbertus Gysbrechts<sup>18</sup> that simply represents the back of a painting (**Image 8**); according to Stoichita, who reproduced the painting on the cover of the original French edition of his book, “The object of this painting is the painting as an object” (Stoichita 1999: 364).

Experimental photographs, therefore, do not claim to be true representations of reality, but rather records of the photographic process itself—of the very essence of photography. They may or may not be the fruit of chance, they may or may not restore glory to the image, they may or may not stem from a conceptual approach, they may or may not be described as abstract, they may have been produced with simple apparatus or, on the contrary, with sophisticated machines, and they can be obtained by diverse techniques. The definition of experimental photography can, therefore, not be restricted (as is too often the case) to the use of a particular technique, which does not necessarily call into question the parameters of the photographic apparatus.

It is, of course, important to specify that the photographers I consider experimental do not all define themselves as such: some clearly articulate their intention to subvert the photographic device; others offer little explanation of their practice. Few have read Flusser, and even fewer ever met him (apart from his friends Müller-Pohle and Fontcuberta, the only ones who mentioned him during our interviews were Lüski —see note 8— and Franco Vaccari<sup>19</sup>).

Yet my attempt to define a contemporary experimental trend is not intended to establish the existence of a coherent movement or school. Contemporary experimental photography, unlike the other schools (creative, generative or concrete photography) that may have influenced it, has no master, school, manifesto or capital; it is instead an informal, polymorphous trend with no particular definition or representation, that only emerges through critical analysis. According to

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<sup>18</sup> Cornelis Norbertus Gysbrechts, *The Reverse of a Framed Painting*, about 1670-1675, oil on canvas, 66 x 86.5 cm, Copenhagen, Statens Museum for Kunst.

<sup>19</sup> Italian photographer and writer Franco Vaccari met Flusser in Turin on June 19, 1985, during the *Torino Fotografia* festival; he remembers that Flusser was very interested in his ideas on the technological unconscious (Lenot 2014: 70-71).

art historian Jean-Pierre Montier, “The experimental nature of photography does not belong to a school and does not consist of the attention paid to the medium in itself; it is an artistic ethic and a rule of life” (Montier 2013: 101).

My research (Lenot 2017) focused on about a hundred contemporary photographers, most of whom are European or North American. Around 1970, some conceptual artists, including William Anastasi (from 1967 on), Michael Snow, Ugo Mulas, Jan Dibbets, Timm Rautert and John Hilliard, were the first to question the very principles of photography.

Following in the wake of these pioneers, some contemporary experimental photographers have played with the system, going against the standard rules for the production of photographic images. Some play with light, producing photographs at the limits of visibility—like Adam Fuss who works in the dark, Rossella Bellusci who uses dazzling white, Chris McCaw who shoots into the sun and SMITH who works with a thermal camera. Others practice slow photography, freeing themselves from the obligation of immediacy and introducing a temporal dimension: film-strip style images by Patrick Bailly-Maître-Grand and Paolo Gioli; frozen images by Estefanía Peñafiel Loaiza; ultra-long exposure photographs by Michael Wesely. Many photographers undo the image by playing with chemistry in various ways, the most original of which are probably the oxidations by Nino Migliori and the Polaroid manipulations by Ellen Carey and James Welling. Finally, some artists explore the negative (Gábor Ösz) and play with the printing process, using a wide range of supports (grass in the case of Ackroyd & Harvey, for example) or deliberately not fixing the image (Thu Van Tran and Indira Tatiana Cruz). In all (or almost all) these cases one might wonder, “Is this still photography? When Dennis Oppenheim gets sunburned, when Richard Conte sun-prints a drawing on an apple, is it still photography? Can it be defined by its limits, by what it includes and what it excludes?”

Other experimental photographers disregard the camera, using rudimentary devices (Bernard Plossu), building their own cameras (Miroslav Tichý, Roger Newton) and deconstructing or even destroying them (Mr. Pippin). Several others do without a lens and produce *camera obscura* style photographs (Paolo Gioli, Gábor Ösz, Vera Lutter, Mr. Pippin and many more). Aïm Deüelle Lüski goes so far as to practice a “horizontal photography” in which the support is no longer perpendicular to the light and the photographer’s relation to the subject is therefore radically altered.

Some photographers do away with the camera altogether, playing directly with photosensitive surfaces and producing photograms. Among them are the British photographers Garry Fabian Miller and Adam Fuss, photographers of the German school led by Floris Neusüss, French photographers including Pierre Savatier and Henri Foucault, and Americans such as Michael Flomen, Walead Beshty and James Welling. Others, such as Silvio Wolf, Denis Bernard and

Juliana Borinski, play with the photographic material itself; Pierre Cordier produces chemigrams, and Alison Rossiter works with long-expired papers.

Finally, other experimental photographers foil the camera by shifting the photographer's position. Some engage the photographer's body in the photographic act: Ignaz Cassar appears as a white shadow in the image; Jean-François Lecourt and Thomas Bachler play the role of shutter release by shooting a gun at a closed photographic box (a *camera obscura*), creating an orifice through which light enters; Morgane Adawi imprints her own body. Elsewhere, a bodily cavity becomes a photographic chamber inside which a sensitive surface is printed with an image of the exterior: Lindsay Seers's or Ann Hamilton's mouth, Paolo Gioli's fist, the vagina of a transgender American photographer who now wishes to remain anonymous. Another way of shifting the photographer is to do without him or her, allowing chance to take the photographs instead (Noël Dolla, Andreas Müller-Pohle), or to set up a system allowing visitors to an exhibition to take the photographs themselves, in which case the artist's role is to prescribe, encourage and program rather than actually photograph (Franco Vaccari).

These experimental practices are both diverse and homogeneous. Each artist practices a different protocol and technique, but all question the standard parameters of the photographic apparatus. They thereby assert their creativity and freedom, and their desire to play against the apparatus – often humorously. These various photographers do not really constitute an established movement or school—at most, they represent a trend, a moment in time between the decline of analog documentary and the advent of digital photography. At the moment when digital photography took over the task of representing the world, analog photography, relieved of this task, could devote itself to self-reflection, leading it to experiment (just as, in the late nineteenth century, the fact that photography had become easy and instantaneous allowed painting, relieved of the task of representing reality, to question itself and evolve toward cubism and abstraction). Rather than the demise of analog photography, this could be seen as an elegant form of reticence with regard to modernity, an anachronistic way of resisting—or even rethinking and reinventing—the contemporary world in an innovative and inspiring way, true to the tradition of Vilém Flusser.

Translated by Sally Laruelle

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